A Great Library on the Prairie: The History, Design, and Growth of the University of Illinois Library

Brock Peoples

ABSTRACT
The University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign Library stands today as one of the largest publicly funded libraries in the United States, providing information access for research and discovery to over 50,000 students, faculty, and staff as well as to members of the community at large. The library developed and grew as the university itself grew, becoming an architectural manifestation of those it serves. Originally designed by a team of University leaders, librarians, and architects for the pedagogies and information needs of the early twentieth century, the main library building, a neo-Georgian structure dating from 1926, supplemented by an imaginatively designed adjacent underground library for undergraduates in the late 1960s, has adapted to emerging information technologies and patron use through additions and changes in service models over the decades, ensuring its continuing relevancy to its patrons and its place as the heart of the university.

THE MARCH TOWARD ONE MILLION VOLUMES: THE GENESIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY
An article headlined “Growth of University Demands New Library,” appearing in the Urbana Daily Courier on January 10, 1916, describes the issue at hand: “An institution with the scope of work, the number of students and number of faculty members equal to that of the University of Illinois should have a library of at least one million volumes as the nucleus of a working collection of a comprehensive university collection.”

This stood in contrast to the situation that faced the university’s main library facility at the time, Library Hall (now Altgeld Hall, named after John P. Altgeld, Governor of Illinois, 1893–1897). Constructed in 1897, Library Hall was the University of Illinois’ first purpose-built library. De-
signed in the Romanesque style popularized by architect Henry Hobson Richardson, Library Hall originally housed 30,000 volumes and had a capacity for 90,000. The building itself was ornately ornamented both inside and out, displaying intricately carved architectural details on its stone exterior, complex stenciling on interior walls and ceilings, ornamental iron shelving in the book stacks, and four ceiling murals by Newton Alonzo Wells representing the university’s four colleges: “The Sacred Wood of the Muses,” “Arcadia,” “The Laboratory of Minerva,” and “The Forge of Vulcan” (Scheinman, 1969; Weller, 1968). A product of the 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act, the university had been founded in 1867 as the Illinois Industrial University. It became the University of Illinois in 1885. Its original role was as a provider of “industrial” education, and as such it earned the label “Cow College.” However, even though it soon began to excel in practical and vocational subjects like engineering and architecture, it also developed a wide-ranging curriculum encompassing the humanities (Solberg, 1968). Soon, Library Hall was the home of an expanding collection. The university’s geographical isolation had given it an incentive to acquire books, and the library became a strong attraction in drawing and retaining students and faculty (Solberg, 1968). In addition, the university signaled its intention of investing in the library by opening a library school. Katharine Sharp, one of Melvil Dewey’s most able students, was sought after by the university, and in 1897, the same year Library Hall opened its doors, she became head librarian, professor of library economy, and director of the library school. Although Sharp is said to have paid more attention to the practical workings of the library than to collection development, by the time she left in 1907, the collection had grown to a point where it stood in the middle rank of the university’s peer institutions and was set to become a “first-class library on the prairie” (Solberg, 2000, p. 201).

By the time of the Courier article in 1916, Library Hall had already undergone a major expansion, in 1914 (Scheinman, 1969). Even so, the building had still been crowded with 350,000 volumes and had been forced to outsource collections to departments in “non-fireproof buildings, a very undesirable condition.” The Courier article gives examples of new libraries at Harvard (three million volumes), Berlin (seven million volumes), the New York Public Library (four and a half million volumes), and the Library of Congress (six million volumes), declaring that a library collection of a mere one million volumes would still be “distinctly a second-rate library” by comparison. The article concludes by addressing the financials: one dollar is required “to properly house a library book” so “it can be seen that the State must spend considerable money to house properly its most important state collection” [emphasis added] (“Growth,” 1916).

The idea that the University of Illinois needed to significantly expand
its collections was not new in 1916. In 1912, University of Illinois president Edmund James had called for the expansion of library holdings to one million volumes and a facility to house them as part of his goal to “create a research library on par with those at the great German academic institutions” (Library, 2000). This proposal was agreed to by the University of Illinois Senate Committee on the Library, who petitioned the Board of Trustees for action on the matter. The committee had written the Board as early as their 1912–13 report that “the University should make every effort to build up here a library of at least a million volumes in the next ten years” (University of Illinois Senate Committee on the Library, 1913, np). The committee further stated that the “facilities were helplessly congested and deplorably overcrowded, to the point of serious embarrassment to both faculty and students” (1913, np). The committee’s recommendation was approved by the Board of Trustees on April 7, 1913; however, the board would be prodded by the committee again in their 1916–17 and 1921–22 reports. In the 1921–22 report, the committee laments that the situation had deteriorated to the point that “staff was beginning to box lesser used volumes because shelves could not possibly hold all of the volumes in the current collection” and that “many class instructors were no longer requiring that students regularly use the library” as a result (1922, np).

While the decision makers at the University of Illinois considered their options, public sentiment toward a new state library was growing as “demand for books of an educational nature is constantly increasing” (“Demand,” 1924). It should be noted that, as emphasized in the 1916 Courier article, the library at the University of Illinois was indeed considered a state library as well as a university library. Anxiety rose that the state might continue with plans for a general-purpose library if the University of Illinois did not act quickly (Library, 2000). The necessity of a large collection and a facility to hold it was also a continuing concern, since “the University is located far away from the large book centers, while a great many other universities are located in or very near them and can depend on other libraries than their own,” requiring a library much larger than those at the best institutions if “faculty and students are to have book resources comparable” to them (Windsor, 1927).

In 1921, nine years after President James’s initial call, Charles A. Platt, based in New York City, was contracted as the consulting architect on a new campus plan for the university with Professor James M. White serving as supervising architect on-site (“Total Cost,” 1927). A new library would feature prominently in the new plan, and Platt’s general plans and sketches for it were approved by the Board of Trustees on May 18, 1923. Platt’s plan adopted the Georgian Revival style, which was already in use on the campus (Library, 2000). As noted in the dedication pamphlet for the Library Building, this style would visually unify the new buildings that comprised the South Campus, of which the library was the second (the Agriculture Building, now Mumford Hall, was the first) (University of Il-
linois, 1929). It was reported that this style “was chosen chiefly because it was so generally employed as an early American style and has withstood the test of time” (“Total Cost,” 1927). White also listed a “somewhat domestic feeling” as an advantage of the style, explaining further that the academic feeling of an architectural group “can best be obtained by introducing a domestic trend into the architecture,” as opposed to the “monumental” or “factory type” (“Total Cost,” 1927).

The construction of a new library at the University of Illinois would take place during a boom of large academic library construction that occurred between 1920 and 1945 (Kaser, 1997). This was a period during which new designs and layouts would be experimented with as a result of changing pedagogical pressures and collection management strategies. Arguably the most successful design is typified by the University of Arizona’s library (built in 1923). The University of Illinois library arranged itself around a central book stack (with access to it on the second floor) and a monumental reading room (see fig. 1), with the rest of its floor space reserved for seminar rooms and other library activities. This basic design would become a stereotype for other libraries, and a pattern emerged of arranging the library around the book stack in a T, U, H, E, or O-shape (Kaser, 1997). Platt’s original drawings show the library adhering to the O-shape stereotype once fully completed, while establishing a U-shape for the library’s original footprint.

THE LARGER ENVIRONMENT: PLATT’S SOUTH CAMPUS MASTER PLAN
Before discussing the building, it is important to consider the grander scheme it was meant to inhabit. Platt’s plan for the South Campus was a rectangle bounded by Fourth Street (Champaign) on the west, Lincoln Avenue (Urbana) on the east, Nevada Street (Urbana) on the north, and Pennsylvania Avenue (Champaign and Urbana) on the south. This area consisted of nearly fifty new buildings, most of which were larger than anything that existed on the campus at the time. Platt’s plan used a main north-south axis aligned with the existing main quadrangle and an east-west axis aligned with present-day Lorado Taft Drive. The east-west axis was left open to form two quadrangles, each approximately the same size as the existing (and present-day) main quadrangle. Additionally, Platt’s plan incorporated alleys formed by trees, some of which survive today. (The north-south rows of trees in front of the Main Library, which extends south across Gregory Street, is one example.) The sheer scope of Platt’s plan suggests that it was designed to accommodate the university’s expansion for years to come, as was the library itself (Platt & White, n.d.).

Platt sought to maintain a sense of unity across this large area through a common architectural language (Library, 2000; see figs. 2 and 3). He used Georgian Revival as the style for all University of Illinois buildings he designed, incorporating uniform cornice heights whenever possible to
further convey a sense of unity. His buildings also included architectural details such as window shape, monumental chimney design and placement, doorway design, and uniform incorporation of decorative sculpture (though buildings were individualized in this last respect). While previously built structures on the University of Illinois campus had some of their own artistic details, Platt introduced a virtual renaissance.

Platt himself was an artist by training, not an architect. He had sought entry into the influential École de Beaux-Arts, but had been denied. Despite this, he worked as an artist, showing his work at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (itself a propellant of the École de Beaux-Arts trained architects), and practiced landscape architecture and residential architecture in New York prior to receiving his first academic commissions. It appears that the Main Library at the University of Illinois was the first library Platt designed, and its striking similarities to the New York Public Library and the use of a stereotyped pattern for large library design, as mentioned previously, is possibly a result of Platt’s inexperience on the subject. In practice, Platt’s plans were carried out by supervising architect James M. White, a professor at the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois and designer of earlier campus buildings, including the university’s first purpose-built library, now known as Altgeld Hall, as previously mentioned (University of Illinois, 1929).
While White’s influence was supposedly limited to the “details” of daily construction work and making on-site decisions, it is impossible to say how influential he was in the Main Library’s final design. However, it is known that university librarian Phineas Windsor had significant input and the project had the full support of the university president and board of trustees (University of Illinois, 1929). The resulting library would grow to be the largest public library in the United States and help propel the University of Illinois to become the world-renowned institution it is today.

“Without a great library, there can be no great university”: University of Illinois President David Kinley
The library itself opened in the first unit of a multiphase construction process three years later in 1926 with a collection of 649,924 volumes and would acquire its one-millionth volume, the new building’s raison d’État, in 1935 (personal communication from T. Teper, University of Illinois Library, March 19, 2010; University of Illinois Senate Committee on the Library, 1933). This represents a growth rate, on average, of just over 31,000 volumes per year. The building itself was not dedicated until 1929, after
the completion of all sections in its primary service unit, at a total cost of five million dollars, five times the cost expected by the Courier in 1916 for a one million–volume capacity library building (“Total Cost,” 1927).

The dedication of the Library Building (now known as the Main Library) took place on October 18, 1929, in conjunction with a meeting of the Illinois Library Association. An open house was also held where “the entire building, from the basement to the fourth floor . . . was thrown open to public inspection” (“Total Cost,” 1927). By this time, the library had taken the shape it would have for the next thirty-three years. As mentioned previously, the library was constructed in phases: The central unit, comprising the eastern face of the building and housing the reading rooms and delivery room, was built in 1924, with the first stacks section immediately following in 1925. The north section was added in 1926, and the southern section, along with the second stacks section, was added in 1927 (Library, 2000). This created a characteristic U-shape library in which the building wrapped itself around the central book stacks on three sides, fitting a pattern common in library construction of the period (Kaser, 1997). At the time of dedication, the new library had the capacity, in its stacks alone, for the one million volumes it was built to house.
As noted in the dedication pamphlet, “it may be said that graduate students and faculty will use chiefly the upper two floors and the 140 cubicles in the book stacks; undergraduates will use chiefly the two lower floors” (University of Illinois, 1929).

The division of the library’s patron space into subject reading rooms was a direct response to the seminar system popular in American universities at the time. The seminar system was a hallmark of the German academic institutions, which President James sought to imitate (Kaser, 1997), and appears to have first been introduced at the University of Illinois (by the College of Literature) in 1893-94 (Solberg, 1968, p. 359). As Platt originally envisioned, the library would be a stereotype O-shape when fully completed; the majority of the additional space (outside of the stack) was to be utilized for seminar space. Supplying condensed, centralized book storage freed space elsewhere in the library for use as seminar rooms and reading rooms, including the monumental two-story-high reading room on the second floor. The stack also allowed for controlled access to the primary corpus of the library’s collection through a central delivery point, which could be restricted at will. When the library opened, the stack was accessible only to staff and those faculty members and grad-
uate students who maintained study carrels in them (University of Illinois, 1929). Today, access to the stack is still restricted and granted openly only to graduate students, faculty, and staff, who must sign in when entering by allowing library staff to swipe their identification card. Additionally, the stack solved a security problem inherent in large buildings: it is simply physically difficult to constantly surveil a large area. At the University of Illinois, small departmental libraries could surveil their own small spaces and collections, the reading rooms were controlled by prominent staff positions at their single entrances, and the rest of the collection lay safely within the controlled access stack.

The progressive organization of study across the levels of the building so that graduate students would occupy the upper floors and undergraduates the lower served to reinforce the philosophy that knowledge was hierarchical and one must strive to attain it. In effect, the library was a “pedagogical machine” that served as a “mechanism for training” (Foucault, 1975, p. 172). For example, a freshman who studied at the university through the graduate level would ascend through the library building to its upper reaches in direct correlation with the level of study.

The Main Library was designed to function as a mechanical machine as...
well. Paging stations were placed throughout the centralized stacks, complete with pneumatic tubes for relaying the written book requests to pages and access to a conveyor system to transport materials. In practice, when a patron placed a materials request at the circulation desk, a message was sent through the pneumatic tube system to the correct page’s desk, located near the item in the stacks. The page would then physically retrieve the item and place it on the library’s conveyor system, which would deliver it to the circulation desk to be, finally, delivered to the patron.

**Influences**

As we have seen, the building of this library and the collection it was created to house was part of an effort to elevate the University of Illinois to a position of competitiveness with the best institutions in the country. Indeed, by the time of the dedication, the library ranked as the sixth-largest university library in the nation, surpassed only by those at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Cornell, and Chicago (Windsor, 1927). It was also constructed during a period that witnessed the growth of a multitude of large academic libraries, all of which were able to draw from the lessons learned in the building of many large public libraries, such as those in New York, Boston, Detroit, St. Louis, and San Francisco, and to emulate these libraries at the height of Carnegie-age construction. These great libraries had themselves been a product of a continuing evolution of the disciplines of both architecture and librarianship, the developments of which were inevitably reflected in the buildings themselves (Van Slyck, 1995).

Kaser explains the environment and philosophies being addressed by this building boom as “an interactive mix comprising three factors: the size of the book collection, the size of enrollment, and the predominant teaching style used in the institution,” (1997, p. 85). The method of instruction that Kaser refers to, as reflected by the Main Library at the University of Illinois, is the seminar method, “which for the first time required students to consult a multiplicity of primary as well as secondary sources,” and was especially popular at institutions with an emphasis on graduate studies (pp. 85–86). Kaser relates a belief among many professors that “true seminar instruction” required that “all books relevant to the subject . . . were sequestered and available only to students of the seminar, which was the standard practice in the German universities” (p. 85). The recorded discussions and statements regarding the impetus for the new Library Building examined here certainly refer explicitly to Kaser’s first two factors: an increasing book collection and increasing enrollment. However, the third factor is present as well. The motivation given by President James to increase the library collection to one million volumes was to “create a research library on par with those at the great German academic institutions” (Library, 2000). The 1916 *Courier* article arguing for a one-million-volume library at the university cites a German
library as an example as well—the Royal Library at Berlin (then known as the Prussian Royal Library, now known as Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin [Berlin State Library]) (“Growth,” 1916). The most compelling evidence that the seminar system was, in fact, on the minds of the planners is the presence of seminar rooms and departmental libraries in the building itself. When the dedication pamphlet states “that graduate students and faculty will use chiefly the upper two floors” (University of Illinois, 1929, p. 7), it should be noted that nearly all of the seminar rooms and subject-specific reading rooms were located on the third and fourth floors when the library opened.

A significant development in library technology of the nineteenth century that was used to great effect, and in a novel way, in the new Library Building was the book stack itself. The multitier book stack was developed for the Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève by Henri LaBroustre in the 1840s in order to “compress the largest number of books in the smallest possible cubage” and “remained the most economical compact book storage device . . . for more than a hundred years thereafter” (Kaser, 1997, p. 107). It is important to note that these book stacks were not intended for the convenience of patron browsing. At the Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève, readers “were not allowed to consult books . . . but rather had desired volumes fetched for them by library employees to be studied under their scrutiny in large public reading halls” (p. 107). The template of a library consisting of a closed structural book stack, delivery room, and reading room would become commonplace in the United States during the nineteenth century and indeed was the template for the earliest public libraries of the Carnegie era, including the libraries of Allegheny City, Pennsylvania (1893); Grand Rapids, Michigan (1902); Mt. Vernon, New York (1903); and undoubtedly others (Van Slyck, 1995). This template enabled both efficient access to a large amount of material for patrons and a high level of control and supervision by librarians. The book stacks at the University of Illinois Library Building differed from earlier examples in that “they were built in advance of the surrounding wall and are braced within themselves like a miniature office building so as to transmit all the wind pressure from the west all through the book stacks to the ground” (University of Illinois, 1929, p. 3; see fig. 5). This departed from previous methods of book stack construction, which relied on heavy roof and wall construction and interior steel braces in order to support the weight of the structure and provide support against wind forces. The advantages given to this new construction method include increased mobility within the stacks (without the steel braces in the way) and ease of adding additional stack units (University of Illinois, 1929).

The large central libraries built in the United States during the Carnegie period would experiment with a variety of building configurations, reflecting current ideas on library operation of their time and locale, including how best to place the book stack. The Boston Public Library (1888) would
position its stacks along one-quarter of its enclosed-O-shaped building (Van Slyck, 1995, p. 68). The New York Public Library (1915), a rectangular building with two open courts, located its stacks along one long edge of its building, directly beneath its reading room (pp. 74–75). The St. Louis Public Library (1912) similarly located its book stacks along the length of one long edge of its rectangular building (p. 84), as did the Detroit Public Library (1921) (p. 86), though with a more conventionally horizontal stacks access as opposed to New York’s vertical access. As the designers of academic libraries struggled with how to organize their own structures during this time period, keeping in mind the three pressures identified by Kaser, a set of stereotyped patterns emerged. As a departure from the rectangular configuration of buildings more common before 1920, academic libraries began to conform to the stereotypical T, U, H, E, or O-shape with a centrally located book stack as described previously (Kaser, 1997, pp. 98–99). As constructed, the new Library Building at the University
of Illinois conformed to the U-shape, though as envisioned once all future additions were completed, it would conform with the O-shape.

In many respects, the Library Building has a similar floor plan to the New York Public Library (as monumental as the New York Public Library was and given Platt’s location in New York City, it is conceivable that these similarities are intentional and not coincidental, though no evidence has been uncovered to support this supposition.) Both structures encourage entrance through a large vestibule with three large arched doorways. Once inside, visitors find themselves flanked by equally proportioned rooms on the right and left in both libraries (though at New York Public Library, the patron would have to round a corner to enter them). A monumental stair must be mounted to reach the second level, where the public catalog shares the same relative location in both buildings. Indeed, Van Slyck’s description of the public catalogue room of the New York Public Library could just as easily be given to that at the Main Library of the University of Illinois: “The importance of the room’s function—to bring readers and books together through the medium of the card catalogue—was further reinforced by the room’s generous proportions, square shape, and ample natural lighting” (Van Slyck, 1995, p. 75). Further comparisons could be made, such as the design of the monumental stair. Also observed in the plans for the Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève, the Boston Public Library, and others, the monumental stair led readers from the relative dark entry floor to the main reading rooms and public areas bathed in light on the second floor. As discussed by Van Slyck (1995), this implies “the journey toward enlightenment requires conscious effort on the part of readers” (p. 70). This symbolism may be carried further than the second floor of the Library Building, where as mentioned previously, the specialization of study encountered increases as the visitor ascends to the third and fourth floors. Even while the functional and symbolic design of the Library Building mirrored that of the New York Public Library in many respects, the Library Building showed an adherence to the stereotypic designs for book stack arrangements in academic libraries that emerged during this period, as discussed previously by Kaser (1997).

**Reactions**

On March 13, 1927, the *Daily Illini* gives two accounts of the recently opened Library Building. The account given by librarian Phineas Windsor notes that “in the new and beautiful building the library is bound to grow . . . and to give greater service to students and to the faculty than in the old building,” continuing that daily use has increased three times over that of the old building and that “instructors in some courses have begun to assign more collateral reading because now the library has room for more students.” Windsor concludes his reaction to the new library: “In so far as the library can provide all the books one needs for his study, a con-
A great library on the prairie/peoples

venient place in which to study, and an atmosphere conducive to study, so far is its purpose fulfilled” (1927). Another writer from this date is unidentified and the piece more editorial in nature. After giving a poetic description of the structure, the writer concludes: “Hardly a monumental character on the exterior, the Library is far different on the inside. Do not its halls, its artistic works, its vastness, stand as a memorial to those who have added to the great store of experience which the past has built up in order that our future builders may start far up on the scale of knowledge and continue where others have left off?” (“Builders,” 1927).

The issue of record, of both the *Daily Illini* and the *Urbana Courier*, for the Library Building’s dedication dates from October 19, 1929. Artistic interpretation is reserved for the printers’ marks that illustrate the windows of the main reading room and delivery room on the second floor and attention is paid to the remarks of the speakers of the day. University president Kinley is quoted as stating that “the library is the heart of the university, therefore we will endeavor to keep it for light, truth, and wisdom” (“Sees Library,” 1929). Carl B. Rodon, librarian of the Chicago Public library, responded “this library is the result of the cooperation of a librarian who visualized and an architect who realized.” Dean Ford was also congratulatory in his address, stating that “the growth of the university library can be matched by few university libraries in this country” and that “the university can have no reality unless it has a great collection of books.” Professor Windsor, director of the library school and librarian, declared “the library is the symbol of the growth of influence of the university” (“Sees Library,” 1929).

Kinley’s declaration of the library as the “heart of the university” may have come across as a fit of cognitive dissonance to some. The library was, after all, located more or less on its own on the far southern edge of campus. The dedication pamphlet seeks to dispel this apparent quandary of location: “A library, of all buildings, should be so designed as to permit expansion,” a virtue provided for by not only its design but also its location (University of Illinois, 1929). This allows the interpretation of Kinley’s message in a figurative sense instead of simply a literal one.

In the midst of this atmosphere of celebration, President Kinley was reported to have said “contrary to public opinion . . . the Library is not large enough for the present needs” (Freeman, 1929). As the one million-volume-library had been called for as early as 1912 by then-President James to fulfill the needs of the university, and that by 1916 such a library, though seen as necessary, would be according to Kinley, “second rate,” it is to be expected that by 1929 Kinley would see the new library as a step in the right direction and not a fulfillment. This is supported when Platt’s vision for the entire building is considered and not just the first phase that was being dedicated at the time, as the section of the building completed by 1929 occupies one-third (approximately) of the entire envisioned structure.
The University Library from 1929 Until the Not-So-Distant Future
As intended, the stacks were enlarged via additions in 1939, 1957, 1968, and 1982. The 1982 addition is unique in that it houses compact movable shelving instead of a traditional stacks structure. A significant addition to the building itself was built in 1962, giving it the north exterior seen today. A basement addition was built on the southern side of the building in 1966 to house mechanical equipment (Library, 2000).

The Undergraduate Library, which formed as a unit within the Main Library in 1949, gained its own structure in 1969 (Undergraduate Library; personal communication from T. Teper, University of Illinois Library, March 19, 2010). The Undergraduate Library originally consisted of the collections of the Galesburg campus of the University of Illinois, opened in response to the influx of undergraduate students after World War II, and moved to Champaign upon that campus’ closure in 1949 (Downs, 1949). The project of library dean Robert Downs, the Undergraduate collection was housed in rooms 123 and 101 (currently the same rooms that house the Business and Economics Library). With seating for 323 students and an ever-growing collection (which began with 25,000 volumes), it was quickly evident that the Undergraduate Library was outgrowing its home in the Main Library building. In 1963, the university acknowledged the necessity of a new library focused on undergraduates, to be located in the heart of campus, providing significant additions in reading space without disrupting existing open vistas or overshadowing the Morrow Plots (a National Historic Landmark, the Morrow Plots are the oldest continuously used experimental agricultural field in the United States and the second oldest such field in the world) (Leetaru, n.d.). Architect Abrose Richardson, who was a consultant to the University Planning Group, proposed locating the new library adjacent to the existing building, but also underground, solving the problems outlined by the university. As initially proposed, at a cost of seven million dollars, the library would provide shelving for 100,000 volumes, seating for 4,800, and, by virtue of its underground location, a fallout shelter for 15,000 people in the event of nuclear attack. Richardson’s plan was adopted and the underground undergraduate library began to take form (“U.I. Considers,” 1963). As constructed, the library housed shelf space for 150,000 volumes and seating for 1,899 in 67,121 assignable square feet (“Built for Undergraduates,” 1969; see fig. 6). Final shelter capacity information is not available; however, provisions such as canned water and food were stored in the library in case a situation arose that warranted their use. The library maintains a physical connection to the Main Library via an underground tunnel that aids ease of movement between the two facilities.

Librarian Robert Downs was instrumental in the development and implementation of the plans for the new Undergraduate Library. The
library itself gained significant attention not only for the novelty of its underground location and focus on undergraduate students, but for its employment of large amounts of space allocated for student use for study, typing, and even listening to recoded media. This model of library space allocation has become known as the learning commons and has increased in popularity in the succeeding decades, giving patrons a third space (neither home nor work) in which they may engage in activity along with peers (Kaser, 1997; see fig. 7). When asked about the threat to the book-centered library from learning commons and from new media forms such as audio recordings and the prevalence of microfiche, Downs replied that the “book is here to stay,” while recognizing that our library spaces must evolve with our society and changes in pedagogical practices (“Built for Undergraduates,” 1969).

Today, the University of Illinois Library has grown to over 11 million volumes, 5.5 million of which are held at the Main Library stacks with the remainder at an off-site high-density storage facility and a number of departmental libraries. Over the course of its existence, the Main Library has seen the University of Illinois progress from an isolated industrial
college to a prestigious world-renowned university. Plans are being considered for how the library will continue to serve the university through the next century and into the digital era. Currently being considered is a remodel that will result in the Main Library building occupying most of the footprint Platt envisioned, though of the building seen today, only the historical first unit (the portion dedicated in 1929), minus its stacks, will survive into this proposed next phase of development. This plan calls for the relocation of undergraduate collections back to the main building to a unified learning commons and the remodeling of the existing undergraduate library to house all special collections, including archives, rare books, and classics.

Whether or not this plan is implemented, and in spite of the vast growth in library collections, changes in patron use patterns, advancements in pedagogical methods, and monumental advances in technology, it is clear that the Main Library building will serve the University of Illinois as a library well into the foreseeable future. The library stands today as a testament to the foresight of university leaders, librarians, and the architect who collaborated to design, construct, and maintain a library that has weathered these changes and that will continue to serve its patrons throughout the twenty-first century.

Figure 7. Learning commons at the Undergraduate Library showing students engaged in a variety of activities. Source: Brock Peoples (2010).
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Brock Peoples is a 2010 graduate of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is now director of the Smithton Public Library District in Smithton, Illinois and is active with the Illinois Library Association.