# Revisiting Library as Place

## *Balancing Space Planning Priorities by Focusing on Core Purpose*

**Anne M. Houston, RUSA President 2015–16**

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My library's new book shelf recently featured a striking new book edited by Manuela Roth, *Library architecture + design*,[1] which includes color photos of new library spaces from around the world. I'm sure that other librarians share my enthusiasm about the design of library buildings and find pleasure in looking at library spaces while analyzing the design choices made in constructing new or reconstructing old libraries. We have a longstanding tradition of library spaces being beautiful as well as utilitarian, as evidenced by many websites featuring "most beautiful libraries in the world" (just Google this phrase for several Internet lists). We want libraries to fill our aesthetic desires perhaps because we spend so much time in them. Libraries are places to come and linger, and so we expect them to have spaces that are nice to look at as well as functional. The grand reading room is one manifestation of this, where users work intently at wood tables in a classically designed space, as is the colorful, happy children's room which conveys to children the joy of reading. In both cases, the design encourages the activity done in the room. For librarians, a successful space combines the beautiful with the functional: we enjoy architectural excellence but also seeing the choices made by architects and other librarians for how space will be utilized to meet user needs and fulfill the library's mission to its community.

As many of the photos in Roth's book illustrate, there has been a well-documented shift in recent years toward the user-centric library in which the balance of space is moving away from collection storage and toward space enabled to meet other user needs. Collections storage has been freed through technology-enabled resource sharing and offsite storage and libraries have turned more to a focus on users both in formal and informal ways. User experience and assessment librarians work with specific techniques to understand, analyze, and improve virtual services and physical spaces. These changes add up to a radical rethinking of library space and present a provocative new challenge for architects and designers.[2] Now that library space has been freed from the dominance of collections space, infinite possibilities exist for defining the user experience within the library building.

But as we add more space for users and strive for the best possible user experience, do we run the risk of scope creep by trying to fill more and varied user needs than the library space can accommodate? In academic libraries the Learning Commons aims to create a seamless student experience by consolidating services for one-stop shopping: technology support, career services, dining, and tutoring services

alongside library services such as reference and access to collections. The library's position as neutral multidisciplinary space can make it a coveted place for other campus units, especially when renovation or building projects place all possibilities on the table. Scott Bennett talked about academic libraries as places of learning,[3] but as all campus functions contribute to learning in some way, "the library as learning lab" perspective is alone not sufficient criteria for allocating space. What distinguishes the library from other learning spaces on campus? I'm less familiar with public libraries but I'm guessing that they face similar questions and difficult demands on their spaces as well, if different from those pressing on the college or university library. We may be flattered that everyone wants to be situated in the library, but how do we learn to say no to some uses and determine which to prioritize? As libraries transform themselves from book warehouses to places for users, how do we define what users come to the transforming library *to do*, and how can we avoid saying yes to each and every possible purpose?

One approach is to ask our users themselves. Increasingly, libraries conduct surveys and focus groups to discover what patrons want from their library visit or what they expect to achieve by moving through a library space. We ask what their expected outcomes are when visiting a library, and what about the library space results in a successful or unsuccessful visit. Some responses are as expected: users come to access materials, ask for help with research or reference questions, utilize technology, or do quiet creative work. As work and learning become more social, users clamor for meeting or group study rooms and spaces for events. The library space is valued for the tangible economic benefit it provides through access to shared resources such as collections and technology. But other uses are less tangible and even have an emotional or psychological component to them. Our users talk about wanting to be in the library atmosphere: they want to be surrounded by books, enjoy "the smell of books," be in a solitary or contemplative place, or be close to others doing work. The library is valued for its atmosphere of studied concentration and its ambiance of seriousness. The library is seen as fulfilling the societal good of self-education, which is both economically advantageous but also deeply tied to notions of the American dream. There's a certain pride in visiting the library and guiding one's own education or personal development. Given these many and varied user desires, it's hard to rely on user feedback alone to determine library space allocation. We may not be able to be all things to all people when the needs and desires are so numerous and varied.

When thinking about library space design, a useful comparison is between libraries and other public institutional spaces such as hospitals and airports, which have a fairly clear purpose. People go to hospitals to get treatment and airports to get from one city to another (though the latter can seem futile at times). It must be comparatively easy to map the user's journey through one of these places, as compared to the less certain space of the transforming library, where the user walking through the door could have more than one purpose, some of them not even clear to the user themself. A colleague of mine compared libraries to national parks, which are equally multifaceted—they exist for conservation, enjoyment, and education, among other things—and have myriad purposes for their users who experience them in different ways and come to them to fulfill different personal needs. I like the library/park analogy even though it is not perfect: national parks have a environmental purpose outside of any immediate user experience of the park itself, while a library without any users would be empty of purpose and not fulfilling any piece of its mission except to exist for future potential users. So if anything, the library space is about an even more complicated user-focused experience than the national park. How do we understand this complicated role and somehow come to a balance of priorities?

These questions are on my mind because my current institution is in the midst of planning a major new library building project. Led by the project architects we are engaging in an inclusive process to surface needs from students, faculty, staff and alumnae, many of whom have given us their ideas for what should go into the new library. The sheer number and inventiveness of the suggestions we've received has been impressive. Among other things, users have suggested colocations of student services, open "lab" spaces for the humanities, "cold spots" where wi-fi and cell service are blocked, and focused mini-collections of materials customized for particular classes. They have asked for better study spaces alongside a significant presence of books for browsing. I do not know how many of these suggestions we will be able to incorporate into our relatively small footprint, so the process of determining criteria for inclusion will be vital. The complexity of the library's use of space can make it seem like all things to all people, making it a locus for every need on campus, and making every idea seem equally appealing.

One way to approach this dilemma is to examine and define the fundamental core purpose of the library as a starting point for making tough choices. A *core purpose statement*, according to James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras in their 1996 Harvard Business Review article on building a visionary company, is simply "the organization's reason for being."[4] A core purpose doesn't attempt to say what the organization does (and so is different from a mission statement), but states the most fundamental role of the organization which distinguishes it from other institutions, companies, or services. As such, the core purpose shouldn't change much over time; it is what remains consistent about the institution when technologies change. When RUSA engaged in a strategic planning process in 2014–15, consultant Paul Meyer led us through exercises to define our core purpose as an association. You can see the result of these discussions in our final strategic plan, available on the RUSA website. Defining the core purpose consumed several hours of our two day-long strategic planning retreats, as we engaged in sustained, in-depth discussion of why we exist and what role we play within the ALA structure and (more importantly) within the professional lives of our members.

The core purpose exercise was exhausting but necessary, as it now provides a central reference point for setting goals and objectives for moving forward.

A discussion of a library's core purpose can offer a similarly vital reference point for beginning a space planning process, and provide a way to focus the multiplicity of needs and desires into a coherent program of spaces and services. A core purpose statement should succinctly express why the library exists and what role it plays in its community or institution, in terms specific enough to distinguish it from the overall purpose of the community or institution itself. While the final core purpose statement will be different for every library, the process can be informed by discussing the purpose generally of libraries as they transform themselves to meet new demands, tapping into our ongoing discussion of why libraries continue to exist in the digital age. Versions of this discussion sometimes result in digressive answers, such as a list of specific benefits that libraries continue to provide for people, or in the case of space planning, examples of spaces that facilitate new ways of working. While these answers can be useful, they talk around the central question of what a library is really *for*. By developing core purpose, we can make an attempt to answer that fundamental question.

For example, I might suggest a statement like this to describe the core purpose of libraries: *The core purpose of a library is to preserve knowledge and the written word; and make these accessible to the library's users for learning, enjoyment, and creating new knowledge*. I'm fairly happy with this wording, at least as a starting point. I think it captures how libraries curate analog and digital knowledge, literature, and the book as object, and it covers both the learning purpose and the leisure purpose of libraries. If I were engaged in a planning exercise with colleagues, they would probably question parts of my statement: Is it just the "written word" that libraries curate? How do we define knowledge? Are learning and enjoyment two distinct activities? My colleagues would suggest alternative wording, but after some sustained effort we would hope to come to a working statement that we can rally behind. Many permutations of this sort of statement are possible, which will be specific to an institution or location. But regardless of which words we choose, all uses of library space should tie back to or grow out of the library or library unit's core purpose, and ultimately aim to fulfill that purpose.

For example, based on my core purpose statement, I would say that space design should enable learning by facilitating access to, and use of, recorded knowledge without barriers caused by lack of money or technology. This concept of making knowledge accessible may be fulfilled through a range of collaborative spaces offered by libraries for teaching and learning. Spaces for digital humanities/scholarship, GIS and data visualization also fulfill the core purpose of preserving knowledge and making it accessible in various ways, some of which will be new and innovative. Makerspaces utilize knowledge in the purpose of creating new knowledge. The library space as a whole can also be seen as a huge makerspace that supports the maker culture writ large by enabling creation that flows out of the vast body of knowledge preserved in both physical and digital libraries. And the library itself can be a living example of the design thinking principles that it teaches—see the great book *Make Space* from the Stanford d.school for ideas on this.[5]

On the other hand, proposed space uses may stray from the library's core purpose or have an unclear connection to it. One example would be installing a café in an academic library simply to get users through the door, without tying the need for food and drink to the needs of learners. The coffee shop should be designed as a space for respite for those working in the library, or a gathering space for people using the library, not a space where customers drop in, grab coffee and go; and so it should include study and learning spaces similar to those in the rest of the library. Some academic libraries offer or have proposed tutoring or career services in the library, but again we need to be clear about how these connect to our purpose. These may be excellent services to co-locate in the library for the convenience of students, but they should be designed to offer collaborative opportunities with information and research services so that they are integrated with the library's core purpose, not disconnected from it. This isn't to say that some nonlibrary services won't form a part of a final space plan for a building, especially in a campus environment where space is scarce and needs are many. But by knowing our core purpose and keeping it front and center, we can ensure that our final plans don't shortchange the need for a cohesive and vibrant vision of library services going forward.

Focusing on core purpose in space planning has another benefit beyond helping us make choices and balance competing interests. As we're caught up in discussions of the transforming library, we should remember to check in with our core purpose statement periodically to make sure that we're fulfilling the role that we agree to serve within our communities, and allowing this to guide our transformation. Space planning is just one piece of the transforming library, but is often the most tangible one. Going about it right seems more important than ever.

### References and Notes


1. Manuela Roth, *Masterpeices: Library Architecture + Design*, updated and rev. ed. (Salenstein, Switzerland: Braun, 2015).
2. For one excellent description of how a library has redefined its space, see Charlie Bennett et al., "Reimagining the Georgia Tech Library," 2014, https://smartech.gatech.edu/handle/1853/51712.
3. Scott Bennett and Council on Library and Information Resources, eds., *Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space*, CLIR, pub 129 (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2005), www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub129abst.html.
4. James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision," *Harvard Business Review* (September–October 1996), https://hbr.org/1996/09/building-your-companys-vision.
5. Scott Doorley and Scott Witthoft, *Make Space: How to Set the Stage for Creative Collaboration* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012).