Design Fashions and Fads in University Libraries

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Each city has its glamor buildings which dominate the urban pattern—a capitol or city hall, court house or post office, cathedral, temple, tower or public library. These prima donna types—their very siting usually rivaling the monumental importance of their configuration—have been the style setters throughout the history of architecture and city planning. Each generation has watched them run the design gamut—sometimes for pride and beauty; sometimes for sparkle, glitter and show; sometimes to be the avant of the avant-garde, often simply to create a better building. This, oddly, many have done.

Whereas the city has numerous glamor buildings, the college or university may have but one, and often the library is the one to wear the tiara of the campus. Here again the drama of the site of the house of books may upstage the design of the structure itself. But in spite of the theatrics, results often can be rated as excellent.

In this article, I want to comment on the major design changes (yes, many of them have been fashions and fads) of the twentieth century in university buildings—principally libraries. I shall attempt to relate their architecture to the other three-dimensional (and some two-dimensional) aspects of design. I shall at least touch on the rapidly-changing professions, old and new, which become involved in the programming, design and development of the total university library.

The past seven decades on campuses, as in cities, have seen the tempo of design changes which were previously evolutionary, increase to such a degree that they may be termed revolutionary. Since the advent of the machine age with its rapid means of transportation and communication, and all of the accompanying technology of construc-
tion, campus plans and building aesthetics have not remained fixed.

To cite one example of the rapidity of the design trend or fashion of this century: it was not long after the great architect Edward Durrell Stone began utilizing the pierced block wall (or grille) design before his work was being imitated in every state. What Stone had handled well from a functional and artistic standpoint never came out as well when “adopted” by others less skilled. Moreover, it was not long before the pierced wall or grille was being reproduced in all forms and was for sale by the square foot or square yard in stores, including the five and ten variety, across the nation.

Urban growth has surrounded and enveloped many a campus. On the other hand, many institutions have sprawled over into their neighboring communities. New campuses, of which there are many, have been established in already thickly populated areas, sometimes arbitrarily, often not without reason. Even campuses still in suburban or rural settings have themselves become urbanized in their attempt to accommodate their increasing enrollments and their teaching and research responsibilities. Few universities today are not involved with governmental agencies in their quest for physical expansion or in their search for a method of survival. All of these new involvements make us wonder how much longer we will be able to refer, as Webster does, to the campus as “the principal grounds of a college or school between the buildings or within the main inclosure.”

In brief, the grounds of places of learning have changed emphasis since 1900 from classic (but not always efficient) serenity to unprecedented (and often frenetic) growth. Building design during this same period has moved from the fluffiness of Victorian infatuated with the past to the harshness of some moderns. This is especially true of the university library building which has become an increasingly important structure during these seven decades, which has encountered technological changes and improvements, and which has gyrated about every design cliché while doing so.

Why the library especially? For a number of reasons. For one, it is synonymous with culture and higher education—and therefore, important. Academically it has long been the heart of the campus, and this role is strengthened each year.

Because of its academic position, the library also has taken the place of honor physically. Since it came into its own, and especially from 1900 onward, the library has been a popular gift package, memorializing the name of its donor. Consider, therefore, the number of crown sites allocated to libraries—on axis with the main entrance,
the highlight of the quadrangle, at the terminus of a long vista, the
tower symbol of the campus, or in a handsome grove of trees.

A look backwards seventy years also underscores the record num-
bbers and large sizes of university libraries being established. This is
attributable in part, no doubt, to Andrew Carnegie, who built up-
wards of 1,900 community libraries in the United States and Canada
between 1897 and 1918.

The period since 1900 also has witnessed major internal design in-
novations—in modularization and flexibility, book storage, lighting,
ventilation, humidity control, acoustics, audio-visual facilities, micro-
filming, and computerization. Most importantly, this period has seen
people and books brought together.

Before 1900, design changes on the university campus—as in the
city—came gradually. But as the twentieth century has gained mo-
mement, the changes in design fashions and fads which formerly
would have taken generations have been telescoped into a matter of
months. Travel, publications, and television share this responsibility
for time compression with such additional factors as new materials,
new methods of construction, growth of population and growth of
institutions. This is true not only of the actual architecture of recent
libraries but also of its related components in interiors, furnishings,
colors, landscaping, and art.

To repeat: by no means have all of these design fashions—even all
of these design fads—been negative. On the contrary, the past seventy
years have seen enormous advances in the design professions and
have produced many great solutions for the expanding needs of our
university libraries. And today I would predict that the next twenty-
five to fifty years will have an even more powerful influence.

Only very recently have regional and city planning come of age
and been accepted as professions. Even more recent has been the
development of campus planning as a separate design profession; it
is today where city and regional planning were in 1945. Today we
are seeing the birth of still another design profession—urban design,
which promises to take over the large-scale site planning aspects of
city and regional planning as the latter become more involved in the
multi-disciplines of sociology, political science, economics and law,
in addition to three-dimensional design. Landscape architecture, too,
has come of age.

Meanwhile, architects, the senior profession, have kept pace with
the changing requirements of this jet age and have been able to
produce results which undoubtedly will take their place alongside the
great buildings of history. Interior design, too, has taken on a new dimension—that of relating to architecture. In top-quality design today art is everywhere—no longer is it something only to be “hung”; the trained artist works with the architect, the landscape architect, the interior designer, and the owner.

This coordination is, aesthetically speaking, the greatest change of the past seventy years, at least in those areas of the country which are sophisticated in their approach to design. It used to be (and unfortunately still is in some sections of this country) that a site for a building would be selected, probably by the owner, with little or no thought given as to what function it was to perform or of its relationship to an over-all plan. The architect, then engaged, would have to step in and do the best he could in designing the building. (It is only in fairly recent years that the value of programming has been recognized.) Upon a building’s completion, it would be turned over to others who would proceed to inflect their tastes on it or camouflage the architecture with furnishings and landscaping. An encouraging start has been achieved in the coordination of the efforts of the designers and the owner or client.

A review of the design fashions and fads of this century reveals immense variety. We have seen the pendulum swing from the campus library designed from the outside-in (without consideration to the interior arrangement) to the one designed from the inside-out (and as for the exterior, come what may) and back again and back again. We have observed library facilities squeezed or shoe-horned into symmetrical floor plans; we have seen the unpleasing result as would-be asymmetrical compositions have been forced on axis in sites full of dramatic appeal but totally impractical.

Because of the library’s relation to culture and because “culture” until twenty-five years ago was more foreign than American, we have inherited classic or Islamic temples of books, basilicas, Gothic towers, Italian campaniles, Renaissance palaces, Italian hillside towns, Georgian mansions, Spanish missions, and early London churches. We have countless examples from the École des Beaux Arts, a few from Germany’s Bauhaus movement, and others reminiscent of Greek Revival, Italianate, Romanesque Revival, Mid-Rococo, Gothic Revival, Neo-Gothic, Early Baroque, Neo-Renaissance, Pseudo-Gothic, and Neo-Pseudo-Early-Late-Mid-Everything!

There are blockbuster edifices located in pastoral settings with no windows; glass boxes in warm-to-hot climates (and what a boon to the manufacturers of draperies, shades and other methods of con-
trolling the sun); view windows viewing service alleys; sunny reading decks in the Deep South and shady ones in the Far North.

There are "precious" buildings, "period" buildings, non-buildings, engineered buildings, expandable buildings, and buildings by computer. There are garage-type structures, boxcar modern, and even some "like the side of a barn." There are precast and poured-in-place and the box-on-box style from Expo '67. The library has witnessed everything that concrete will do up to this time; "exposed aggregate" may become the style of the sixties yet. The library was one of the principal users of the glass block in the era when it appeared that this construction feature would take over forever. (Actually, a very practical and useful product, but, in my opinion, so overused—and usually poorly used—that it has virtually disappeared from the market. Remember the curved glass block wall of the thirties. Few libraries of that period were without it.)

Because libraries oft have fallen prey to trial and error, there are examples of grand staircases leading nowhere; false fronts and their counterparts in design, "honest architecture," which often out false-fronted the false front; stacks stacked on multi-floors of a tower served by a single elevator. There are round buildings, octagons, hexagons, star shapes, free-form; there are modular buildings designed to fit the module of the Corinthian column.

Libraries have come all the way from the dome and its rotunda through the mansard roof and the undulating roof to the flat top with its shiny and hideous mechanical equipment showing (though the model and renderings of this building no doubt showed everything clean above the fascia). There has also been the flamboyant roof or the multiple arch and the hyperbolic paraboloid or the double butterfly. But of late, many new libraries have come back to the mansard and the dome.

Our smaller campus libraries are more comparable to a city's branch libraries which have had to struggle to fit into neighborhoods of Colonial, English, Spanish and contemporary homes. The small libraries, too, have witnessed the clichés of each generation. But clichés are less dramatic when practiced in residential scale.

Library interiors have somewhat paralleled exteriors in keeping up with the styles. To put it another way, the stages of interior design of libraries may be compared to the indoor plants of the respective generations. Starting with the potted palm and coming through the aspidistras, the rubber plant, the Boston fern and the succulent, we arrive at the greatest asset in all history to the interior decorator or
designer—the philodendron, without which there might never have been contemporary architecture.

No period of history has seen anything as revolutionary as the comings and goings of the interior furnishings styles of this century. If one starts with the last phases of late Victorian and Gay Nineties he passes through the Mission or Golden Oak period; the Mid-Grand Rapids (encompassing the Colonial and Spanish trends of the twenties); through the thirties with its Classic Moderne (with a final “e”) and the Modernistic (I use this word advisedly, though I am aware that the “ic” ending is dropped when describing good modern or contemporary design); through a short but powerful spell of Japanese influence following World War II, to the enormous popularity of Danish Modern. Now we are back to the Spanish or Mediterranean. Less widespread but notable were the sliding Shoji period or the Shutter period, both of which have left their mark since 1945, and the influence of tinted glass in more recent years.

Perhaps the greatest single influence in the furnishings of libraries has been the American Windsor chair, certainly the trademark of a record number of libraries—university and otherwise—in the United States.

An important influence in the interiors of libraries has come about in recent years with the widespread use of carpeting. Not only has this product proved its value in providing acoustic qualities for otherwise noisy areas; it also has aided materially in providing the quiet, clublike character which many libraries hope to achieve.

There are two schools of thought in the use of color in libraries. Some librarians and their interior designers advocate bright colors in an effort to take away from the institutional character of their buildings. Others avoid any color—even stained wood and dark trim—in the belief that such might be eye-catching and thus disconcerting to the reader.

Libraries have thus lived through apartment house tan, celadon green, all white (colors which blended with the ever-present murals of WPA days), Chinese reds, every shade of cream and beige, psychedelic colors and patterns, and the currently “in” golds, oranges and mustards.

I believe that library furnishings were, for the most part, inferior to the exterior design of the buildings (at least until very recent years). Probably this is because so many libraries of the past appeared to be furnished for effect only—certainly not for efficiency,
comfort and practicability—or because the furnishings budget vied
with the landscaping budget for being the area where savings were
achieved. (When construction bids are high, it is automatic: “Cut
the furnishing budget; reduce the landscaping.” And this usually
when those budgets have been minimal since the start.) Or perhaps
(and I am afraid this is the major reason) because many institutions
have failed to recognize the importance of engaging a professional
interior designer, one who can advise on quality and cost values as
well as aesthetics, one who is a coordinator, one whose work will
complement that of the architect.

There is not much to say about the landscape of the turn-of-the-
century university library. Chances are the building had a formal or
monumental (Queen Anne?) front with very formal, dignified plant-
ing to accompany it. Often it simply had a pair of Italian cypress
flanking the main entry. The other elevations all (Mary Anne?)
would slide into oblivion, with cottage landscaping and occasionally
a few bushes and flowers. Interior courts in those days were light
wells, which served little purpose except to act as giant trash recep-
tacles.

In the past thirty years, however, libraries have learned the value
of indoor-outdoor living, if one may use this descriptive cliché. (No
other does as well.) Buildings are no longer “front-door, back-door”
types. They now take advantage of their site and the open areas
around the building. Moreover, reading decks and courts have been
humanized by the landscape architect.

Most importantly, the landscape architect and the site planner
who think in terms of urban scale have taught us that the spaces
between buildings are as important as the buildings themselves. This
is nothing new and has been recognized in many parts of the world
since the first buildings were assembled on a common site. But this
phase of landscape-site planning had been bypassed and overlooked,
especially through the early decades of this century.

With increased emphasis on the use of outdoor spaces has come,
of course, new demands for appropriate “outdoor furniture.” Suffice
it to say here that no project is complete until the total design has
been accomplished. This includes, besides benches and actual tables
and chairs, light standards, signs (informational and directional),
kiosks, and special sidewalk and paving features.

All of these fashions in twentieth-century university design—most
of them concerning library design—lead us to the question of what
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will come next. There are those who would have us believe that the library, as we know it, will fall prey to technology and that the book will become obsolete.

Certainly computer and microform technology, today's communications, and the demands for flexibility caused by today's rapid changes cause serious questions to be asked and decisions to be made. Already major design changes have been instigated and many more are in store. But in summation, I agree firmly with the consensus of the participants of the Educational Facilities Laboratories' June 1967 symposium on The Impact of Technology on the Library Building, that:

It follows . . . that library planners can proceed at this time with confidence that technological developments in the foreseeable future will not alter radically the way libraries are used. In planning library buildings today, we should start with the library as the institution we now know it to be. Any departures in the future should be made from this firm base. . . .

All the fields of technology are swirling with action, and it is certain that, in every individual library, planners and administrators must be constantly alert to innovations, to local potential for assimilating developments, to the possibilities for interaction between libraries. On a broader scale, continued research, experimentation, and study must be carried on to help solve today's planning problems. Technological progress perforce will continue. But it is not breakthroughs that are going to make a new world so much as the constant accumulation of new experiences over a considerable period of time. . . .

Now, more than ever, it is important to design library buildings so they will be inviting and comfortable for people to use. The library building itself will gradually change, but people, who use libraries, are a constant factor.¹

So planners should be able to go confidently back to the drawing boards without fretting about an occasional cliché. A cliché now and then may stimulate our design teams and result in even more humanization of the library buildings which will be designed for the student of the computer era.

Reference