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Academic Library Design: A Commons or an Athenaeum

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of the Internet and the availability of an ever growing array of information technology tools have created a paradigm shift in the field of Library Science. The mission of the Library has largely stayed the same, but the means of fulfilling this mission have dramatically changed. To address this paradigm shift libraries have been forced to implement extensive physical renovations. These renovations can largely be grouped into two competing designs, "The Commons" and "The Athenaeum." These designs have been the direct result of a need to address the decline of user statistics brought about by the Internet.

A brief examination of the history of the Librarianship will reveal why library renovations and redesign have become so pressing. Furthermore, this article will attempt to chart a strategic course for 21st century academic libraries by discussing the "Commons" library design and comparing it to the "Athenaeum" design. Three sets of data were used in writing this article. Library usage statistics are taken from the Association of Research Libraries statistical reports from 2001-2002 and 2007-2008 and from the National Center for Education Statistics' Library Statistic Reports: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008. The data on user satisfaction with library renovation is taken from a study conducted by Harold Shill and Shawn Tonner (2003).

Brief History

Since the founding of the first ancient library until recent times libraries have largly had a monopoly in regards to information and knowledge. Like any true monopoly the libraries dictated who could have access. The original libraries of the ancient world stored, what was then the world of knowledge, and rationed it out to suitable scholars. The libraries of the Middle Ages and Renaissance were little changed as in either case this knowledge was maintained for the privileged few. It was not until the late 19th early 20th century that the growth of public libraries began to democratize knowledge. This trend toward democratization of knowledge would continue slowly until near the end of the twentieth century. Of course we are speaking of the rapid rise of the Internet and the associated knowledge management tools e.g. web-pages, search engines, wiki and the like. The Internet and its related technologies would change the entire field of Librarianship.

The Internet was the first challenge to the hegemony of the library. As with most long standing hegemonies the librarians had developed traditional ways of providing service. This included an emphasis on, in-person usage and a monopoly on access to research material. This tradition left the libraries largely ill prepared for the dramatic shift brought about by the Internet.   Suddenly libraries were competing against the completely open and free Internet that made information, accurate or not, instantaneously available twenty four hours a day. The academic library on the other hand, with more authoritative information, was still wedded to, print indexes, print journals that would have to be

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painstakingly photocopied or interlibrary loaned. The early book catalogues in their telnet or DOS formats were clumsy even in comparison to the early Internet. The ease of access that the Internet provided, as well as the seemingly endless supply of information, helped the Internet become the preferred destination for many researchers.

As the new millennium began, it seemed that the Internet had supplanted the academic library as the primary destination for researchers. According to the research conducted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) for the years 1991-2002 as total student populations increased 9% the most noticeable library user statistics decreased "Reference Transactions decreased by 26%, Total Circulation decreased by 10% and In House Use decreased by 35% (Kyrillidou, 6). And gate counts, the number of persons who physically enter library facilities as compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics declined steadily from 1994-1998,(see chart 1). This steady, decade long, decline led the casual viewers to see the library as deserted. Scott Carlson in his 2001 article "Deserted Library" for the Chronicle of Higher Education, says "The shift leaves many librarians and scholars wondering and worrying about the future of what has traditionally been the social and intellectual heart of campus, as well as about whether students are learning differently now – or learning at all" (Carlson).

	Chart 1		
Year	Number of Participating Libraries	Total Gate Count	Average
1994	3,303	17,830,269	5,398
1996	3,408	16,455,549	4,828
1998	3,658	16,194,154	4,427

Carlson was not alone in noticing this downward spiral of user statistics. Many academic librarians saw the decline and began reinventing their libraries proactively. Harold Shill and Shawn Tonner, whose work will be discussed in greater length later in this article, conducted a study of 354 academic institutions that expanded or renovated their existing libraries between 1995 and 2002 to counter the trend of decreasing user statistics (2003).

Academic library renovation does not occur without due consideration. User studies and literature reviews are fairly common practice in the renovation process. It is reasonable to expect that most library planners have at least encountered the Commons design. This design would be a radical departure from traditional designs as it centralizes access points and adopts information technology. With the growing demand for all things technology the Commons design is very compelling.

From Library to Commons

This article will use the term Commons to denote the different versions of the design, the most prominent being the Information Commons and the Learning Commons. The Information Commons is the original idea and the Learning Commons is a later evolution. Donald Beagle, Donald Russell Bailey and Barbara Tierney in their book "The Information Commons Handbook"(2006) defined the Information Commons as "… a cluster of network access points and associated information technology tools situated in the context of a physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning" (xviii).

The literature on the Commons design is dominated by articles and books on how to implement the design. From the literature it is clear that at the heart of the Commons design are three principles: user-defined space, inclusion of non-library services, and deployment of clusters of network access points. However to further understand these principles a deeper explanation is needed. User defined space means allowing students to make of the space what they would. This of course means food, beverages and noise as students define the space to their needs. Inclusion of non-library services typically means inclusion of IT professionals at the reference desk, although writing centers and tutors of

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all kinds have been included. Finally and most importantly, the cluster of network access points is represented by the row upon row of desktop computers.

At this time, there exists no study on the success of the Commons design. It was suggested by Dr Russell Bailey, the Director of the Providence College Library and clearly a proponent of the Commons, that gate counts would be the metric used to assess the success of the Commons. At the South Eastern New York Resource Council Conference *The Information Commons Lessons Learned,* Dr Bailey was asked how to assess the Commons. His answered was that "The success of the Information Commons is the gate count. Students vote with their feet" (SENYLRC 7 May 2009). We will use this criteria to evaluate the Commons design. To help assess the Commons we will be using data collected by Shill and Tonner for their article "Creating a Better Place: Physical Improvements in Academic Libraries, 1995-2002" (2003) and the companion article "Does the Building Still Matter? Usage Patterns in New, Expanded, and Renovated Libraries, 1995-2002" (2004). The study conducted by Shill and Tonner is the result of "a web survey of 357 academic libraries completing a new building, an expansion and renovation project, a renovation, an addition, or a major space reconfiguration between 1995 and 2002" (Shill and Tonner, 433). This study, which did not address the Commons design per se, uncovered a number of factors that led to an increase in gate counts from 1995-2002:

- Number of data-ports
- Percentage of seats with wired network access
- Number and quality of public access computers
- Quality of natural lighting
- Quality of layout.
- Quality of user work spaces.
- Quality of library instruction lab
- Quality of telecommunication infrastructure
- Quality of collection storage space
- Quality of HVAC system (Heating, Ventilation, AC)
- Quality of overall facility ambience (Shill and Tonner,148)

Comparing the list of factors collected by Shill and Tonner and the three guiding principles of the Commons design we can see that the only aspect of the Commons that leads to increased gate counts is number of public access computers. The report found,

The presence of public access workstations would appear to be essential for encouraging students use because they are normally the starting point for catalog, databases, and Internet research. In many libraries, students also are able to check e-mail and use applications software at public access workstations. Table 15 suggests the existence of a mild, positive relationship between the number of public workstations in a facility and increase in post project usage, but it is not statistically significant. Interestingly, one-third (n=8) of mostly larger libraries offering 100 or more public access computers experienced a 100 percent increase in usage following project completion(2004, 137-137).

The other aspects of the Commons, the inclusion of non-library services, and the number of group study rooms did not increase the drawing power of the library. In fact an analysis of the Shill and Tonner article shows that any library that wants to see an increase in gate counts should simply renovate the library to include: natural light, comfortable seating, a good ventilation system and make available over one hundred public access computers. The following sections will discuss the feasibility of providing this number of public access computers.

It appears, therefore, that in order to significantly increase gate counts the number of public access computers has to be over one hundred. However, this number is problematic. Indeed even a lower number of public access computers are a cause for concern. When libraries increase the number of public access computers what they have done is contribute to labization. Labization is a term coined

by this author for a poster presentation, *The Steampunk Library* at the 2007 ACRL NY Annual Symposium "Library 2.0: A New Social Model" and is defined as the conversion of library space, usually the reference room, into computer labs.

Labization and the Commons design have two flaws. The first is user expectation and behavior. A Commons design does not fit user expectations of what a library looks like. It does however fit the description of a computer lab. The expectations upon entering a library are that of a quiet building with people reading and studying and the user's behavior reflects this expectation. Individuals conform to the culture of the library making it easier to maintain a reasonable noise level. The Commons design by its nature is a communal space. As noted in the *Field Guide to Information Commons* "…the renewed emphasis on social interaction echoes early hopes that the library would be more than a place to find information and technology by referencing pedagogical beliefs that unstructured, dialogic interactions foster learning" (Forrest, 9). Unstructured dialogic interactions are noisy but desirable in a Commons. However, how do we know when a conversation is a heated discussion on current events or a loud retelling of the previous night's events? The short answer is, in an unstructured environment, it is impossible to tell the difference. The Commons drastically changes user expectation and the behavioral patterns of the users. The users will conform to the sound levels of the Commons rather than the Reference Room which may be in direct contrast to other academic library users, thus is can be said "The problem is that the social model undermines something highly valued in academic libraries: the communal nature of quiet serious study" (Gayton).

The users of these new noisier Commons' can also be a distinctly different population from the library user who wants to use the library in the traditional ways, research, and study. With the transformation of reference rooms into a Commons these traditional users are metaphorically and physically pushed away from the center of the library into the peripherals of the building. This leaves the center of the library with a computer lab populated by computer users. In effect, to increase gate counts in the new Commons we have either pushed away or pushed out library users so that libraries can become social centers.

The second problem with the adoption of the model is the reliance on the computer to draw the users into the library. Over the next couple of years tethered desk top computers will see increased competition from smaller and lighter Internet devices. Laptops have already decreased enough in price to be comparable to desktop units and sales figures show that people as of 2005 are buying slightly more laptops then desktops, "Analysts with the research firm Current Analysis said laptops sales jumped to 53.3 percent of the total PC retail market in May 2005. Last year, notebooks made up 45.9 percent of the total PC retail market" (CNET news). The laptops, smaller and more mobile relative the netbook, are even more of a bargain and make up 20 percent of the notebook share of computer sales. Furthermore, the iPhone and Blackberry have blurred the line between a cell phone and a netbook making them mobile Internet devices. The only thing needed for a dramatic shift in PC usage from tethered desktop to mobile units is for these items, mobile Internet device, laptops and netbooks, to have wireless access.   To fill this need colleges and universities have extended the range of their wireless service. For those who wish to be more mobile and are willing to pay can get access to any of the major cellular company's 3G networks that would allow them to use the Internet anywhere. This combination of small mobile devices and extensive Wi-Fi coverage will free users from having to go to the campus computer labs, including the Commons. Users will be able to work or research in dining halls, dorm rooms, quads or athletic fields.
  There is no doubt that laptops, netbooks and handheld Internet devices will increasingly become more potent options for users and as they do, the need for public access computers will decrease. It may well be the case that large computer labs, including the Commons, have already seen the zenith of their drawing power.

Clearly, the Commons design is not a failure or the literature would be warning others away rather than detailing how to design and implement a Commons. However, it can be seen that the Commons has stumbled upon success not by centralizing and importing non-library units or deploying banks of computers but by renovating and modernizing.   The research done by Shill and Tonner suggest

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this very conclusion. The question remains are student using the library services once they have entered the library. The ARL statistics that cover the increased time span of 1991 through 2008 paints a conflicting picture. The traditional user statistics for Reference Transactions and Circulation have continued to decrease as the Interlibrary Borrowing and Participation in Library Instruction, as represented by Group Presentations statistics have increased. The average annual percentage increase for Interlibrary Borrowing was 6%, and Group Presentations was 2.7%; while Reference transactions decreased 4.3% and Total Circulation decreased 1% (Kyrillidou,8- 9).

The Athenaeum:

- *An institution for the promotion of literary or scientific learning.*

The literature on the modern Athenaeum is limited as it is a new model of academic library design. However, through reading what literature does exist, particularly the works of Scott Bennett (2005), Scott Carlson (2009), and Sam Demas (2005) we can gain an understanding of the concepts that form the modern Athenaeum. The guiding principle of the Athenaeum is the creation of a "unique cultural center that inspires, supports, and contextualizes it user's engagement with scholarship" (Demas, 3). The key here is that the engagement is scholarly and structured.

The Athenaeum is a challenging design to implement as it takes academic librarians out of their traditional role of service and takes a step towards the realm of the educator. It is true that many academic libraries have been teaching library instruction classes as well as offering credit-bearing library research classes, but this is not what the Athenaeum design proposes. The Athenaeum design requires academic librarians to delve further into subject specialization. Many academic librarians possess second subject specific master's degree and it is these degrees the Athenaeum design will rely heavily upon. Academic librarians with their feet firmly planted in subject specialization can support the curriculum as well as expand upon the curriculum with the use of library material and space. What this entails is the formation of academic clubs, working groups, roundtables to help engage students and faculty in scholarship. Furthermore, the academic library will have to plan and implement lectures, conferences, and presentation, across the academic spectrum all to be hosted by the library. The Gould Library at Carlton College has done just that

The Gould Library Athenaeum …joins with academic departments and other campus entities in cosponsoring cultural events during the school year. The library hosts about 65 events, involving about 2,300 participants each year. Students studying in the library sometimes take a break to attend an event they would have missed if it were held in a classroom building. (Bennett).

This in essence changes the academic librarian role from the gatekeeper of the portal to knowledge to an active creator and disseminator of knowledge.

The hurdles involved in the implementation of an Athenaeum are threefold. First, academic librarians would have to incorporate new and time consuming job functions into already busy schedules. In that regard, academic libraries that chose to adopt the Athenaeum design would find it worthwhile to overhaul academic librarians' job responsibilities. Second, the engagement of the campus community requires constant adaption as classes change along with the campus community's predilections. Finally, the assessment of the Athenaeum design would be a challenge; user statistics would have to be weighed against how well the academic library raised information literacy of the students.

Conclusion

To date there has been no study conducted to rationally explain the decrease in user statistics that academic libraries experienced in the mid-1990s. In fact, at this time, ten years later, a study would be near impossible. It can be surmised, however, that the Internet was a major component of the drop

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libraries saw in the late 1990s. However, with the Internet becoming more ubiquitous and Internet access points becoming more plentiful, it might appear reasonable to assume that gate counts would continue to decline. This has not been the case. According to the gate count numbers compiled by the National Center for Educational Statistics, gate counts stabilized in 2000 and then began to increase, (see chart 2). When examining this chart, it is important to recognize that the number of reporting libraries increase by nearly 524 from 1994 to 2008 so any increase in total gate count would have to be revised down when comparing the numbers.   The question of what changed in the academic library to spur this turnaround remains.

	Chart 2		
Year	Number of Participating Libraries	Total Gate Count	Average
1994	3,303	17,830,269	5,398
1996	3,408	16,455,549	4,828
1998	3,658	16,194,154	4,427
2000	3,527	16,456,612	4,665
2002	3,568	16,926,698	4,744
2004	3,653	19,368,745	5,302
2006	3,617	18,765,712	5,188
2008	3,827	20,274,423	5,297

At first glance, the adaption of the Commons design appears to have increased gate counts; however, the analysis done by Shill and Donner seems to suggest otherwise. It is possible that increased library usage can be linked to library renovations that made the library more comfortable and inviting. However, even if the Commons design was the root cause of increased gate counts, the long term viability of the design is questionable. By turning our reference rooms into computer labs we have now become beholden to the computer lab to draw students into the library. But the tethered public access computer is going to become a lower demand item in the coming years. When that occurs, those institutions that are relying on the Commons to draw in students are going to wonder where all the computer users went. Instead of a deserted reading room they will have a deserted computer lab.

The vastness of human knowledge as it stands today dwarfs the holdings of the ancient libraries. Even a small college library probably has a larger collection then that of the Library of Alexandria "The scrolls in the main library totaled 490,000" (Casson, 36). However what Alexandria lacked in holdings it more than made up for in pure intellectual curiosity. The ancient scholars that inhabited Alexandria sought to understand the nature of the world around them. Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth, Heron of Alexandria invented "…slot machine into which a coin was dropped which caused the flow of a little water, a sphere made to rotate by escaping steam … a hodometer to be attached to a carriage and record the number of revolutions of a wheel…" (Humphreys, 122). These people and many others like them laid the ground work for the future.   It is this kind of intellectual curiosity that needs to be stimulated by our libraries today. The academic library needs to become the center for intellectual inquiry it needs to become an Athenaeum.

The Athenaeum represents a paradigm shift in design from the service model of the Commons and the traditional academic library. The Commons and the traditional academic library are designed to be portals to: knowledge, information, and research with the librarian acting as a gatekeeper. The Athenaeum asks the librarian to be a guide. The mission of the library changes from compiling and making available to actively engaging in the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

We need to understand that the success of the academic library is best measured not by the frequency and ease of use but by the learning that results from that use…Reconceiving our purpose

involves a fundamental shift for librarians trained in a service culture--one that is comparable to the shift that faculty are making as they move from a teaching to a learning culture (Bennett).

The academic librarian's work as an active creator and disseminator of knowledge goes beyond subject guides, bibliographies and even library instruction classes. It has to move into the realm of workshops, seminars, lectures, and, conferences that cover the academic spectrum, to be hosted and organized by the library.

In essence, we have at present two competing models for the future of academic library design. The Commons model which is shaped by technology and unstructured user defined space and the Athenaeum which is defined by the creation and dissemination of knowledge. We have examined the potential and the drawbacks of both designs and as we move into the second decade of this new millennium it would seem that an Athenaeum is the superior design. This is not to say that there is no room for the technology that the Commons so readily makes available, only that a hard look at the future of computing and mobile computing is required to ascertain that what worked five year ago will work five years from now. The real measure of the viability of the academic library should be based on the level to which we raise student's intellectual curiosity not just on user statistics that are based upon in-person library usage.

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