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OPINION:

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The Academic Library and the Commons

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to survey the existing literature on Information Commons and other new academic library building concepts, to consider how their designs encourage institutional and individual learning. A range of literature from other fields will be consulted to examine the broader context of the ideas of “commons”. Some of the problems of this design concept are discussed in light of university learning goals and the various meanings of “commons”. The conclusion considers how the successful features of these newer academic library buildings and the concept of the academic library as a “commons” together indicate a viable and promising future for academic libraries as places of learning and creativity.

Introduction

Within most library sectors there is a siege mentality, bundled with frustration – and some excitement – as technology pushes institutions forward into a future they never quite planned for; with many of the general public regarding the institution and profession as made redundant by technology (Joint 2007). Computer terminals have been in many libraries since the first public access catalogues in the 1980s (Borgman 1996), and by the early 1990s North American university library redevelopments such as the University of Iowa’s Information Arcade, and the Information Commons at the University of Southern California¹ marked the beginning of a movement to combine computer centres with academic libraries (Boone 2003). This move continues, and many universities are investing in new library buildings and library expansions with space for books, computers and other ‘non-library’ services (Shill and Tonner 2004). Along with “non-library” uses of space, non-library

¹ Both are sections of larger, older academic libraries, the Hardin Library and the Leavey Library, respectively (MacWhinnie 2003).

names are becoming popular: Learning Centre in the UK (see Oyston 2003) and Information Commons in North America (see MacWhinnie 2003). This article focuses on academic libraries and how their designs have changed so that they may be conceivably described as commons, how they relate to the concept of commons and its value to institutional and individual learning.

Learning versus information?

Non-library names for academic libraries include: Information Commons, Learning Commons, Learning Centres, Electronic Information Centres, an Information Gallery, Information Hubs (all in MacWhinnie 2003), Learning Hubs², Scholars Centres and even a Cybrary (both in Bundy 2004) and a Learningcafe (Boone 2003). The new names reflect new demands on academic library services. They all reflect the combination of student access computer facilities with library collections, but many also include group study and conference rooms, additional multimedia facilities, and classrooms (Shill and Tonner 2004). The shift from 'library' to the sometimes catchy, sometimes curious new building names and the addition of new types of space has largely been driven by technology, which has 'become the catalyst that transforms the library into a more vital and critical intellectual centre at colleges and universities today' (Freeman 2005).

Yet IT is only one component of the sweeping changes for academic libraries. Changes do not reflect the triumph of providing information over encouraging learning. The importance of learning and teaching to the library seems to have increased. Moving beyond the simple store of information which only ever defined a library at its most basic, academic libraries are becoming places where learning and teaching occur, in multimedia classrooms, collaborative workstations and other flexible environments (Freeman 2005). This is reflected in a recent tendency among new Canadian academic library buildings and renovations to use the name "learning commons" instead of "information commons" (Boone 2003), along with the trend in UK libraries to use the term "learning" in naming their new facilities, whether hubs, centres, commons, and so on. Boone describes a learning commons as more focused on learning and research processes, and the choice of the emphasis of

²An example is the University of Nottingham's planned renovation of the Hallward Library: details available at <http://nottingham.ac.uk/is>

'learning' over 'information' may also be a political and institutional decision to highlight the importance of learning and knowledge over bare information, despite the centrality of information to recent technological change.

Marketing for Survival?

Fritscher argues that '[t]he research library will survive because of the introduction of ever more and newer digital technologies, not in spite of them' (Fritscher 2005). This combination of warning and prediction is the tack that has essentially been taken by many academic librarians as a response to the threats of a 'paperless society' and 'deserted libraries' that digital information delivery would bring about (phrases coined by F.W. Lancaster and Scott Carlson, respectively, as cited in Demas, 2005). The demise of the book would be coupled with the downfall of the library, in the public realm and the academy. This has not happened: print media has thus far thrived with the revolution in information technology (MacWhinnie 2003; Frischer 2005), and so has the academic library, according to many accounts (Boone 2003, MacWhinnie 2003, Demas 2005, Freeman 2005).

Aligning themselves with the 'IT revolution' can be seen as a sharp marketing move by academic librarians and university administrators both. Munn's seminal description of the university library as a 'bottomless pit' for university budgets at the time when cost-benefit analysis and 'scientific' methods of effective resource allocation were just beginning to be applied to higher education appears to have been disproven (see Munn 1968). Munn warned academic librarians to begin to 'have some answers' when asked to justify their percentages of university budgets (Munn 1968). In a reappraisal of Munn's outlook in 1991, Hardesty found that deans at American higher education colleges that he surveyed did not hold to a 'bottomless pit' view and strongly valued their institutions' academic libraries (Hardesty 1991). Several of the administrators that he spoke with found the library useful as a symbol. Library consultant Maurice Line finds the symbolic value of the university library draws the somewhat dubious attention of architects and vice-chancellors (Line 2002)³, but this symbolic value seems to have worked in the

³ In the vein of his long career as a writing librarian, he proposes that each campus has an Architect's Building so that principals and architects could have a building as an ostentatious display of genius and institutional success, and so allow the entire remainder of the university to be functionally designed.

academic library's favour. As one of the more visible buildings on campus, large university libraries make a good place to put functional, attention-grabbing multimedia classrooms, late model computers and the rest of the non-library equipment and spaces that universities are perceived to need to remain competitive in the knowledge economy. Having to accept a multiple use facility is a small price to pay for the new buildings and collection space that cannot fit into the average library budget, particularly when these non-library uses are not entirely antithetical to the ethos of librarianship.

While symbolic and marketing value may be part of the reason that new academic library buildings are getting funded, it does not explain why many of these buildings have been successful with students and users. Mixed use libraries cannot all host dances, mini-golf and a game library (ludotheque), as the small size and elite nature of Amherst College, St. Olaf's College and Carleton College (all in USA) has allowed their libraries to do (Demas 2005). However, in Frischer's phrasing, 'the quality of the experience' will become more important than the quantity of information (Frischer 2005).

One quality which 'commons' academic libraries can and do offer is the 'social dimension of learning' (Freeman 2005). This is linked to the collaborative group work increasingly in vogue, but not limited to it. It can include such intangibles as 'a welcoming atmosphere', but it is one of the qualities that get people into libraries. Libraries can also offer cafes, bright lighting, and comfortable seating, in response to the recent growth of the Borders-style 'superbookstore' (see Bundy 2004; also Line 2002). This is a different type of atmosphere than that expected and still demanded by the user who wants the quiet space of the classic reading room, but both should be offered by the designs of academic libraries since the experience of a quiet library environment and the noisier social library experience both draw students in (Freeman 2005).

What makes these new libraries 'commons'?

Commons is a hotly contested word, making its use as a word for multiple use academic libraries somewhat puzzling at times. The first linguistic issue to deal with is what the historical idea of a commons is. It has been referred to as 'a shared outdoor field or common area', referring principally to its North

American context (Brodeur 1967), and as a ‘resource [that] is open to users regardless of the user’s identity or intended use’ (Frischman 2005: 933). In an attempt to clarify the term, Bailey and Tierney list three basic conceptualizations of “information commons”: the world of information and digital information (‘the Web’) as ‘the macro-Commons’, clusters of IT hardware and infrastructure as ‘a micro-Commons’, and the merged academic library as an ‘integrated Commons’ (see Bailey & Tierney 2002). In the specific case of academic libraries, ‘commons’ is a somewhat ironic term, given their limited accessibility.

The Commons concept is of striking relevance to the Open Source movement, the goal of which is allowing open use of intellectual and academic production regardless of user (see Suber 2006). This is linked to the system of production that Benkler calls ‘commons-based peer production’ in his seminal 1998 article ‘Coase’s Penguin’ (Benkler 2002). Commons-based peer production is voluntary and unsupervised creative and intellectual production made possible by the distributed information network, a “phenomenon that could allow us to tap substantially underutilized reserves of human creative effort” (Benkler 2002: 444) The Open Directory Project⁴ and Wikipedia⁵ are among numerous examples of successful projects utilizing a different ‘information commons’ than any single library building. This brings us back into the contested semantic terrain that ‘the buildings formerly known as academic libraries’ are seeking to inhabit.

Lest they fall into a linguistic “tragedy of the commons”⁶ and the phrase “information commons” is ruined by muddled overuse, perhaps the planners and namers of academic libraries could consider the origin of the historic commons, in the Town Common. The mutability of who was allowed to use a common land was part of the picture in historical commons (Frischman 2005), but it was usually self evident if it was in a town, or other named place (for example, North America’s famous Boston Common). A clearer name than

⁴ See <http://dmoz.org>

⁵ See <http://www.wikipedia.org>

⁶ An economic concept introduced in a renowned article by a biologist concerned about over-population (Hardin 1968). The “commons” he refers to as tragic is the planet Earth and its resources, which he saw being overused and ruined because of population growth unfettered by any law to prevent people from overusing the planet. How this problem as it applies to libraries is not considered within the scope of this brief communication, since libraries have been addressing the problems of differing levels of service demands far longer than the building and design changes discussed herein.

'information commons' would be welcomed in the planning of new academic libraries, considering this context.

But creating a blend of formerly discrete functions and goals is what makes information commons and the new multiple use academic library different, irrespective of the monikers used. It may not always be clear what the result of this blending process is, as this article has detailed, but it can and should also include more than just a blend of learning, research and teaching, but also to make the leap between learning and creativity, and vice versa.⁷ Learning space, teaching space, social/discourse space and information space all have a home in the academic library designed as a commons.

Joint-use academic/public libraries

One type of new library academic library building that can give merged academic libraries a valid claim to being a true 'commons' is the joint-use public and university library. There is a tradition of combined school community libraries dating back at least to a school and public library in New Hampshire in 1906 (Bundy 2003). A joint-use library is defined by Bundy as: 'a library in which two or more distinct library services providers, usually a school and a public library, serve their client groups in the same building, based on an agreement that specifies the relationship between the providers' (Bundy 2003). While these community joint-use libraries have a long tradition in countries attempting to serve dispersed communities in rural areas, particularly in Canada, Australia and the United States (Bundy 2003), there have been few combined university and public libraries. There has been a flurry of interest in joint-use libraries in the past 10 years with two particularly exciting new projects: the hotly debated Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in San Jose, California (Peterson 2005) and the Irving Barber Learning Center at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (UBC 2007 and Boone 2003) are both exciting examples of the possibilities of information commons (built with many of the same non-library functions that purely academic information commons are) that represents more than convergence of library and computer services for university students. The Barber Centre is not strictly a public library/university library partnership, but like the Learning Cafe at Glasgow

⁷ See Demas (2005) for a discussion of how art, intellectual discourse, research and learning are all encouraged by new academic libraries.

Caledonian University (Boone 2003 and JISC 2006) it represents a wider commons of information access and an institutional partnership; both provide open access to the public, instead of simply a commons for a relatively narrow user group.

Not every university library and public library service can be merged in one 'union building'. It may also be that this concept has not been tried in the past because it is not feasible for many or most organizations. Joint-use libraries often require some added expense and difficulties, for example the multiple entrances required by the King Library (Peterson 2005). On top of design expenses, successfully getting a joint-use building built is understandably a more complicated undertaking than a standard new build of an academic library. Two success factors can be highlighted:

- geographic proximity: if the two libraries to be merged are not near each other, the project may not be worth considering (e.g. the San Jose State University Library and the San Jose Public Library were within walking distance of each other (Peterson 2005)).
- institutional cooperation: the two institutions to share the facility must be able to agree on management and a strategic plan (Bundy 2004).

The long term success of the King Library, the Barber Learning Centre, the Learningcafe and new joint-use buildings like Australia's Murdoch University Rockingham Regional Campus Community Library⁸ remains to be seen. Yet the notion is a promising one that may be able to closer link the academy with an ever-wider learning community.

Designing future academic libraries: the old and the new

Figure 1 lists a range of features that academic libraries need to become the multiple use academic libraries that support a changing learning environment, taken from a range of the literature discussed previously. It also draws a distinction between traditional features of libraries that are part of what continue to make academic libraries successful and the newer non-library

⁸ <http://www.rocklibrary.murdoch.edu.au> : A partnership between the city of Rockingham, Murdoch University and a further education school

features that modern library users demand. Some of these features must be

Figure 1: Library Design Features

Old Library Feature	New Library Feature
Browsing/serendipity	24/7 opening/extended hours
Quiet contemplation	“Shush-Free”/social discourse allowed
Learning opportunities	Learning & creative opportunities w/multimedia
Company of scholars	Places to eat, have a hot drink
Reference guidance	IT assistance
	Information Literacy support/teaching
	Collaborative opportunities
	Technology rich environment
	Comfort
	Flexible Space

[Sources: Boone (2003), Demas (2005), Line (2002), Freeman (2005) and MacWhinnie (2003)]

balanced, such as the mutually exclusive features of quiet contemplation and noisy social discourse or group work, which can be accommodated by designating quiet areas and physically separating them. These tensions can be dealt with through careful planning and a focus on people (Demas 2005) and not simply on the value of their collections and what is stored in the building, nor on the impressive technological features that they can incorporate. This emphasis on people makes the appropriation of “commons” increasingly valid.

Modern academic libraries and their successors are typically designed with entrances manned by security guards and requiring the swipe of an id card for access⁹ (and sometimes to exit¹⁰). Building security, access and safety concerns certainly cannot be disregarded, particularly considering the new

⁹ As predicted when the security technology involved was cutting edge in the foundational modern academic librarians’ library design text Academic Libraries As High-Tech Gateways: A Guide to Design and Space Decisions (Bazillion and Braun 1995).

¹⁰ As is the case with the University of Sheffield’s Information Commons, with a current policy disallowing entrance to anyone without a university card, less inclusive than the other University of Sheffield libraries which allow guests to sign in on a sign-in sheet.

prevalence of 24/7 access, but planners of 'commons' should take into account the restrictive image they may be fostering at the same time as they aim to design welcoming spaces and remember that the ultimate sign of success is usage.

Conclusions

Academic libraries have undergone many changes in recent years as their planners attempt to ensure that they remain viable and relevant to the knowledge economy. In spite of what many may think about the value of print versus electronic information and the traditional ethos of librarianship, the flexible, welcoming and dynamic spaces of multiple-use academic libraries, by whatever name, play a key role in institutional and individual learning at their universities, just as their predecessors did. The threat to the academic library space is the same that has always threatened it whether from an overemphasis on storing and preserving books or an overemphasis on IT: planners losing sight of the academic and learning needs of library users. It is hoped that modern academic library planners had that in mind when they consider buildings that are increasingly being named 'commons', a name that signifies the needs, learning and creative potential of the people using it.

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