LIBRARY SPACES AND PLACES: EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION

In looking at the important discussion around the structure and design of both the physical and virtual library space, it is worth exploring why the design of this space is so important and reflect on the fact that the interest and concern over the design of our library spaces is nothing new. Historically library users and the wider community have been as deeply engaged as we are today, not just with how libraries look, but how they function. This remains true for all library types, whether it is the school, the public, or the academic library, and reflects the importance of the relationship between libraries, their perceived social and educational function, and the often intimate relationship users have with the library 'place'. In this link between the shape and form of the library space and its perceived function, our ambitions and overriding vision for libraries are articulated. The grand vision of the library's purpose and the role libraries have been assigned in shaping society, education, and knowledge transmission means libraries can be viewed as the architectural embodiment of wider social and educational concerns (Fennessy, 2007).

Gorman, in his book *The Enduring Library*, suggests that library buildings are both 'symbols' of a society's commitment to learning and physical 'manifestations' of a community's aspirations (2003 p.5). In this way the 'idea' of library is, according to Gorman, both "symbolised and made manifest in the space and structure it occupies" (p.7). Historic libraries and their design may be viewed as 'artefacts' providing insight into a previous generation's social and educational 'vision' and informing the present of the values which drove their construction. As we reflect on the grand designs of some of the world's great libraries, the intimate and community-focused spaces of many of Mechanics' Institutes, and the functional form of libraries built in the 1960s and 1970s, as well the more contemporary 'Learning Commons', it is

easy to see them as both 'symbol' and 'manifestation'.

In this reflection, we are also engaging in an essential conversation with those who have preceded us, questioning their vision, and drawing upon their experiences to help us shape and form our own. The design of contemporary library spaces is in turn informed by these conversations with the past, while also acting as a barometer of current concerns until such time that they too will present future generations with an invitation to reflect on the community which created them.

This is perhaps most easily understood in the context of the often

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contentious issue of what we call the 'library space', an argument almost as contentious as what we call ourselves. Over time as a profession we have attempted to articulate contemporary visions of what the 'space' aspires to be and how it will function through what we have called these places. Think of labels such 'Educational Resource Centres (ERC)' and 'Learning Resource Centres (LRC)' in the 1970s and 1980s, more contemporary labels such 'Learning Commons' and 'Information Commons' and, in an attempt to reflect the increasing hybridity of the library space, the use of labels such as 'cybrary' and 'webrary' among others. Each of these labels expresses a contemporary desire to not only re-shape the physical space, but to also articulate the symbolic shift in the vision for the library and its purpose. Today the discussion about libraries

has moved beyond defining just the physical 'place' and is now concerned with the concept of 'space' both actual and virtual – what Black, Pepper, and Bagshaw (2009) call the "hybrid library", one of "clicks and mortar"(p.3). This shift may be viewed by some as a revolution, a break with the past, however contemporary discussion of libraries (or whatever we may call them) cannot ignore the past and rather than a revolution what we are seeing is an evolution – a continuation of the story of both the library and the information professions. Drawing the story together is, according to Gorman, a "golden thread of values and practices" (p.3) vested in the information professions. This 'thread' weaves its way through time drawing past, present, and future together so that within the walls of library spaces common concerns (past and present), ambitions, and vision for these spaces can be seen and understood. As a profession when we continue to re-imagine our library spaces we are on a journey and engaging in a conversation with our peers both past and present.

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