New Directions Snapshot: Library Space and Student Needs

Overview

Despite predictions of the demise of the bricks-and-mortar library late in the last decade, new academic library building projects and renovations continue apace throughout the country. Colleges and universities eager to improve the student learning experience by fostering greater intellectual engagement, connection and community on their campuses are looking toward library spaces as never before for support in this endeavor. The “library as place” remains as relevant to the academic lives of our students as ever.

New thinking about library space design has been underway for at least a decade. It is an ongoing response to the profound technological changes, and to the philosophical shift in approaches to teaching and learning, that continue to have an impact on all of higher education. New student needs have been occasioned by these changes, and these needs are at the center of a widespread re-examination of traditional library spaces.

Berkeley library spaces are home to world-class collections, and some of them are also comfortable, accommodating and architecturally inspiring. Others show signs of heavy wear and tear on their physical structure, mechanical systems, and furnishings. Beyond the problems of aesthetics and physical comfort resulting from this wear and tear—problems not insignificant to our student users—many of our spaces have not kept pace with the technological developments and transformations in teaching and learning of the last decade. As a result, they’ve become functionally deficient in meeting student needs. The New Directions process, however, offers a fresh opportunity for The Library to prioritize and plan space transformations in light of national trends, campus needs, and the growing local data on student preferences.

National Trends

Broad, conceptual trends

- A philosophical shift toward emphasizing the library’s role as a learning center. The focus is on building learning environments that not only provide optimal spaces for using physical and virtual collections, but are also conducive to interactive, collaborative, and discovery-based learning.
- The library as “campus living room,” providing a welcoming, comfortable environment that meets the needs of the larger campus for unstructured, informal exchange and a sense of community.
- Flexibility in all aspects of design, so that spaces can be adapted to future technology, evolving collections, and unforeseen changes in work, study, and learning practices.
- Employment of user-centered and “collaborative” design strategies that tap stakeholders—not only through surveys, but also through focus groups, observation studies, and charrettes—to ensure design meets real needs.

1 Most trends in this section are now fairly well-documented in the literature and evinced in a number of renovated libraries across the country. A small sampling of publications would include Learning Spaces (EDUCAUSE, 2006); Libraries Designed for Learning (CLIR, 2003); Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space (CLIR, 2005); Guide for Planning Higher Education Library Spaces (ACRL/LAMA); and our own Library Teaching and Learning Spaces Task Force Report (2007). For specific libraries, see: Georgia Tech, University of Washington, Stanford, University of Pennsylvania, UC Merced, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, University of Southern California, North Carolina State University, and Indiana University, Bloomington, to name a few.
Specific trends

- Library cafés
- Ubiquitous, reliable, high speed computing, both wired and wireless
- More comfortable & informal spaces that foster social interaction
- Spaces and resources that support students in media production, an activity increasingly demanded by undergraduate curricula
- More group spaces, diverse in size and equipment provision, supporting the trend toward collaborative learning
- Re-examination of traditional food and drink policies
- Incorporation of green design and concern for sustainability
- Space "zoning." Increasing diversity of space accommodations requires heightened attention to the designation of space by purpose & permissible uses. Zoning makes it easier to figure out “what’s where” quickly, but also makes use expectations clear (e.g., quiet versus non-quiet zones)
- Integration of service points, giving student more of the convenience of “one-stop-shopping”
- Flexible elements, like furnishings and mobile space dividers, that students can rearrange to suit their needs
- Partnerships, involving shared space, with other campus services like IT and centers for teaching excellence, writing centers, etc.
- Classroom designs that are configurable, not all fixed, forward-facing rows.

Local Issues

Campus recommendations for library spaces have been focused on a single issue: group accommodations. Specifically, the New Century Plan calls on campus libraries to attend to “the increasingly team-based nature of both instruction and research” by expanding accommodations for group work. Many of the needs articulated with greatest frequency by students and library staff, too, are consistent with trends identified in the previous section. Below, some additional space-related needs (and wishes) identified in recent surveys and discussions with stakeholders, as well as challenges unique to the Berkeley campus.

Needs

- Increased number of electrical outlets for laptop computing
- Increased seating capacity during finals
- More convenient (especially, online) systems for reserving existing group spaces
- Lockable carrels—on a campus where office accommodations for graduate students are inadequate and theft rates high
- Accommodations for student parents: at a minimum, changing stations in restrooms
- Print collections arranged for browsability, easy navigation
- More library exhibits and innovative installations

Challenges

- New demands for group spaces haven’t diminished need for quiet, independent study spaces we’ve traditionally provided. Determining right mix will be a challenge.
- Building lasting partnerships with campus agencies (and physically collocating them in library space) with goal of providing more seamless, integrated support for students is hindered by the campus

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2 As reflected in Library surveys and other reports available on the New Directions website:
Small Group Discussion on Students and Library Physical Spaces, 1/08
New Directions Survey of Student Library Employees, 2/08
Moffitt Renovation Project, Student Focus Group Report, 2/08
Moffitt Renovation Project Think Tank: Trends in Group Learning Space Design, 2/08
funding model of “silo budgets.” Past space sharing initiatives failed when agencies had to eliminate library satellite operations due to budget cuts (e.g., the Student Learning Center outpost in Moffitt several years ago). How to ensure stability without shared funding?

- Negotiating “competing” space claims: More attractive, book-store like stack arrangements reduce collection capacity, implying possible need to reduce size of on-site collections. New strategies required?
- Desire for more exhibit spaces & installations: Graphics Office staff is working at capacity. “Giving” exhibit space to student groups doesn't eliminate need for some Graphics support to ensure follow-through & quality.
- Campus funding for infrastructure (physical, mechanical, service) is inadequate, and will continue to be impacted by state budget cuts. Already the root cause of a number of library space “complaints,” infrastructure budget presents an obstacle in realizing vision of student-centered library spaces:
  - Liberalized food & drink policies would increase janitorial service needs
  - Expensive renovations will quickly deteriorate without adequate maintenance
  - Key student issues, comfort and electrical outlets, have expensive infrastructure components
  - Green initiatives small and large (from recycle-reduce-reuse to design of alternative energy systems) could prove difficult in this environment

Opportunities and Starting Points

New library construction and renovation projects offer large scale opportunities to implement changes to student spaces. The anticipated Moffitt renovation, currently in the planning and fundraising stages, provides an opportunity to implement our best thinking about students and library space on such a scale. “Lessons learned” and good practices to emerge from the project should be documented and widely shared. The Library should not, however, ignore more immediate, lower-investment, and smaller scale opportunities to adapt our spaces to better accommodate current student needs. It should also be proactive in engaging campus, when necessary, to work towards solutions to space-related challenges.

- Develop concerted, library-wide strategies for launching and tracking small space pilots. Leaders of successful pilots, working with Library Space Planning, could prepare toolkits for library-wide use.
  - “Comfort Pilots”: Create small “parlor” spaces and furnish with lounge chairs, etc. Investigate “natural daylight” types of lightbulbs to improve ambiance in dreary spaces
  - “Collaboration Pilots”: Provide equipment like mobile whiteboards, huddleboards, markers, etc., in designated areas, and work out related procedural issues
  - “Zoning Pilots”: Develop alternative zoning strategies for quiet and conversational areas. Consider signage strategies, research lightweight options for sound buffering, etc.
- Develop concerted, library-wide strategies for expanding seating during finals
  - Consider opening rooms not normally used for study (classrooms, meeting rooms, etc.)
  - Create improvised spaces with surplus tables and chairs in underused areas
  - In keeping with the library-as-campus-living-room ethos, create “break rooms” or “library hospitality space” for food and drink
  - Budget for additional security and janitorial needs during this period
- Engage new campus Director of Sustainability in conversations to help address challenges to library green projects
- Begin identifying likely campus partners and pursue discussions to create multi-service collaborations in existing library spaces and planned renovations
- Launch feasibility study for liberalized food and drink policy
- Library Administration should work with Facilities and Space Planning to survey libraries and create master list of functional deficiencies that negatively impact student learning—e.g., shortage of outlets. Prioritize need and budget for upgrades.

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