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What Do You Call A Place Where Books Are Kept?

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What do you call a place where books are kept?

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Honors Capstone Project in Architecture

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Abstract

The public library as a single grand building, gated by massive columns and filled with rows of dusty tomes, is a severely outdated conception. The model of library as a permanent, stable landmark in the city has been debased with the advent of digital technology and a new model is forming that embraces the ephemerality of modern media. However, the image of a building filled with books still holds power over architects and bibliophiles and continues to wield influence over the design of new libraries. Consequently, the modern library is caught between trying to provide adequate technological and educational resources to its patronage and serving the critical role of storing, organizing, and providing access to knowledge.

Books are caught at the center of this struggle, seen both as unwanted remnants of an outdated age and valuable artifacts to be preserved and treasured. The design of recent libraries illustrates this dichotomy but the increasing focus on the importance of the digital is creating conditions that relegate the book to storage. Books in storage may be well preserved, but the power they hold is removed from the public sphere. For books to wield their influence they must be seen and experienced. Technology has caused a schism in the library and the book must go its own way.

The information society born of technology has created a new library, one without walls, even without matter. The digital library pervades, instantly accessible and ever growing. The institution of the public library, to help its patrons through the maze of its resources, must become a guide and voice of authority as well as a place of education and access.

The modern public library is an indefinite thing; spreading through the city, anchored by nodes of authority, but shifting and changing, appearing and disappearing as it is used. Books, by contrast, occupy a definite physical place and need that context if they are to be understood and learned from. The repository where books are sent, rather than a blind warehouse of miles of boxes, should provide books with their place in the modern library city. An open and publically accessible component of the larger library, the repository can make visible the value and power of books, even in a digital society. The repository is a storage facility and a museum, a resource and an experience.

Summary of Capstone Project

Introduction - Books vs. Libraries

Tension arises in determining what should be housed in the modern library. The demands of technology on libraries -- to provide public access to resources, the equipment to access them, and the prerequisite education to find and understand those resources -- has begun to compete with less modern aspects of the library, namely books. For over the last two decades libraries have tried to reconcile their existing collections with new digital resources, and for some time this seems to have worked, but the realization has begun to hit libraries that there is not enough space to house both books and technology under their existing roofs.

The spatial strain placed on libraries has resulted in the increasing prevalence of off-site book storage, the removal of books from libraries and the creation of a new model of library based on access, education and collaboration; the modern library provides the resources needed to access other resources. Within this new system, the place of the book must be reevaluated, and so its value and characteristics must be understood.

Context - Defining Books

The modern definition of a book as a pile of pages, printed with words and pictures, bound together in a cover, and sold as a commodity is a limited definition of what a books can be. All written texts since the first cuneiform tablets can be seen as variations on a theme -- ways of preserving thoughts and

sharing them with others. Understanding the book as a metaphysical artifact allows the potential of books in the modern library to be evaluated. Understanding the evolution of books helps define their character as artifacts, evaluate the ways they are made valuable, and establish the requirements they present for the place where they are kept.

Writers and bibliophiles can endlessly extol the virtues of the smell and feel of a page and the value of a good binding. Their praise, although somewhat in excess at times, resoundingly supports the importance of a book as a physical object. Because books are material, rather than immaterial information propagated by digital technology, they can be understood as more than ideas preserved. Books are read not only for the words they hold, but the things they say silently as a result of their existence in the world. In comparison with the incorporeal world of digital media, the physical qualities of books become one of their greatest assets and thus valued help establish their position in the modern library.

From clay tablets to on-demand printing (and even e-books), this evolution has been influenced by social and technological shifts and demands. A social evolution of the book and library has been traced through history identifying the forces impacting their co-evolution and charting the results in terms of book and library form. From this analysis trends can be seen in the position of the library as it adapts to the modern era stretching back thousands of years. The library through history has become increasingly open and accessible while books, which reached a peak of visibility and access in the early twentieth century, are recently regressing towards the hidden and inaccessible position they

held centuries ago as they are replaced with digital technology. The visibility and accessibility of books is clearly valued as a trend and its reversal is a challenge for the modern library.

Formally, the evolution of the library is less clear in its trajectory; formal strategies have been explored repeatedly in history as a result of a variety of variables. A pattern can be distinguished in certain time periods that characterizes libraries of that time and has a resonance with its contemporary books. These typologies help describe the evolution of the library when compared as a series. Each formal configuration given to a library creates a different contextual environment for the books it houses. Formal characteristics of libraries are related to the needs of the patrons at the time of the library's design and therefore betray the designer's attitude towards books. The scale of the space, the methods of storage and display, and the organizational system employed change the reading of a book by providing different contextual information against which the book is read. A careful consideration of the context of a book, like a careful consideration of its physical form, increases the insight gained from the book; providing context is then a critical goal of any library.

Case Studies - Split Designing

Although a shift towards digital technology and resources is needed for libraries to remain relevant in the information society and to provide what is

needed by modern patrons, in a sense it is ironic that digital technology should be so favored by libraries. Digital technology is becoming increasingly detached from the library as it takes on a simultaneous ubiquity and placeless-ness. The shrinking of technology has allowed it to be personalized and perpetually available. An individual can now make any place into a library through personal computers and the vast resources of the internet.

The physical public library remains important -- not only to those without other access to personal technology, but also to the general public -- in this technological age by refocusing itself as a community center and source of authority in the cacophony of information proliferated by digital resources. The library devotes itself to on-site education and remote access, catering to the modern patron.

The results of this phenomenon can be seen in the shifting spatial and functional organizations found in the modern library. A programmatic split can be found in library designs of the last decade where the design considers its role as an archive and its role as a civic institution as separate. This frequently results in a spatial separation of books and readers where the readers are given space only dedicated to reading and books are similarly isolated. A series of diagrammatic case studies explores this split in the modern library.

Contention - The Place of Books

The modern library system had been redirected, its priorities have changed and it has taken on new roles while eliminating others. In the transient digital

realm of the new library, the physical library becomes a moment of stability without clear boundaries, one point of focus bleeding out into the cloud. With this understanding of the library it is no longer possible to conceive of the library as a single building, and the library must designed at a larger scale, that of the city. The modern library needs to be seen as a series of inter-connected permanent library spaces providing focal points in the field of temporary library created by personal technology and digital resources. The library designed at the scale of the city can support far more than a single instance of library; the urban space linking the permanent libraries becomes an extension of the library, an urban library that can also be designed to support library goals and the needs of patrons.

Within the city-as-library there is still a question as to the place occupied by books. Physical books cannot be ignored in a digital age. The inherent differences between a physical and digital text result in too great a disparity of content for one to replace the other and so books maintain their foothold in the library system. Books (as physical texts) are now only one method of preserving thoughts and can be circumvented in large part by more convenient digital media. Books are then only needed occasionally, a state taken advantage of by the off-site storage employed by many libraries; when the readily available digital resources are not enough, a book can be requested and retrieved for patron use without devoting library space to their storage.

An off-site book repository supports the on-demand nature of the modern library, but it does not adequately support the needs of books and readers. While digital media are not tied to physical space and allow the library to spread out

effortlessly into the urban fabric, the staunchly corporeal nature of books requires them to be experienced in a physical context in order to be understood. Pseudo-remote access, like that provided by off-site storage, negates the power of a collection of books when experienced by an individual. Virtual browsing of books may be convenient, but yields far less rich results as an afternoon spent in the stacks.

Books experienced in a physical setting are connected in more ways than their keywords -- the knowledge gained from books, rather than the information they contain. For their greater value to be available in the library system, the place of books cannot only be in a closed-off warehouse where they are only seen by a select few. For a library to consciously, and valuably participate in the larger library system it must provide a way for books to be experienced as richly as possible, and read in as many ways as possible. This means creating an environment with layers of context in which to read a book.

For the comprehensive modern library a physical place dedicated to books is essential; operating as a node in the larger system and critically examining and re-presenting the books it contains.

Design Project - The Repository

To test the implications of this new model of library, this design proposal considers Iowa City, Iowa, a UNESCO City of Literature. The city is home to an especially well supported library and a rich range of related institutions. Along with the city's public library and a wealth of community supported library

activities, the city is home to the University of Iowa and its collection of libraries. Combined, the public and academic library spaces represent an ideal range of patrons and resources.

Within the urban fabric a pedestrian walkway links the city center and the campus, along which the major elements of the city-as-library are placed. At one end the Iowa City Public Library becomes the focus of civic activity and provides public access to library resources. Along the spine a variety of spaces become incidences of temporary library, tying together the urban library with bookstores, coffee shops and a streetscape designed to be an extension of the library. The University of Iowa Main Library, near the edge of the campus, becomes a focus of academic thought; a learning commons where collaboration and innovation are encouraged with technological and educational support. The repository is the final element along this library spine. Situated within the University of Iowa campus, the repository acts as both an extension of the urban library and an extension of the campus, linking the pedestrian library path and a new quad where the many literary programs at the University of Iowa come together.

The repository itself is designed not only a warehouse in which to store the library's collection, but also a museum, where books are not only used but understood. A mass of book stacks is wrapped by the shell of the building and held above the ground plane. On the north and south façades a void separates the stacks from the building enclosure within which a series of volumes separates out specialized spaces. These volumes extend from the stack out of the building,

puncturing the enclosure and expressing themselves as framed images set in the façade when viewed from the public space outside.

The volumes on the south façade, bordering the pedestrian library spine, represent a chronological sequence of formal library typologies which house the collection for their representative time period. A choreographed pathway links the volumes forming a journey through the evolution of the library and the book. The volumes are enclosed with varying opacities, changing the extent to which they can be observed from inside the repository. As a visitor moves along the pathway they see, experience, and compare the different typologies of library represented.

On the north façade the volumes contain administration spaces needed for the operation of the repository and also for its participation in the larger library system. Spaces for circulation, preservation, and cataloguing look out on the University of Iowa literary quad.

At the ground floor the wrapper reaches down to the ground in the form of a grand stair. At this level the contents of the repository meet the larger library system; the repository's contents can be requested and received for busy patrons and research assistance can be provided. Also at the ground floor the repository's contents can be transformed into the stuff of the information society with digitization initiatives that allow the repository to support the larger library framework.

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