The Academic Library as Congenial Space: more on the Saint Mary's experience

"I enter the library…..I'm standing just outside Rao's Café. Around me

students are sitting at tables – eating, drinking, talking. A wellhead at

the center of the space dates back to the early 16th century."

(Albanese, 2004)

Introduction

The casual observations above were extracted from a recent article about the bustling library at Connecticut's Mount Holyoke College. They were chosen because they would seem to capture some of the essence of the successful modern academic library. The ancient artefact had not been sacrificed, or even relocated, to accommodate a contemporary enhancement of the library. The wellhead and the café coexist peacefully in their complementary contributions to the school's academic and social environment.

The library at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia does not own a 16th century wellhead. It does, however, have a café and what the café lacks in old world charm it makes up for with plenty of cheap coffee. Coffee has not traditionally been proposed as a valuable library asset. Indeed, it has historically been considered something much less than an attribute. I would suggest that it (and its hot beverage kin and related solid consumables), not rare book collections or other revered resources, will, in future, be of greater importance to the sustained vitality of academic libraries. A clue to this can be found in the advice of one public space theorist, "Start by understanding that the future of libraries lies in making them a place where people want to be" (Block, 2003).

Prologue

When Madeleine Lefebvre, the new University Librarian, arrived at Saint Mary's in 1999 her impressions of the library were consistent with those of other first-time visitors. The building itself (circa.1974), while it did have some positive attributes, suffered from design and decor flaws common to many of its contemporaries (see also Burke, 2004). The chief one was a dimly lit, gloomy entrance and lobby area which provided a markedly unfavourable introduction to what was otherwise a dynamic, responsive service organization. Her account (Lefebvre, 2001) reveals how, over the next few years, the library underwent numerous and varied initiatives to overcome some of the building's deficiencies. In spite of the absence of a targeted budget for infrastructure renewal, improvements were nevertheless completed and much discussion and planning was focussed and reallocated to these identified objectives. The goal was to make the library a more congenial space – a better place for students as well as those who serve them. They had embarked on a process which was to be later identified by Harold Shill, in an exhaustive survey of the usage impact of library renovation and construction, "Decisions on the future of academic library space will reflect…..librarians' own assessment of the physical library" (Shill, 2004). What follows is an update on our progression toward that idea.

But first, some context…..What, after all, is congenial space, in the modern (or if you prefer postmodern) sense, and what does it have to do with academic libraries?

The Wider World

The Internet is one of the best things to ever happen to academic libraries.
Sweeping generalizations such as this are rarely provocative, let alone helpful. And yet the truth of it is at the core of the principles which should guide library staff when an evaluative eye is cast upon the building, collections and services which comprise the library's support for the university's teaching and research mandate.

While the Internet has allowed for the predominance of web-based, electronic access to information for the general public, the specialized public and the academic (both professor and student), it has also, somewhat surprisingly to many, provided university and college libraries with a degree of salvation.

The Internet and the Web have made students aware of the preponderance of readily available information. The facts, theories, opinions and ideas which were formerly found only in libraries were now all around them, both bountiful and begging to be explored. And, of great importance, they came wrapped in the visually engaging medium of computer-generated screens of text, graphics, colour and motion. Today's university student, most of them born in the 1980's, are hyper information-sensitive, their daily lives since childhood awash in a flood of data and sound. They were "born with the chip" (Abram, 2004). Such is certainly the case here at Saint Mary's.

The threats to the sanctity of academic research supposedly posed by the "Googlized" world of massive information attack, plagiarism and unreferenced sources have been rumoured, if not always articulated. And it was with a growing sense of unease that the annual statistical compendiums of library usage in the late nineties and first few years of our current millennium revealed the declines in circulation and reference inquiries which were evident to those who worked at the public service desks at the Saint Mary's library, evidence of "a shift in the balance of power between the cybrary and its visitors" (Kapizke, 2001).

For a number of years, the library at Saint Mary's, like academic libraries everywhere (Carlson, 2001), had been adapting its means of delivering information to take advantage of global improvements to computer and communication technology and, by extension, scholarly communication. We created, gathered and diverted human and financial resources to making more, and more current, information readily available to students and faculty whether within or without our walls. Users of the library could be, and were, able to carry out extensive, high quality academic research without ever, unless needing a book, having to actually set foot in the library. We had failed "to design our libraries to merge virtual space and physical space to create a convergent architecture" (Weise, 2004). Or, to put it rather more blandly, foot traffic went down as fulltext database usage went up.

But then a peculiar thing happened. 2003 saw a reversal of trends. Perhaps it was a "post-internet bounce" (Albanese, 2003) but, in a fundamentally dramatic way, the number of students passing through the doors of the Saint Mary's library began to climb.

The Supremacy of Environment and Service

There are two main reasons for this increasingly pleasing phenomenon. One lies within the aforementioned elevated student awareness of the value and availability of information and its

similarly elevated complexity. The other lies within the realm of the physical and creative environment of the individual library world into which each student chooses, or chooses not to, immerse themselves. The former, being a global sign of our time, is a matter of fact, the world as it is, the benefits of which should accrue to all libraries and over which, while we have some input, we must admit of little control. The latter, the environment which the individual library chooses to create for itself, is very much within our control and subject to our decisions and choices. Encouragement can be found in a recent report on Canadian universities, libraries included, which found "the libraries that students rank the highest in our survey are the ones that provide *a pleasing, welcoming environment*" and that "students in focus groups make it clear that they want the library *to feel like a good place to be*" (Mitchell, 2004).

University students not only need libraries, they want them. They want them to be a provider of the information and resources their professors insist upon and which they are coming to recognize as necessary. They want them for the help and guidance which library staff can give them through strong reference services and information literacy programs. And they want them to provide an atmosphere conducive to the way they now study, research, and communicate: they want to do these things in a supportive, communal environment, surrounded by like-minded young people, all of them struggling with similar issues and problems, academic, economic and social. This is hardly surprising. For many years architects, urban planners and other shapers of public space have stressed the tribal nature of social gathering: that "crowds attract crowds" (Alexander, 1977).

In an attempt to rejuvenate a library which was "quiet, dull and brilliantly dead", one librarian put it well when describing the desired outcome of its renewal, "an atmospheric blend of the studious quality of an academic portal, the friendly welcome of a public library, and the exciting, coffee-aroma-filled hubbub of a retail bookstore" (Burke, 2004). And as Samuel Demas so eloquently put it in the now infamous (and extremely valuable) article *The Deserted Library* (Carlson, 2001), "There is a huge amount of socializing and flirting and being seen that's not in the least in conflict with the main use of the library, which is research".

A recent article on the future of libraries speculated that they may eventually become *information social hubs* (Michaels, 2003).   Does this term repel you or attract you? Should it be added to that already lengthy list of names which libraries have had attached to them? Is it one of the better ones?

The challenge to come for academic libraries is to provide not only resources and services, a role we have always embraced, but also a new environment designed with modern students in mind. They must not be just "clicks and mortar" (Huang, 2001). One observer has already warned, "the next great library debate may be over space" (Engel, 2004).

Harvard = Saint Mary's = the 1200 student college down the road

A wide-ranging and important report produced by the U.S.-based organization OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) contained a multitude of analyses and insights (Wilson, 2004). Among them was this telling comment: "My library today is more like Harvard than it was 20 years ago". And whatever gap exists today will surely grow ever smaller in the coming years.

The urge to speculate is human. A recent highly provocative article by the dean of one large university library proposed the following: "Many of these undergraduate users can get enough from the open Web…..That the library has a large and rich collection does not matter to them" – and also, and perhaps with even greater implications, that "large, rich collections still matter

to faculty and graduate students but, over time, alternatives will be good enough for them as well" (Lewis, 2004).

The effects which computer technologies have had on libraries, particularly academic ones, have, of course, been dramatic both for their extent and their rapidity. And as we know, it has only just begun. The daily growth in the quantity and quality of information on the Web, the supplanting of paper academic journals by their electronic equivalents, consortium purchasing of databases, the rise of e-books and improvements to inter-library lending processes continue. The fact that electronic sources of information, especially those on the open Web, take "*less time to use-making it cheaper*" (Lewis) is of great importance to time-starved and cash-strapped students and should be to us as well. It is not difficult to envision the day when all of these elements converge to the point where *all of us have it all* – in the realm of collections that students and faculty use. And you can throw in to this mix the suggestion that "being collection-centric is old-fashioned; content is no longer king – context is" (Wilson).

It is now time to reconsider our traditional definition of "The Great Library" – one not predicated by the number of volumes housed or size of acquisitions budget or how much ivy grows on its walls. In light of this, successful academic libraries are positioning themselves to take advantage of these great opportunities. They know that "it is important to watch new users rather than listen to established customers" (Lewis). They know that a university library must contribute to a culture of academic and social success which is reflected in its physical and intellectual environment.

There are many ways to achieve this and many possible contributors.

The University

An academic library, by definition, exists within the context of the larger academic institution. Each exerts influence over the other, for better, for worse, for the status quo. In their plans to improve the Saint Mary's library as a congenial student space, staff were able to take advantage of numerous initiatives, innovations and fortuitous events at the university which meshed with their own ideas.

Foremost was the arrival in 2001 of a new vice president academic. He was not only kindly disposed towards libraries, in general, he also began the process of creating a comprehensive academic plan for the university. The plan, still in development, is intended to have far-reaching effects upon everything from student research and writing to student retention and ultimately to raise the status and improve the quality of academic life on campus. Its acknowledgement of the library's centrality in student and faculty research would lay the groundwork and provide the context for Madeleine's aim of improving the library's prominence and stature on campus. Even more concretely, the vice president's support was to later manifest itself in increases to the Library's acquisitions and operating budgets. It had become evident that, "librarians must demonstrate to the campus community that the library remains central to academic effort" (Hisle, 2002).

Opportunities

In order to cultivate university support for the library in general, and for new projects in particular, it is imperative to maintain as high a profile as possible on campus. This can be achieved through many avenues, from staff membership on committees both important and less so, to attendance at social functions and involvement with the university's community outreach efforts. The benefits which these sometimes seemingly small initiatives accrue to the library manifest themselves in many different ways, not always easily discernible. In the past

few years library staff at Saint Mary's have been presented with a wide variety of such opportunities.

The first occasion was an unfortunate one. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States forced the diversion of dozens of commercial airline flights to Halifax, resulting in the need to provide accommodations, food, emotional support for American citizens and communication services in a chaotic and traumatic time for thousands of stranded, unforeseen visitors. Saint Mary's opened its residences to many of them and the library helped by providing internet connections so that Americans and other internationals could alleviate their own and their loved ones' concerns. The library's provision of internet services is also extended to those conference delegates, tourists and other visitors who rent the university's residence rooms during the summer months.

In 2002 Saint Mary's marked the 200th anniversary of its founding with a year-long series of commemorative events. For many of these occasions, the staff of the university archives, located on the third floor of the library, was relied upon to provide vital research, background information, photographic records and artefacts.

A far different situation arose in September, 2003 when the library found itself transformed into the Salt Lake City Police Department. The library was figuratively moved thousands of kilometres to the southwest United States for a few weeks last fall while CBS Television shot a movie in Halifax. The money received for this was directed to the Archives for the purchase of new display cases.

Later that month, the city of Halifax received quite a different visitor in the form of the first hurricane to hit our shores. It caused two fatalities, much property damage and the loss of tens of thousands of uprooted trees. Moreover, electricity was lost to most of the city for days. A week of classes was cancelled while the university was largely in the dark except for the library which managed to open a few days later and offer a sanctuary for some of those students living in residence.

The opening in September, 2003 of the first Writing Centre on our campus was the culmination of the efforts of many, the library not least of all. Like similar centres elsewhere, it provides group and individual instruction on academic writing and research as well as workshops for faculty and students on related issues. The seed for this project was planted by the university librarian in a proposal submitted to a special university task force on literacy. The library's provision of an impetus for it was not unnoticed. The library and the writing centre have already established a cooperative working relationship.

The Projects

In her earlier article, mention was made of a proposed "Atrium Project" for which Madeleine held high hopes as a means of more physically integrating the library with other campus facilities. This three story glass dome would envelope the library entrance, the nearby Science building and another existing academic building. While the addition of new labs, offices and classrooms is a huge plus for everyone, it is its creation of an open, flexible common area adjacent to the library which would include 24/7 computer access and study space which is of greatest interest to us.

We would also like to expand the coffee shop and use it as part of a bridge between the new academic space and the library. We have a guarded optimism that the completed project will realise many of our objectives of increasing the visibility of the library, integrating it further with other academic departments and providing greater flexibility in the distribution of computer facilities.

There were other physical (and virtual) changes which staff have initiated over the past few intervening years to try and make our library a more desirable destination for Saint Mary's students. Late in 2002 a Space Planning Committee was formed.

Some changes, easily undertaken, may seem insignificant at first glance but have a positive, cumulative impact. The improvements to the Reference Room outlined in the previous article continued with the addition of 12 more computers and their furniture (we now have 36 and counting). Their prominent location imparts recognition on our part of their importance to the research process. This is part of an ongoing discussion with significant cost and space implications but the popularity of our computers among students demands that we critically examine the number of machines we can make available to them and how this relates to other computer services on campus (see again Shill, 2004).

The Reference desk itself was remodelled by removing a top panel which served to provide a forbidding appearance. This friendlier design makes reference staff more visible and appear more open to receiving students' inquiries. Again, it is consistent with our intention of changing the students' perception of the library, an inviting place anxious to serve them.

As part of the library's "image makeover" a new web site was launched in September, 2003. The new site (www.smu.ca/library) adopted a clean, bright, contemporary design with intuitive, less jargon-dependent access points and content, an attempt to "learn from students as well as have them learn from us" (Lippincott, 2002).

But of all the various changes and improvements which the library experienced over the past few years, there are two which can account in largest measure for the dramatic increase in the number of students coming to the library. One was rather labour-intensive, time-consuming and somewhat costly. The second was cost-free, quick and easy even though it entailed overturning an almost universal, hallowed tradition of longstanding…..

Significant Improvement #1: Renovations to the Lobby
As mentioned, the sprawling lobby inside the entrance to the library was a gloomy, uninviting space which, if not corrected, would be almost enough to defeat virtually all other initiatives. At the time of the library's construction the lobby was envisioned as a space able to host receptions and other occasions demanding subdued lighting. In any case, it has been a burden around the library's neck ever since. The bright lighting in adjacent areas only served to accentuate its cave-like atmosphere. The poor illumination also prevented any other utilization of the area.

The Space Planning Committee quickly made it its first and highest priority. Plans were drawn up which incorporated the installation of two large (12'x12') banks of ceiling lights at either end of the lobby. The improvement was apparent with the "flick of a switch". The lobby was now basked in a warm and inviting glow which changed the entire dynamic of the space. Students no longer have a sense of needing to hurry through to the bright areas on the perimeter.

The new lighting now allowed for the addition of an informal seating area comprised of 20 upholstered armchairs. This area has since proven very popular with our students who use it alone or in groups for reading or socializing. Even the large (8'x15'), bright mural at the far end of the lobby has been seen "in a new light" and adds a splash of colour to its surroundings.

The Services Plus area, which provides an array of services to students such as printing, photocopy credits, ID cards, microforms, etc., was given a facelift. New vinyl flooring replaced the worn carpeting, a total of eight microfilm filing cabinets which supported a defunct academic department were donated to another university, allowing for the rearrangement of

the remaining cabinets in a more open concept plan and a new, more efficient counter/cabinet was added. New flooring was also installed behind the circulation desk and in the two freshly-painted photocopy rooms, all of which are part of or are adjacent to the lobby.

Finally, after consultation with an interior designer, tropical trees and other greenery were brought in to enliven the space.

The lobby is now a bright, cheerful space with greater flexibility.

Significant Improvement #2: Our food and drink policy was abolished
Libraries have held on to their "No Food or Drinks in the Library" policy for a long time. This in spite of the fact that we exist partly so that patrons can borrow books and take them home where they can be stood on, eaten off of or dropped in the tub. Our decision to allow snacks and (covered) drinks coincided with the opening of the coffee shop (we have since noticed that a number of other academic libraries have had the same idea). Our computers have emerged unscathed. Except for some adjustments required of our custodial services to insure timely cleanups, there have been few problems associated with the abolition of these outdated regulations. There have, however, been many benefits.

Students like being able to enjoy a hot or cold drink while reading, studying or even doing research. Unscientific observation of students entering the reference room suggests that more than half have a drink in hand. And now they no longer have to leave the library when they are thirsty or hungry (perhaps not to return). At another Canadian university where the "food laws" were relaxed, the head of the library expressed the belief that, "such policies foster a safe, secure setting where learning can occur" (Lougheed, 2001).

This is not only a valuable example of responding to client needs and its significance extends well beyond the benefits enjoyed by our students. Equally importantly, it changed student perceptions of the library. And as the library became an ever more popular place for students to work and socialize, ever greater numbers of students were attracted to it. The library is a beehive of activity most of the time and space is at a premium. We now hope to use this popularity in our argument for an expansion of the library in the coming years. The policy against food and drinks had been in place forever. All it took to change it was the will to do so.

A Work in Progress

Increased use of the library has also been an encouragement to staff who now are busier at the Reference and Circulation desks and feel that they are providing valued service to more and more of the student body.

A recent Senate Library Committee report indicated that students would like us to consider longer hours of operation. As has been noted in other schools, in spite of the 24/7 availability of electronic library materials, "students are demanding longer hours to have a place to go to study" (Gosling, 2000). In response, a pilot project was begun which sees the library building open 15 minutes earlier (8:00 am) each weekday and an hour earlier on weekends. The Reference desk is also open earlier as well.

Students are not the only ones to benefit from this new focus on the library's physical environment. We are currently in the midst of refurbishing staff work areas with new offices for some and new workstations for others. All staff space has been re-painted and new flooring installed.

Earlier plans for an Information Commons are still alive. This may tie in to the Atrium Project.

In any case, we hope to soon be able to further improve our ability to provide Saint Mary's students with the services and resources they deserve in a space which is functional, productive and congenial.

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