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## The High Tech and the Beautiful: Library Buildings, Digital Libraries, and the Future

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## **The High Tech and the Beautiful: Library Buildings, Digital Libraries, and the Future**

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### **Introduction**

The reopening of the New York Public Library's (NYPL) main reading room last fall was heralded in the New York Times by no less than three articles, one editorial, and several letters to the editor. Founded in New York City in 1895 as a free public reference library, the NYPL had occupied its current site, a formidable marble Beaux Arts edifice, since 1911, and the reading room was showing its age. Now, thanks to a \$15 million gift, the entire room was refurbished: beautifully painted ceiling panels were cleaned and brought back to life, ornamental woodwork was polished, and modern windows were added. The transformation was not merely aesthetic; considerable attention was given to outfitting an area of the room for training patrons in the use of electronic resources, and electrical outlets were placed at regular intervals at the desks for computer use. These outlets it was noted, alternate with "the classic bronze reading lamps" long associated with the room, and in spite of now being outfitted for the Information Age, it was clearly the lamps, and the ceiling, and the gold-leafed woodwork that evoked the awed reactions of patrons in the first days after the room's reopening. One writer described the room's "jaw dropping beauty"<sup>1</sup> and the eminent art critic John Russell went so far as to gush that "the very act of bending over a book now has a built-in majesty."<sup>2</sup>

New York was not alone in enjoying a recent library renaissance: both the British Library and the National Library of France recently underwent similar transformations. While NYPL's restoration took a mere sixteen months, completion of the new incarnation of the British Library took thirty-six years and \$843 million to complete. The new National Library of France building took ten years and a whopping \$1.5 billion. An amusing article appeared shortly after the reopening of the three libraries comparing the results. (It should be noted, by the way, that these three libraries are not coequals: the British Library and the National Library of France are, as their names state, national libraries; the NYPL is a great research library, but the Library of Congress in Washington, DC is considered the United States' de facto national library). In this article several writers participated in an admittedly completely unscientific survey, comparing the three restored facilities for reference service, delivery time for books, and general ambience. The National Library of France, which is being touted as "the first library of

the third millennium,” suffered a major breakdown of the computer controlling the delivery of books almost immediately after it reopened, followed by a strike of 800 members of the library’s 2,800 member staff.

Poor France. The authors found it be the “snootiest” (“No place to even ask a research question”) and—horror of horrors— it also served the worst food (although it should be noted that the NYPL avoided this question by not serving any food inside the building). Not surprisingly, the National Library of France lagged in the race to retrieve a book from the stacks, which was ultimately won by the NYPL after the British Library suffered a “heartbreaking setback” from an “unusual glitch.”<sup>3</sup> (We are not told what that “glitch” was.)

Of course the measure of a library’s greatness today goes well beyond the speed with which a book can be retrieved from its stacks. At the same that it was cleaning the paintings in the reading room, the NYPL introduced its Digital Library Collections ([digital.nypl.org/](http://digital.nypl.org/)) web site, featuring highlights of primary source materials from the Library’s Research collections. The first of the collections, the Digital Schomburg, includes fifty-six texts and more than 500 images representing African American history and culture, and is made up of two components, “Images of African Americans in the 19th Century” and “19th-Century African American Women Writers.”

Other similar online exhibits of library and museum holdings proliferate. From the Library of Congress web site ([marvel.loc.gov/](http://marvel.loc.gov/)) one can go to an “on-line gallery” of exhibitions (the Freud exhibition, which just moved to the Jewish Museum in New York, was a recent highlight). Another noteworthy museum site is that of the Walker Art Museum, ([www.walkerart.org/](http://www.walkerart.org/)) which actually includes an interactive art exhibit. Other sites provide a taking-off point for visiting museums the world over, without ever venturing from one’s seat (I’m not sure how majestic one’s posture will be, though).<sup>4</sup> I taught a class of students in the School of Library Science at Rutgers this semester, and one of their assignments was to compare the experience of visiting a museum exhibit in person with looking at an online exhibit. The in-person experience won hands down, I’m happy to say, but the ability to see artifacts in a far-away place one might never hope to visit is not to be discounted.

Like everything else on the Internet, the uses to which this new technology are put range from the sublime ([www.thevsb.com/art/indital.html](http://www.thevsb.com/art/indital.html)) to the not so sublime ([www.airsicknessbags.com/](http://www.airsicknessbags.com/)).

The enormous amount of newly available information and the ease with which it can be accessed was the subject of a recent conference called “New Challenges for Scholarly Communication in the Digital Era: Changing Roles and Expectations in the Academic Community.” Sponsored by several groups that included the American Council of Learned Societies, the Association of Research Libraries, and the Coalition for Networked Information, this conference brought together publishers, teaching faculty, librarians, academic administrators, and professional association representatives for two days of discussions on topics such as “Getting Ahead in the Digital World,” “Distance

Education,” “What Does it Mean to Publish?” and the “Economics of Scholarly Communication.” I should mention that early in the conference one panelist displayed a cartoon (from a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, I suspect) showing someone at cocktail party asking another, “If this is the information age, how come nobody knows anything?” Recurring themes and questions that came up during the conference included: should technology drive the direction of scholarly communication, or should it be the other way around? How can we turn the current information surplus into knowledge, and who is responsible: librarians? university presses? Should the promotion/tenure system be changed to reflect this new era of electronic publishing? Does an article published online have as much credibility as the same article in print? What happens to junior faculty whose dissertations were submitted electronically, thereby diminishing, or even eliminating, their chances of getting that dissertation published by a university press? Who owns course material put online: the teacher or the university? Does distance education work and what drives it: politics? Higher education? How can distance education be evaluated? Not surprisingly, the ultimate conclusion of most participants was that traditional models of scholarly communication are no longer sustainable, and new kinds of collaborations among the participants are urgently needed. (This conference was, of course, hardly exclusive. Similar recent events include a 1998 symposium on Scholarly Publishing in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences sponsored by the University of Iowa Libraries, a 1997 conference in Toronto called “Beyond Print: Scholarly Publishing and Communications in the Electronic Environment,” an “International Conference on Scholarship and Technology in the Humanities” held in Britain in 1994, and another in Britain, organized by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the British Library Association, called “Reading the Future: A Place for Literature in Public Libraries” in 1992.)

While the sciences and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the social sciences have happily embraced the electronic environment, the humanities have been slower in doing so, largely because of the nature of humanities research.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that Phyllis Franklin, the Executive Director of the Modern Language Association was among the speakers at the Washington conference and that Gregory

Crane, a Classics Professor at Tufts University, gave one of the program’s most interesting presentations. The availability of electronic job lists, Franklin noted, has deeply cut into print subscription revenues and stand-alone societies have, in general, been very hard hit by the new technology. It was extremely interesting to see the reaction however, when one member of the audience asked what would happen if the *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*) raised its subscription price to, say, \$4,000. There was a kind of collective epiphany as everyone suddenly realized that we all would probably continue to buy it anyway. And after all, it would still seem pretty tame compared to the \$30,000 the American Institute of Physics asks for—and gets—for its bibliographic services. (On the other hand, there was a report on the fate of the *Bryn Mawr Review*, an online literary journal that was welcomed when it first appeared through grant funding, but which subscribers declined to sign up for again at \$5 a year when the grant ran out.)

Gregory Crane's presentation was largely about Perseus, ([www.perseus.tufts.edu/](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/)), the digital library of historical resources he helped create in 1987. The original purpose of Perseus was to collect materials about the Archaic and Classical Greek world. More recently the addition of Latin texts and tools, and Renaissance materials has broadened the scope of the site. Crane's enthusiasm for the Perseus Project is terrific; he extolled its use—and the use of the web in general by humanities scholars—as a great opportunity to make esoteric ideas more accessible to a wider audience. He suggests that using less scholarly language will enhance this process, though one could argue that this is the sort of thing that leads to the “dumbing down” of intellectual pursuits we hear so much about. Indeed, a proviso on the Perseus website might give one pause: there can be no such thing as an authoritative history of Ancient Greece, not least because the surviving evidence is often so thin. Many interpretations expressed in the Overview obviously would not win universal assent, but not all such points of potential controversy can be marked in a survey that is meant to be brief.<sup>6</sup>

Crane observes, correctly, I believe, that the digital environment can be a boon to interdisciplinary work; think, for example, of the several fields that Women's Studies draws on. He also emphasized its potential use in altering traditional research methods, not to mention the course of professional careers (witness his own). With respect to resources, he suggested that instead of simply replicating the look of traditional print sources online (an admonition that was repeated several times during the conference), highly enhanced editions of, for example, archaeological reports could be produced to include maps and visualizations of thousands of objects. Crane also provocatively wondered about the creation of an online dictionary that would correspond to how language exists in our minds, rather than using the ordinary alphabetized format.<sup>7</sup>

Perseus is certainly not alone as a humanities-based digital presence. At Rutgers University, the Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities (CETH) ([www.ceth.rutgers.edu/](http://www.ceth.rutgers.edu/)) has been in operation since 1991. Started as a joint project of Rutgers and Princeton Universities. (It is now exclusively under Rutgers' purview, where it is housed in the library's Scholarly Communication Center). CETH's mission is, as its home page states, is, “To establish an intellectual framework for working with electronic texts in the humanities that will advance our understanding of the potential of electronic texts and satisfy the needs of research and teaching in the humanities, and To disseminate information about the creation and use of high-quality electronic texts in the humanities.”

From CETH one can leap to a growing number of other electronic text centers and digital library projects ([harvest.rutgers.edu/ceth/etext\\_directory/](http://harvest.rutgers.edu/ceth/etext_directory/)). The Humanities Computing Unit at Oxford University in the UK also strikes me as a particularly dynamic center, sponsoring numerous special events using digital technology and fostering its use in everyday teaching. Most recently this group sponsored a program called “Beyond Art? Digital Culture in the Twenty-first Century” ([info.ox.ac.uk/ctitext/beynd/](http://info.ox.ac.uk/ctitext/beynd/)) which included participants from the art, museum, theater, broadcasting, literature and music worlds debating whether the arts are being threatened or inspired by the use of computers.

The dangers of leaning too heavily on the online environment for literary studies are well known. Simple cataloging errors have profound repercussions. Note the confusion created when there are multiple entries for the same book in an online catalog because of one small typo. This potential for such errors is exponentially greater, of course, when dealing with a large text, and the act of transcription itself worries some: Ilse Bry, a distinguished and unusually prescient librarian who died, unfortunately, in 1972, warned that “as automation advances, we must watch out: it may claim as drudgery and take off our hands the work-a-day experience that may trigger the imagination and creativity for which we are supposed to be freed.”<sup>8</sup> Much research remains to be done on the act of reading itself: how does the reader make sense of what he or she is reading? How does reading differ from browsing? What is the value of nonlinear text? And so on.

Another movement that may or may not bode well for digitized text is an apparent movement among scholars to return to “beauty.” “Maxed out on political analysis and cultural studies,” reported an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* late last year, “scholars in the humanities have begun to talk again about the joys and pleasures of good powerful—and even beautiful—writing.”<sup>9</sup> The article goes on to report on the creation of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, a kind of anti-MLA which hopes to “inaugurate the arduous process by which humanists will help to define artistic standards for the new century.”<sup>10</sup>

New artistic standards were not necessary, though, for visitors, as noted before, to respond appropriately to the beauty of the renovated New York Public Library Reading Room. Volumes have been, and will be, written about “beauty,” but I find an account described by the distinguished educator Ernest Boyer to be particularly telling. Boyer was recounting how in the early days of the U.S. space program each lift-off was still a major event. He pointed out how in that split second after the countdown, when a spacecraft actually left the Earth, the technicians and mathematicians watching from the space center didn’t say, “gee, that formula really worked.” What they said was invariably one word: “beautiful.”<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately I think we can all agree that we need both in our libraries of the future: the high tech and the beautiful, and the good news is that they do not necessarily preclude one another.

This message was nicely conveyed by Syracuse University Librarian Peter Graham in an article describing the future of special collections and the network. “No amount of elegance in the construction of laptops or communication protocols will carry weight with those attending to the esthetic experience of reading,” he thoughtfully observes.<sup>12</sup> For that reason, and for the very considerable amount of information conveyed by their typography, binding, size, paper, marks, and shape, actual books, particularly when they are rare, must be preserved. Thus the curatorial skills of special collections librarians (who typically work with rare books and manuscripts) will continue to be needed, as will their ability to discern what is important literature, and what a given library will be responsible for. As for the rest of us garden-variety, non-Special

Collections librarians, we'll be out there—in beautiful buildings and not-so-beautiful ones—making sense of the digital world and teaching our patrons how to use it.

## Notes

1. "The Reading Room Reopens in a Blaze of Glory," *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1998: B1.
2. Russell, John. "An Architect Gives a Library Spaces to Read and to Dream," *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 1998: E1.
3. "Beyond the Stacks of Pride and Money: a 3-Way Library Race," *New York Times*, 2 Jan. 1999: E1. For a more detailed account of the troubled Bibliothèque Nationale see "The Reading Room Riot" in *Lingua Franca*, May/June 1999:12-13, and for yet another comparison of the New York Public Library refurbished reading room and the new British Library see "Paradise Regained," by Thomas Mallon and "Paradise Lost" by Max Page in the May/June 1999 issue of *Preservation*: 55-59 and 60-61, respectively.
4. See, for example, "Museums Click on the Web, and the Favor Gets Returned," by Janice Maloney, *New York Times*, 21 April 1999: G16. (From an entire *New York Times* section devoted to contemporary museums and the issues they face.) On a related note, for a discussion of the *Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, see "Art on Line: the Internet Mounts a Masterpiece," by Judith H. Dobrzynski, *New York Times*, 13 May 1999: G1.
5. "[M]ost research and writing in history and the humanities is done by the individual scholar, self-motivated, seeking answers by himself to questions he himself composed," observed historian/librarian Lawrence W. Towner in *Past Imperfect: Essays on History, Libraries and the Humanities*, edited by Robert W. Karrow, Jr. and Alfred F. Young. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 149.
6. Crane, Gregory R. (ed.) *The Perseus Project*, [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu), May 1999.
7. Crane, Gregory R. "Faculty and the Digital World." Paper presented at "New Challenges for Scholarly Communication in the Digital Era: Changing Roles and Expectations in the Academic Community," American Association of University Professors, et al., Washington, DC, March 26-27, 1999.
8. Bry, Ilse. "Bibliographical Challenges in the Age of the Computer." *The Emerging Field of Sociobibliography: The Collected Essays of Ilse Bry*, edited and compiled by Lois Afflerbach and Marga Franck. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977: 68.
9. Heller, Scott. "Wearying of cultural studies, some scholars rediscover beauty," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 Dec. 1998: A15.
10. Heller, Scott. "Wearying of cultural studies, some scholars rediscover beauty," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 Dec. 1998: A15.
11. Ernest Boyer. "Creating Learning Communities." Talk given at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA, 1993.
12. Graham, Peter. "New Roles for Special Collections on the Network." *College & Research Libraries*, 59 (1998): 233.