The Link to Content in 21st-Century Libraries

Content can seem largely invisible in today’s 21st-century libraries. Especially after first-floor renovations, books and print journals are often hidden away on the unrenovated, musty upper floors of the library building and are unseen when people enter the facility. When libraries renovate or rebuild, significant portions of the library print collections are frequently removed from their shelves—to remote storage, compact shelving, or automated retrieval systems (ARS) in the library or off-site or occasionally to areas for disposal. Circulation statistics for print books are on a decline for most libraries while the use of digital collections soars.

If the old library brand was “books,” what is the brand today? Some college and university administrators are reluctant to fund library building renovations when access to digital collections requires no dedicated spaces. Why, then, are other higher education leaders spending money on renovations and additions to libraries if so much content is available in digital form, anywhere and anytime, from the devices of any campus affiliate?

At the 2017 Designing Libraries for the 21st Century annual conference, architect Craig Dykers asked the audience what he described as a rhetorical question: Are libraries places for information, with people in them, or are they places for people, with information in them? He concluded that ideally, today’s libraries, as they have always been, are places for the interaction of people, knowledge, and technologies. One reason that library renovations have brought record numbers of people into the physical building is that the notion of how people interact with content began to expand when available technologies were introduced to libraries in the 1990s. Two specific concepts motivated many of the changes in library spaces beginning at that time. First was the realization that libraries could become places for students and faculty to create content rather than places merely to access content. Second was an increased emphasis in higher education pedagogy on active, collaborative learning, in contrast to the traditional, passive lecture mode. These trends led to some pervasive changes in library space configurations, but sometimes the emphasis on information or content got lost along the way.

Linking Spaces to Content

Learning Commons

Learning commons spaces in libraries are intended as ideal venues for students to engage in active, collaborative learning. Furniture in open areas and enclosed group rooms is configured to invite small groups of students to work together, while in-place technologies, access to power, and Wi-Fi provide an environment for students to create new kinds of information products in their assignments. The library-provided technologies often make it simpler for students to create presentations, develop websites, record podcasts, and edit videos, and the spaces encourage group work and collaboration.

However, many of these learning commons spaces do not appear obviously related to a library. In fact, more colleges and universities are adding informal spaces for collaborative learning—very similar to those found in library learning commons—to their new or renovated classroom buildings, student unions, and even dormitories. Should library spaces offer something unique? Why not highlight the links to information and content?

The renovation of the Cabot Science Library at Harvard University opened up sightlines of the building, and the designers and librarians made conscious decisions to showcase learning that is happening in the space. Through the use of digital screens and large windows facing onto a heavily trafficked area of campus, the library broadcasts its programs and workshops to participants inside the library as well as to observers outside. Passers-by can easily glimpse the eye-catching Discovery Bar, where demonstrations of new technologies and workshops take place. A recent event highlighted a project of 3D modeling of the Giza Pyramids. Similarly, Carol M. Newman Library at Virginia Tech showcases teaching and learning with technology through course exhibits and interactive displays on the main floor. Recently the library also hosted an exhibit that highlighted a crowd-sourced project for transcribing historical documents into digital form; the exhibit included a workstation where students could try their hand at transcribing, tagging, and connecting documents. These kinds of activities make clear the connections between physical libraries, digital content, and tools that can be used to create new knowledge.

Digital Scholarship Centers

Libraries increasingly are giving more thought to the connection between content and spaces when developing digital scholarship labs or centers. Describing these spaces, librarians often note that they intend to make the creation of new types of digital content visible to anyone walking through the library. For example, the suite of spaces incorporating a large video wall, a makerspace, recording studios, and teaching areas in Brown University’s Patrick Ma Digital Scholarship Lab and Sidney E. Frank Digital Stu-
Cultural Heritage
Another means for differentiating library buildings from other campus structures is by telegraphing their cultural heritage mission. Libraries incorporate more than “information,” “data,” or “texts.” Often they also include analog and/or digital artistic representations. Libraries can make strong visual connections to cultural heritage by incorporating paintings, graphic art, sculpture, and digital art into their buildings. In the renovated Charles E. Shain Library at Connecticut College, for instance, a large graphic of a Kurt Vonnegut manuscript, produced by the author on a typewriter, has been made into an art installation in the stairwell. The manuscript is from a speech given by Vonnegut at the library dedication in 1976.2

Walking into the Buckeye Reading Room at the Ohio State University’s Thompson Library, people see raised letters covering the floor in a pattern. A sign at the entrance explains the nature of this project: “The text is created by an alphabetic intersection and line-by-line weaving of three different accountings of world history that are arranged in a literary concordance.”3 In other areas of the library, brass plaques with words in various languages and alphabets are embedded in the floor. These art installations signal that this library values cultural heritage and has a deep relationship with language.

The 2016 renovation at the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) James Branch Cabell Library includes a large outdoor screen to “showcase art, animation, video and information about scholarly work from throughout the VCU community.” University Librarian John E. Ulmschneider noted: “We hang art in our buildings to inspire students and give patrons something to reflect upon. This is just the newest way to do that outreach and education, and to showcase the diverse artistic and intellectual activity of our community.”4

Special Collections
Librarians are recognizing that their special collections (rare books, manuscripts, and archives) will distinguish them in the 21st century. Many institutions have put significant resources into digitizing portions of those collections, but library visitors are seldom aware of those projects. A small number of libraries are incorporating exhibits of this digital material in order to market this content and encourage its use. In addition, librarians could develop displays of digital projects created by students and faculty with content from the special collections.

The New Brand
Although it is no longer essential (in many cases) to access content in the physical building of the library, new environments can highlight the content lifecycle (creation, access, management, curation) for both e-content and analog content. The James B. Hunt Jr. Library at North Carolina State University is an exemplar in this regard. Its many digital displays showcase data visualizations, artistic representations of information, digital book displays on selected topics, information on policy issues such as open access, and more. A large window allows library users to see the robotic book storage system in operation, accompanied by a visual search system for books. The Hunt Library, designed by Dykers’s firm Snøhetta with the collaboration of Vice-Provost and Director of Libraries Emerita Susan K. Nutter and her staff, took every opportunity to make visible its digital collections, staff expertise, technologies, and collaborative work spaces.

In the digital age, college and university libraries can showcase digital projects and the potential that technologies plus content provide for the expansion of knowledge. By doing so, libraries demonstrate they are places that connect people with content. This link is the library’s new, 21st-century brand.

Notes
3. “Ann Hamilton: A Public Art Project,” Versus (blog), University Libraries, the Ohio State University.

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