

## Connecting the Dots, Building a Library for Learning

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### **Abstract:**

The seeds of innovation are changing how libraries use their space and plan for future remodels, renovations or expansions. Common examples of this could be converting space from materials storage to user space needs, or developing spaces around technology enhancements. Technology driven initiatives that impact space usually start as small ideas or seeds of innovative initiatives, such as makerspaces, but are growing into digital media centers, video and imaging rooms, gaming labs and augmented reality spaces. It's all about learning and how the library building can support learning efforts in a new dynamic and changing environment, thus the needed justification for future flexibility in space planning.

**Keywords:** library planning | library spaces | building design | renovation

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

A case study approach to a master space planning project goes beyond the typical consultant-led project into developing a broader perspective on the factors related to addressing innovative changes and initiatives for both present needs and future developments. An assembled team representing a wide range of interests conducted site visits to selected academic libraries to visualize and discuss trends and initiatives impacting space planning. This information was shared with stakeholders in a focus group format to vet out potential seeds of expectation on how the use of library space can contribute to the success of individuals, groups and the larger institution. This was the author's experience in a current project that was underway.

The drivers for creating goals in the planning effort went beyond the library walls to include community, digital scholarship and convening spaces. Research was conducted regarding the pedagogy that libraries can offer, in order to create environments that promote and support knowledge creation. The library wants to be considered the learning hub on campus and be

integrated into each level of the educational mission to ensure student success and faculty research support.

This article promotes the idea of how small seeds of new ideas and new concepts or futuristic thinking can be incorporated into space design and renovation efforts. Current space needs will evolve and current planning should be mindful. And how do we want the library to be viewed, a warehouse for books or a place to learn in many ways?

### **The Future of Library Spaces**

The future of library spaces will be built around how users and stakeholders have changed and with what attributes hold value for them, both individually and as a group. Many of these changes revolve around providing patrons choices; as it related to their use of space and providing a flexible, inviting environment for accomplishing their goals. The evolution of libraries should be connected to learning, and how new buildings are designed and renovations or upgrades developed is critical to the future use of the space for learning by the users.

The literature on library design is increasing recognition of the need for connecting those dots of building and remodeling and learning. The trend is leaning toward buildings that promote collaborative efforts where space and users can meet and work together or the resources within the building are gathered to be accessible for users to learn and have the tools for knowledge creation. A good example of this is IFLA's Publication 179, *Library Design for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Collaborative Strategies to Ensure Success*, which is a volume dedicated to case studies on modern design techniques and has a focus of collaborative strategies used across the globe.

Research conducted by two librarians interested in establishing common vocabularies for learning and library design elements found in their research that collaboration and spaces with the ability to focus, is a common trend in that alignment of learning and design (Nitecki & Simpson, 2016). Their research also showed that what is important to learning in a space may benefit from an articulated distinction between features that are minimum attributes in supporting learning behaviors to take place within the physical design and ambience.

### **What do we learn about the building instead of what's in the building?**

Stewart Brand's *How Buildings Learn* demonstrates how buildings change over time, once completed for specific purposes, as those purposes and original vision plans change. So much of his book talks to renovations of space over time and what value is gained in learning from those renovations. Within the context of these building renovations, he includes Chris Alexander's theory of a healthy building scenario, which combines maintenance, correction of faults and ongoing improvements as a recipe for progressive change which should occur naturally as activities and furnishings within a building change (Brand, 1994).

Renovation to buildings can be limited both financially or with constraints on the infrastructure. A clear understanding of what will happen in the building is critical to achieving success for institutional goals and organizational purposes. And the trend within libraries is

changing that over time more change can be expected and implies that current renovations must somehow align with future needs. Building and renovating these areas gradually allow for continuous improvement, as well as, an analysis of what was learned in the process through assessment and environmental scanning in order to anticipate future directions (Crumpton, 2018). Recognizing that future needs will be different helps instill the concept of flexibility in the present day.

### **The Library as a learning environment**

The use of library space is undoubtedly changing as teaching and learning methods are changing. Technology has greater influence on the facilitation of learning and how the role of the library is changing in the academy. Key concerns include: how does the library and potential building renovations support student success? Or how does the library's physical space become an enhanced learning environment ?

The library's role can be diverse; a place for gathering or convening instruction or social development, a place for information curation with access and instruction on resources and archived materials, a place for knowledge creation which includes making connections with people and expertise, and a place that offers a broad range of support in terms of formats, technology and pedagogical enhancements. Drivers of space requirements include; study spaces to meet different quantitative needs, access to academic functions related to tutoring or skill development, spaces designed for innovation or experimentation, digital scholarship venues and connections to community.

The Learning Spaces Collaboratory is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the process of planning learning spaces. At their Fall 2018 meeting they focused on libraries and how 21<sup>st</sup> century planning for library spaces needed to address learners' behaviors. With architects at the table this group focused on the attributes needed for space planning in four categories: entry spaces, innovation zones, quiet spaces and consultation spaces. Within each category a group of colleagues with various expertise were assigned to address the attributes needed in each type of space. They were asked to create job descriptions outlining what those spaces should be able to do, what requirements should each space have, and how would you measure successful outcomes.

The job descriptions from each of these space types in a library carry a commonality that associates the library with learning. Concepts like what message a space communicates, such as quiet or group study, what equipment or technology is present, what expertise is available such as research assistance, help desk for technology or pedagogical support and what aesthetics in the form of furnishings, or inspirational design is applied to nurture creative thinking and collaboration with others.

The Association for Learning Environments (A4LE) is working on competencies for planning for learning spaces and school designs. They propose that it is not about the building but what is happening inside the building that counts the most (Hendriks, 2019). Their competencies for planning a new design or renovation apply to libraries as well when viewing a library as a learning environment. They suggest, paraphrased for this context:

- Meaningful community engagement process with stakeholders
- Discuss aspirations for teaching and learning within library spaces
- Develop a vision that embraces how learning is achieved inside the building

This planning process is meant to occur before starting to discuss the facility issues and reinforces the concept of a library that is more than books or resources, but also a place to learn in a variety of ways.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries are renovating and growing across the country in many ways. In part it is simply the need to have additional space for additional users. Our profession however is more than a building; it is what happens inside the building and how those activities drive us as information professionals. It is important to connect the dots on building renovations to what users need and want for learning, knowledge creation, innovation and inspirational activities to keep libraries and librarians relevant in today's information rich society.

Furthermore, current space renovation or expansion initiatives should keep in mind that the changing dynamic of information need and use by users today, will continue to evolve and change in the future. Current initiatives should include flexibility in both planning and execution in order to make future renovations easier and less of a barrier for the library to make those changes.

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