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Indicators for the Evolution of the Academic Architecture Library

Jeanne M. Brown

The future is not really something one can predict, which does not, of course, keep us from speculating. In fact, the rapid advance of technology in the last ten years has made talking about the future something of a sport and resulted in "future" becoming code for "changes in technology." The future as determined by technology is not the major thrust of this article, although changes in technology are given to just about anyone's future. Instead, the future is more broadly considered by looking at what is happening around us and speculating on the implications. This article attempts to use our past and present as a springboard for discussions of the future of the architecture library, drawing from long-standing approaches as well as developments in both the library field and in the discipline of architecture.

Some Views of the Future Academic Library

As one would suspect, there is no single vision of the future academic library. However, there are a couple of standard and helpful approaches. One approach speaks of a future that is built on old plus new. The second projects the constancy of change. Both lead one to speak of the evolving library.

In the old-plus-new camp are Walt Crawford (technology guru for many) and Michael Gorman (staunch defender of traditional values and services). In Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, & Reality, they note the following major points:

- The future means both print and electronic communication.
- The future means both linear text and hypertext.
- The future means both mediation by librarians and direct access.
- The future means both collections and access.
- The future means a library that is both edifice and interface.

Probably the most outstanding aspect of the foregoing is how standard it sounds in 2006, a bit more than ten years after publication. It is hard to remember 1995, but it seems we have experienced a very short leap. It would be unusual to find an architecture library that did not evidence all of the above components of the future.

Jerry Campbell, in "Changing a Cultural Icon: The Academic Library as a Virtual Destination," also promotes the old-plus-new approach, referring to the old as "legacy operations." He goes on to discuss possible library missions of the future, including "providing quality learning spaces," "creating metadata," "offering virtual reference services," "teaching information literacy," "choosing resources and managing resource licenses," "collecting and digitizing archival materials," and "maintaining digital repositories." Of these, only the last two offer strong promise in Campbell's view. If he is right, this points to the need to address digitization of architecture materials in the near future. Although some architecture libraries have such initiatives already underway or are well positioned to do so (particularly those with their own architecture archives), it will be a substantial challenge and opportunity for others to identify and integrate architecture materials into library-wide priorities and projects. Nonetheless, local unique collections are a primary focus for the evolving academic architecture library.

The evolving library is the concept of S. R. Ranganathan. Librarians learn Ranganathan's five laws in library school. The ones that stuck with me in that long-ago context were that every book has its reader, and every reader his book. I think I internalized two of the others: "books are for use" and "save the time of the reader." The one that had escaped me, until I revisited his five laws, is "a library is a growing organism." The description of this law still has relevance today (Ranganathan died in 1972):

The 5th law tells us about the vital and lasting characteristics of the library as an institution and enjoins the need for a constant adjustment of our outlook in dealing with it. Libraries grow and change, and will always do so. Collections increase and change, technology changes and budgets change. Change comes along with growth, and in order to be healthy, that change and growth requires flexibility in the management of the collections, in the use of space, in the recruitment, retention and deployment of staff, and the nature of our programs.

Indeed, the evolving library is likely the most workable perspective on the future. Presuming, as I think we must, that the library will continue as an entity, it reminds us of the need for constant reflection on our circumstances and flexibility in charting our directions. This approach works especially well in our world, where change-as-constant is a truism. Evolution of the subject library is just as inescapable as that of the library in general.

The Subject Librarian in the Library of the Future

The 2005 American Library Association (ALA) conference included a session entitled "Subject Librarians: An Endangered Species." The title is certainly suggestive. Are subject librarians endangered? Why? Speakers noted that finding information has
become easier and concluded that subject expertise is less critical. Several asserted that the subject librarian is a luxury libraries can no longer afford. And yet subject librarians are arguably the model for all librarians. The 1992 article "The Organizational Misfits" by Patricia A. Suozzi and Sandra S. Kerbel identifies the need for a new paradigm in the evolution from librarians being "collection owners to becoming information providers." The authors maintain that departmental libraries are "already performing many of these future functions—specialized and tailored services, intensive knowledge of clients..." They see departmental libraries as "entrepreneurial and flexible" and feel this approach is what libraries in general need to adopt.

Knowledge of the client is also seen as key by John Rodwell in his 1999 presentation entitled "Dinosaur or Dynamo? The Future of the Subject Specialist Reference Librarian." Rodwell points out that academia is based on the discipline. Members of the academic community "identify with their subject or discipline and relate best to specifically designed services and to staff who understand and share these values...The...mixture of subject knowledge and knowledge of the client community...allows the librarian to mediate between information resources and the clients." The perception of the need for subject familiarity and knowledge of the patron's information context and needs does not seem to have been translated into a widespread acknowledgment that discipline-centered library service is the strongest foundation for the library of the future. The time-worn arguments are still being made. Most of those arguments were refuted in the Suozzi and Kerbel article. Duplication, expense, unwise use of resources—all are standard and inaccurate arguments against department libraries. Possibly they persist because on the surface they ring true. What would it take to see conference sessions titled "Subject Specialists: The New Paradigm"? Minimally, we need to promote ourselves more vigorously, both to our parent libraries and to the library world in general. Marketing must be in our future if subject librarians and subject branches are to survive, much less thrive.

It is, on the other hand, heartening to see an arts and humanities librarian as one of a total of ten staff members envisioned for a fantasy library of the future in "The Fully Electronic Academic Library" by Norman D. Stevens. The other nine positions, to provide the context, are "staff with the following expertise: archives;...building and equipment maintenance; electronic technology; engineering; information science; instructional technology; sciences; social sciences; and business, law or medicine on a rotating basis."

Information Literacy Instruction—Essential to the Future of the Library?

Will the instructional role of the librarian be essential in the future? Jerry Campbell, as previously mentioned, does not see it as offering strong promise as an essential library mission. There are many who would contest this view, holding that instruction is in fact one of the primary roles of librarians in the future. A Delphi study of library and information science professionals done during 1998-2000 in Israel found that "the experts agree that in the future...LIS professionals will be specialists in locating, filtering, and evaluating information, and will be primary instructors in the use of new information technologies." The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Focus on the Future Task Force reinforces this viewpoint. Among the seven issues they identified in "Top Issues Facing Academic Libraries" was the "role of the library in [the] academic enterprise." To avoid being marginalized, they assert, the library must "emphasize information literacy instruction and the importance of the teaching role of librarians."

It is hard to believe that Melvil Dewey saw the librarian as a teacher even as early as 1876. According to Dewey, "the time is when a library is a school, and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher." It is even more amazing to realize that the field of librarianship has only in the last few years begun to delve into the disciplinary implications of information literacy.

Information Literacy and the Disciplines

The information literacy movement, gaining adherents and definition throughout the 1990s to the present, has focused primarily on general basic skills. The focus has been, and continues to be for the most part, on the first two years of college life. In some ways we have been operating as if there were a de facto split in the profession between those who promote literacy in the terms defined by the ACRL and applied to lower-division students, and those who recognize a need to address the educational goals of upper-division and graduate students, but who are dispersed into many subject disciplines. This is now changing.

In the last few years librarians have begun to turn their attention to disciplinary skills. ACRL's Instruction Section has started a list of publications and Web sites related to information literacy in the disciplines. Engineering librarians and English literature librarians have developed competencies for their disciplines. In some disciplines, such as psychology, the faculty in the discipline have taken the initiative and developed information literacy competencies. The pace has picked up dramatically in just the last year. The Music Library Association published its information literacy competencies in the MLA publication Notes in March 2006. At the 2006 ALA midwinter meeting of the ACRL Information Literacy Advisory Committee, several ALA ACRL sections reported being at various stages in their efforts to develop discipline competencies, including competencies for political science and history. In a significant development for the shifting focus on disciplinary competencies, the Advisory Committee approved the "Tip Sheet for Developing Subject-Specific Information Literacy Standards" (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/acrlcomm/TipSheetSubjc-SpecIIStandards.pdf) at the 2006 ALA conference in New Orleans.

During 2005-2006, art and architecture librarians drafted such disciplinary competencies as well. These competencies were presented to ARLIS/NA members via the ARLIS/NA members-only Web pages in December 2005 and to Association of Architecture School Librarians (AASL) members at the annual conference in Salt Lake City in March 2006. They were further discussed at the ARLIS/NA annual conference in Banff in May 2006.

Just as with the general information literacy competencies, most of the disciplinary information literacy instruction, at least in architecture libraries, is at the basic level. A March 2006 survey to AASL listserv subscribers indicated that the first college year is the one most consistently reached in the instruction efforts of architecture librarians. Survey response rate was low, so this is
an indicator only, but the results resonate with the discussions at the AASL conference. Until disciplinary competencies are developed and gain widespread recognition and acceptance among librarians and in the discipline itself, much of disciplinary information literacy instruction will remain at the basic level.

Core competencies for students in design disciplines advance the discourse between librarian and disciplinary clientele in several ways: they provide the librarian with a base of well-developed and detailed content, they offer a springboard for discussion, and they allow the individual librarian to speak with the voice of all architecture librarians—a united front! They give the librarian authority and credibility when soliciting instruction collaborations. By interpreting and incorporating general competencies into a discipline-specific skill set, the librarian emphasizes the value of the library science discipline to the discipline of architecture—one expression of the cross- or inter-disciplinarity discussed below.

Overlapping Futures of Architectural Education and the Library

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) in November 2004 set up an Architectural Education Action Plan Task Force. The task force reported that “architectural education is facing an impending crisis” due to “a future of exploding technologies and expanding futures.” They identified four areas in architectural education requiring investigation:

- Explosion of knowledge: We must map emerging areas of relevant knowledge and integrate them into our curricula.
- Effectiveness of studio-based learning: We must analyze and promote studio education with respect to its objectives, methods and outcomes.
- Extension into lifelong learning: We must take the leading role in continuing education.
- Expanding futures of students: We must integrate substantial interdisciplinary learning into architectural education.

Of the four, three are areas which librarians have independently identified and begun to address: explosion of knowledge and the resultant information overload, lifelong learning, and interdisciplinarity. Architecture librarians have much to offer to this conversation, and the architecture library—in addition to the architecture classroom—is a prime venue for addressing the concerns identified by the ACSA Task Force.

Although librarians are not charged with mapping new knowledge into the curriculum, we are quite aware of and concerned with the explosion of knowledge. One of our foci is how students can effectively integrate new information into their knowledge base, using a variety of strategies for finding and evaluating information. Other techniques we apply in addressing the information explosion include selective dissemination of information (a term not heard much these days but still being practiced), pursuit of the thus far illusive goal of effective federated searching, development of institutional repositories, and pursuit of better organization and presentation of information. Concerning the last, the new North Carolina State University Libraries catalog (http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/search_collection/) is a wonderful example of bringing techniques that have worked well in the Web environment to the library catalog—techniques and features such as the option to “find more titles like this,” relevance ranking, and automatic spell correction. In the organizing realm, perhaps our role in the future will be the one projected in science fiction writer Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation Series* set in the far distant future, after the fall of the Galactic Empire: the librarian is the one who makes connections between bits of information, and embeds those connections in such a way that pieces that would otherwise be missed are pulled up in response to appropriate queries.

The need for lifelong learning, especially in the light of how quickly the world changes, is one that librarians have long embraced. That need is an essential linchpin in justifying the importance of information literacy competencies. ACSA seems to define lifelong learning narrowly as continuing education. However, both the skills and the appetite for lifelong learning must be instilled long before continuing education becomes the professional’s mandate.

One arena that architecture libraries can and do explore that addresses both lifelong learning and handling information overload, and that touches the needs of the library’s varied clientele, is the function of “keeping current.” How do or might we incorporate keeping current into our approach to services, collections, and operations. Blogs? RSS feeds? Alerting services? New books displays?
Do we ourselves need to be current in the discipline, aware of trends, and acting from that awareness to alert our clientele? Here is an example of how that might work. The Design Futures Council identified several of the top trends in the architecture profession, including Building Information Modeling (BIM). How can that awareness be parlayed into a current awareness alert? No doubt there are many ways, but the one I selected was to have a poster made highlighting this trend and the existence of information in the library on BIM. The poster “Got BIM?” [reproduced with permission of the student designer, who wishes to remain anonymous] did grab attention. One of the faculty, already interested in the topic, organized a panel discussion on BIM that was held in the library. This level of awareness and service is labor-intensive, but perhaps collaboration among architecture librarians is the path that will make it doable. Are blogs on architecture trends that are written for architecture librarians by architecture librarians in our future?

But pushing information, as in the BIM example, is only one of the library’s approaches to handling information overload and addressing the need to keep current. As already discussed, the librarian’s instructional role is important as well, with its long-term goal of preparing the student for life as a professional. Among the competencies addressed by librarian-instructors is the ability to draw upon interdisciplinary sources as needed.

Many disciplines these days claim to be interdisciplinary or to value interdisciplinarity. According to a brief essay on interdisciplinarity by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom in The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled “Expanding on the I-Word,” different disciplines define interdisciplinarity differently. He suggests four types of interdisciplinarity:

- Team-based interdisciplinarity, which could describe, say, an ecological study to which several scholars bring different skills.
- Cross-over interdisciplinarity, referring to fields like biochemistry, which have roots in two disciplines.
- Exploratory interdisciplinarity, for scholars who apply material from other fields on occasion—e.g., a medievalist who draws on queer theory in one article and demography in another, but remains first and foremost a historian.
- Free-range interdisciplinarity, to refer to people like Jared Diamond and Martha C. Nussbaum, who are so eclectic that people are not sure of their disciplinary homes.

Architectural education will no doubt use studio pedagogy, commonly understood to be a basic form of instruction in the field, to begin to address the areas identified by the ACSA Architectural Education Action Plan Task Force: lifelong learning, information explosion, and interdisciplinarity. The studio model might also be used effectively by the librarian and/or faculty for conveying information literacies. One-on-one instruction, although time-consuming, offers an effective approach to teaching students, especially graduate students. In the future perhaps accreditation guidelines could call for the librarian to serve as a consultant in the studio, collaborating with faculty to insist on the demonstration of information literacy skills side-by-side with and in service of disciplinary knowledge.

Who Defines What Changes Should Be Made as We Evolve?

To what extent is our quest to define and create an evolving architecture library a collaboration between architecture librarians and architecture faculty and students? Different approaches have been defined by Crawford/Gorman and Campbell. Crawford and Gorman assert that the “surest path to irrelevance is to allow yourself to be defined by someone else.” Campbell, putting a different spin on the dialogue, feels strongly that "librarians must widen the discussion and raise the questions concerning the future of the academic library—even if some such questions may precipitate draconian answers based mostly on financial concerns.”

Do we dare leave the question open? Do we dare not include our patrons in this conversation? Do our users even care? How do we open this conversation, assuming this is the desired path?

Obviously the evolving architecture library will be a response to changes in both the information world and the world of architectural education and practice. Collaboration between the librarian and the patron (both faculty and student) —collaboration in instruction, collaboration in determining priorities for future developments, collaboration in developing repositories and in making the core resources available—means that changes will be made with full awareness of both parties. There is a growing literature on librarian/faculty collaboration. It is definitely part of our future.

Although each library evolves at its own pace, it dare not ignore the evolutions made by other architecture libraries or by the field as a whole. The role of our professional associations (the Art Libraries Society of North America, the Association of Architecture School Librarians, the American Library Association) is a topic for another article.

Changing World, Changing Library

Among the many examples of the changing world, one identified by Thomas Frey, executive director of the DaVinci Institute, stands out. Among Frey’s top ten trends, as listed in “The Future of Libraries: Beginning of the Great Transformation,” is trend number nine: “We are transitioning from a product-based economy to an experience-based economy.” Consequently, we will not be providing the product “books”; we will be setting the stage for a library experience. What will that experience be?

The design research library at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, is one library that considers itself to be serving this function. According to John Hoke, head of footwear design, “We don’t just give out books... We generate ideas through that place.” Library worker Amanda Briggs,
Many architecture libraries seek to provide such inspiration and otherwise foster a productive library experience. But are we using “experience” the same way Frey is? Experience here implies interaction, involving both content and users. Interaction can be between patron and librarian, or among patrons. Expanding interaction is a reasonable evolution. Libraries are already beginning to apply the social interaction functions of the Web to our specific circumstances. It can be as basic as linking student comments to library materials, for instance. Of course, the physical experience of the library—a place of comfort and interchange—is part of the stage set.

The evolving architecture library has many options as it seeks to develop the most compelling library experience. It can respond to information questions in a variety of interactive ways, including virtual and in-person. It can emphasize the relationship of librarian-instructor and student, of reference staff and questioner. It can generate collaborations by proactively highlighting trends or potentials. It can push information and market its services actively and dramatically, or at least visually. It can maximize digital options, both in terms of digital collections and online interaction between patron and collection. It can be a venue for new digital explorations, such as the multimedia theater in use at a few institutions. It can provide an environment conducive to social and collaborative interactions. It can create a learning environment that draws on the insights of the architecture profession to accomplish the goals of information literacy and architectural education. It can make the insights buried in local unique collections accessible locally and globally. Whatever options it chooses to pursue, the architecture library brings a depth of “value added” that justifies its existence and support.

Summary

The future academic architecture library is part of multiple futures: the future of the field of architecture and architectural education, the future of technology, and the future of information sciences, a.k.a., the library. As we make our journey to this future, there are many alternate and even simultaneous paths to explore. As we build on our collections and services and adapt to the consequences of ongoing change, the strengths of our discipline, of librarians, will serve us well.

Our skills in collaboration and communication will lead to effectively engaging in the education of the students and faculty, collaborating at many levels (within the institution, with the architecture discipline, within our own staff, among architecture librarians) to best effect, being aware of and responsive to the goals of patrons, attracting the attention of our patrons, shaping patron expectations and experiences, and marketing our skills.

Librarians are committed to lifelong learning, not just for our patrons but for ourselves. This is both our strength and a fundamental skill of the twenty-first century librarian. Learning in our own discipline, learning in the disciplines we serve, and learning in disciplines that may illuminate our own (e.g., educational technology, psychology, or artificial intelligence) are all parts of what we bring to the academic enterprise. Our willingness and ability to learn, and to translate those explorations into services and collections that serve our patrons, is our key to success. As we monitor our environments we may see the necessity of developing expertise in areas that are currently not the focus in most architecture libraries, such as scholarly communication and digital repositories. It may also be prudent to know almost as much about architecture pedagogy and architecture research as practitioners in these areas.

In the twenty-first century architecture library, we translate familiarity with research and education in architecture and related fields into an identity for the library that will resonate with those involved in those disciplines. We explore developing areas in the fields of architecture and library science, and build consensus among our patrons as to priorities. We translate the needs and expectations of our users into strong and vital library services. We define and redefine ourselves coherently, practically, and sustainably. We are clear on our direction and proactive in pursuing that direction. We are visible.

Notes


7. Shifra Baruchson-Arbib and Jenny Bronstein, “A View to the Future of the Library and Information Science Profession: A Delphi Study,” Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology 53, no. 5 (2002): 397-408. [Ed. note: “The Delphi study process is a recognized research technique... a process which essentially provides an interactive communication structure between the researcher(s) and ‘experts’ in a field, in order to develop themes, needs, directions or predictions about a topic.” For additional information, consult http://www.wilderdom.com/delphi.html.]


16. Jeanne M. Brown, “Core Competency Development,” http://www.scsv.nevada.edu/~asl/core_files.html. This site is an interim one while competencies are in draft. Drafts prepared by seven librarians (Edith Crowe, Barbara Opar, Jennifer Parker, Maya Gervits, Jane Carlin, Alan Michelson, and Jeanne Brown) representing eight disciplines were posted as of December 2005. [Author Note: The site http://www.scsv.nevada.edu/~asl/index.html was posted at the end of August and represents Version 2. The competencies were revised and reorganized based on feedback from art and architecture librarian colleagues. It also includes an introduction and an additional discipline contributed by Susan Lewis.]


25. Ibid., 126.

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