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Why LIBRARIES are now key to creating communities

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Tom Ross, courtesy of Stewart Hollenstein Pty Ltd

Libraries

LAB

Does the bricks-and-mortar library have a place in contemporary life? Many people still believe so, and statistics show that the younger they are the more frequent their library visits. What today's innovative library concepts share is a programme that treats literary provision as merely one pillar among a plethora that includes teaching, making, chatting and playing, activities enabled by cutting-edge technology. If you recall your last visit to the library as hours spent silently searching the stacks for that missing title, we strongly suggest you seek out one of these new institutions. You'll be checking out a lot more than books.

Jim Favaro and Steve Johnson pose in the children's Storytime Theatre, which belongs to the West Hollywood Library their office designed.

‘All learning spaces should essentially be maker spaces’

According to the architects at Johnson Favaro, university libraries are adopting the culture of invention prevailing in Silicon Valley.

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'THANKS TO DIGITIZATION and electronic storage opportunities, the lion's share of research no longer requires the ubiquitous presence of books where study and research take place,' says Jim Favaro, cofounder of architecture practice Johnson Favaro. 'But,' he continues, 'study and research still *do* take place on university campuses and they *do* require a location.' The quality of that place is significant. Physical surroundings not only impact academic progress but, more importantly, 'make students feel that they matter, that they deserve to learn in buildings that are dignified, exciting and forward-looking,' says Favaro. 'If we value education, then the architecture of the buildings within which that education takes place must express it.'

Since setting up shop in California's Culver City in 1988, he and fellow founder Steve Johnson have used their architectural skills to create schools and university libraries that both facilitate shifting student lifestyles and better relate to life after graduation. 'Society is entering an age in which we can no longer predict what students must learn in school that will prepare them in turn for a job that will last a lifetime. Students must learn to learn, because in the future lies accelerating change, less predictability and more innovation. Character traits like empathy, creativity and the ability to collaborate will become more and more the requirements of a fully contributing member of society,' says Johnson. 'Libraries today are no longer just a place of books and research but a space for community. When students are motivated to learn in an environment that encourages them to interact with one another, they are growing exactly those qualities that will serve them in the future.'

While their office is in the middle of designing their biggest project to date – a new master plan for the library system at University of California, Los Angeles – we asked Johnson and Favaro how they believe shifts in the educational landscape are affecting the design of today's – and tomorrow's – university libraries.

Throughout your career, how have you seen the educational landscape change? JIM FAVARO: I have witnessed two major interrelated shifts of focus in higher education over the last 30 years, one troubling and one promising. At all levels of higher education here in the US, students, their parents and, in response, teachers and administrators have increasingly seen a traditional liberal education as a nice diversion at best and a waste of time at worst. The thrust of a higher education now is less about creating whole persons with a firm grasp of the full range of human thought, history, culture, arts and literature, and more about preparing a person for work. This is a shift from the principled to the pragmatic and seems mostly to have been in response to fear – how will I or my child compete in a future, ever-changing work environment? – and to the experience and example of California's Silicon Valley over the last 30 years, in which computer scientists and engineers have seen the most prosperity. This despite Steve Jobs' dictum that he would have much rather hired someone with a liberal arts degree than an engineering one. On the other hand, educators in the last decade or so have increasingly incorporated the philosophy of 'learning by doing' into the daily curriculum.

Was your education a traditional liberal one? JF: I studied structural engineering and fine art at Stanford University, where I received a combined degree in both disciplines before matriculating to Harvard University, where I received my master's in architecture. At Stanford, I had an adviser who was a professor in the engineering school and who one day said to me: 'I see that you take courses in the art school. Is this a way to take a break from your engineering studies?' – to which I responded: 'No, it's the other way around.' I knew then what this eminent scholar in one of the best engineering schools in one of the best universities in the world apparently did not know – which is that to create something out of nothing is one of the hardest things to do. He also apparently did not know that I was taking classes within the engineering school, where we had to make things – prototypes of ideas that we had come up with in response to the challenges of particular assignments. This program was the precursor to the design school within the engineering school, which is now known as the Stanford D School. It's the cradle of the Silicon Valley phenomenon, emulated across the world as precisely the kind of environment in which students learn the ethos of experimenting, making and thinking for oneself.

An example of education's new aspiration for inquiry-based learning? JF: We caution against claims that these developments are anything the world has never seen before; they are, rather, transformations of old concepts within new contexts – in this case the apprenticeship model of learning that in the West has been around since at least the Middle Ages. It is not unlike what here in America used to be called 'shop', where boys made things, usually carpentry, and 'home economics', where girls learned how to cook and sew.

How is this model manifested in today's university libraries? STEVE JOHNSON: All new learning spaces are essentially 'maker' spaces – project-based learning environments – that allow for flexibility in instruction, discussion and making. These types of spaces are finding their way into every level of education down through elementary school, again mainly inspired by the culture of invention that has emerged from places like Silicon Valley in California and Route 128 in Massachusetts. Parents »

'The typology of the library should evolve to incorporate characteristics of other architectures, such as the hotel lobby'

John Ellis

Johnson Favaro transformed an old school cafeteria on the ground floor of one of UCLA's 1960s residential towers into a hybrid space that includes a variety of seating configurations designed to accommodate different modes of learning.

Courtesy of Johnson Favaro

The architecture firm was also commissioned to complete a master plan for seven of the ten libraries located across UCLA'S Westwood campus. Johnson says that converting 'part of the physical collection into digital files allows us to transform library stack areas into anything from classrooms and seminar rooms to cafés and incubator spaces'.

Five ways to future-proof the university library

STEVE JOHNSON AND JIM FAVARO

① PLACE IT IN SIGHT
We always say that the American college campus is one of the most recognizable brands in the world today. The university library – true to its stature in the life of the university – should always occupy a central and prominent position on that campus. A library out of sight is fundamentally out of mind.

② BUILD IT TO LAST
There is nothing sadder than architecture a decade old that was supposed to have been the architecture of the future and already feels out of date. We are stupid to think we can ever design anything that will *always* look like the future, and we shouldn't try. Instead we should anticipate functional parameters of the future as well as we can and create architecture that will last. Furniture and technology come and go. Excellent architecture is forever.

③ STRIVE FOR FLEXIBILITY
Patrons need a variety of options for different kinds of spaces in which to study, socialize and collaborate. A place to study that better suits how students learn today must offer a variety of ways to situate: alone, alone together, and together. Therefore we should always strive for flexible interior spaces.

④ ANTICIPATE TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT
Technology changes every two or three years – how can we possibly know where it will be in ten years? Our goal is to have the infrastructure in place that will accommodate whatever new technology is around the corner – this means cabling and conduit throughout floors, walls and ceilings, as well as the ability to core through floors wherever necessary.

⑤ PROVIDE ACCESS
Librarians are stewards of accessibility. They want to be seen and known as collaborators in the learning and research enterprise, and they want their facilities to both reflect and enable that engagement. They no longer want their offices hidden away where no one sees them – they want the university community to know they are there, front and center, ready to serve. A university library's architecture must enable this.

'Portable computing facilitated mobility. The thought that this might relegate the very idea of a campus to the dustbin of history proved entirely wrong'

and teachers now realize that success in the future will be driven by their children's ability to embrace the entrepreneurial world of tomorrow, and that the best educational experience to prepare them for that future begins in the classroom with more project-based, less structured learning programs. To augment traditional forms of instruction, such as the lecture format, with other formats, such as group study and hands-on projects, classrooms have to be able to swell and contract in size.

JF: A place to study that better suits how students learn today must offer a variety of ways to situate – alone, alone together, and together. Universities no longer see the library as only a place to collect or conserve knowledge but also as a place in which to create it. To become a place where the intellectual life of the campus is fertilized and nurtured across boundaries of academic discipline, the typology of the library should evolve to incorporate characteristics of other architectures, such as the hotel lobby, the corner café, and even the retreat or meditation centre.

So the future of the university library is defined by flexibility? JF: More flexible and versatile interior construction technologies have influenced – and will continue to influence – that which the library of the future will be able to accommodate and provide to its partners on campus. But this does not mean that the library of the future is a forever-mutating, malleable, unstable environment of constant change. Buildings don't morph all that often, and aside from the obvious physical and practical reasons it's a good thing: change requires stability – everything changing at once is chaos – and the buildings on a university campus provide that stability, as well as identity. We see a future where the buildings, library included, and open spaces of the campus will establish that which is permanent and identifiable about the university environment, while environments within buildings will provide the necessary flexibility to adjust to changing times. The library plays a central part in the key role of buildings on campus as the stabilizing counterweight to the forces of change.

Forces of change? JF: Young students live differently than students of my generation did. Certainly less structured than in our time. The key is that they are afforded choice, that the places they inhabit provide opportunities to both reflect and enable ways of living that are unique to their time. This isn't to say that young people today are in any way different from any other generation, but they have had to contend with the unique circumstances of their generation, namely the ubiquity of digital technology and social media in a time when no one really knew what the consequences of such ubiquity might be. Circumstances change, but the fundamentals of human interaction have not.

Digital technology once seemed to herald an age of home learning, but although the smart education and learning market is growing, you believe physical learning environments remain important? JF: The proliferation of portable computing – not so much the personal computer but mostly the now powerful cellular phone and the subsequent arrival of social media and software applications tailored to the phone – facilitated mobility. We no longer need to be tethered to a room or a desk in order to participate in dialogue with others. For a while it was thought that this might relegate the very idea of a campus to the dustbin of history. Of course, it proved entirely wrong – the thought itself a classic symptom of the hubris that accompanies any exciting new technology, which as history demonstrates never really replaces old technologies so much as it accumulates on top of them. People, it turns out, need the company of other people, the face-to-face contact crucial in the sharing of ideas, knowledge and creativity.

What did happen, though, with the increased mobility made possible through portable computing, was the decluttering of the campus, particularly the work environment and the library. And, importantly, the ability for people from different disciplines to meet outside their departments in neutral settings, with virtually all their resources at hand.

Studies show that millennials and Gen Z are the loneliest generations. Interestingly, statistics also show that students have higher loneliness scores than retirees. Can university libraries be designed to help decrease these results? SJ: We have worked with many college and university clients who have invested millions of dollars in technology infrastructure, reclining study pods and beanbags. Despite such investments, we still see spaces not fit for habitation. One of the single best lessons from Apple is simple design and, quite simply, the elegance of the interface with the human senses – the attention to material, weight, feel and touch, even the visual pleasure of an elegant font. We advocate that undivided attention to these same qualities in a building, with the commensurate expenditure of dollars towards an improved indoor and outdoor environment, will yield a return to a happier, more 'connected' population. ●

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