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Fostering Collaboration and Community in Special Libraries

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Until a few months ago, when sophomore Johanna White headed for the library at the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, she would descend to a tiny, cramped library housed in a former campus fraternity house. Today, Johanna and her fellow students delight in the newly renovated and expanded facility. Filled with light and enlivened with color and the work of African-American Artists, the library has become an integral part of the Africana Center's learning community.

The move and renovation have transformed the library from a remote "out of sight, out of mind" facility into a living room for the center—one that is rich in technology and that provides specialized support for its collections and information resources. While occupying just 3,066 square feet and housing 21,000 volumes, its open and inclusive design contributes to the Africana Center's robust environment fostering scholarship, community, and stewardship.

"This facility puts to rest the question of where we should be located geographically," says Robert Harris, vice provost for diversity and faculty development and professor of Africana studies. "We've always been at the heart of the intellectual enterprise of this campus."

Tailoring Spaces

Through careful attention to the design of the physical place, special libraries can strengthen an institution's learning community by supporting research activities and access to information in a technologically sophisticated environment. To do so, successful library spaces need to be tailored to the types of teaching, training, and research they support—from fostering collaboration through group work to providing suitable space for focused, individual projects.

The Gottesman Library at Teachers College, Columbia University, specializing in the field of Education, includes traditional spaces for independent study, such as a main reading room, study carrels, and computer carrels. A recent renovation added seminar and group workrooms, classrooms, a display area—even a café—to support collaborative learning and group work. In designing for collaboration, it was essential to provide acoustical privacy without sacrificing visual connections between spaces. This was achieved by incorporating noise absorbent interior materials, glass-fronted study rooms, and new interior windows between important public spaces.

"Throughout the building we have provided individual and group study/learning/teaching spaces with quiet and less-quiet zones," explains Teachers College Library Director Gary Natriello. "The design has been key in allowing us to accomplish all of this in the same building."

At Marquand Library for Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, where the focus is on individual research rather than collaborative study, a renovation and expansion increased the number of assigned carrels for art and archaeology seniors and graduate students. The carrels are designed to allow students and faculty to have adequate space to use large books, store six shelves of books of varying sizes, and connect to the campus computer system from their carrels. Carrels are available on four floors of the library with different views of the campus. Most important, the semi-open carrels provide an environment that promotes interaction within Marquand's scholarly community.

Because the students and scholars at Marquand depend heavily on print resources, shelving and furniture were designed to allow the use of large-format materials—still within a technology-rich environment where power, data, and wireless connections are provided at study tables. To provide a clear work surface on tabletops, power and data outlets are located under the tabletop surface and there are no table lamps to impede the use of large-format materials. "Art historians often need to compare

several books at one time. The furniture was designed to accommodate this practice,” says Janice Powell, Marquand’s librarian.

With a small staff and facility, the library at the Africana Center had to be creative in developing operational strategies that meet patron needs. This is most evident in their intent to design the library more for independent research than for group study. In the future, Library Director Eric Acree hopes to add technology-rich classrooms for collaborative study within the library.

Another choice the library made was to focus on quality rather than quantity of seating. Ironically, the new library has less seating than the old library, but because the new seating is comfortable, adequately sized and configured in an inviting setting, the library is frequently full. The seating in the old library was rarely filled to its capacity.

Technology-Rich Environments

Whether the spaces are created for independent study or collaborative learning, today’s special libraries need a state-of-the-art, technology-rich environment to support advanced scholarly research and learning. In addition to accommodating desktop computers at carrels and service points and in labs, study and reference areas are designed to provide seamless connectivity for student laptop use through wireless and wired network connections. Group workspaces need to incorporate data networks and accommodate laptops and projectors for practicing presentations and for videoconferencing. Teachers College group workrooms incorporate large, multiple, flat-panel display screens and projectors, with portable equipment added as necessary.

“The key part of the design is that it allowed us to integrate technology throughout the building so that it is always handy,” says Natriello. “The additional technology in the library has broadened the uses of the building. E-mail and online applications are now as prominent among users as traditional library functions. Using technology as a magnet to draw people into the building at all hours, the library has substantially increased the time it is open—from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.”

The new library at the Africana Center has also gained a technology boost. With double the number of computers equipped as production stations and printing stations and new laptops for patrons, use has dramatically increased. To keep up with IT developments and better respond to patron technology questions, Acree, the Africana librarian, sharpens his tech skills by working in the reference department at Cornell’s main library (Olin Library) for a few hours each week.

Evolving Service Models

To support student and faculty study and teaching needs, the locations and designs of service points must reflect user-responsive staff models uniquely suited to special libraries. The small or specialized library often employs a single service point to address a variety of needs, including in-depth research consultation, database instruction, and materials transactions. At Marquand Library users can take advantage of one-stop shopping, where a single service desk at the main entrance supports all floors of the library, referring students to specialized librarians as needed.

At the Africana Library only one supervisor and one student typically service the library. The service desk is next to the staff area in the single, open-plan space, enabling the supervisor to work on projects in the office area when there are few patrons



Teacher group study in a room in the redesigned library.



The Africana Library after the redesign.

Work Space



Look-up terminals for teachers.



The Africana Library circulation desk.

while still supervising the desk and reading room. The full-height shelving, necessary to efficiently house the library's collection, is oriented perpendicular to the desk, allowing an uninterrupted view to the far end of the reading room. Now that usage has increased, Acree foresees the need for a second service point with a lower work surface height where staff members and patrons can sit to discuss detailed reference questions.

Natriello echoes Acree's concerns about correctly defining the service desk. At Teachers College, as would be the goal of most special libraries, the service model is user driven, and the library director, always on the lookout for changing patron needs, is willing to try new ways to accommodate them, monitoring the relative success of those new procedures. Teachers College reports that the one-stop shopping model is working well, even though the library occupies more than 75,000 square feet. However, the jury is not in, according to Natriello, as to whether or not the current service desks will fit the evolving service model.

"We included two service desks on our renovated floors, and neither has turned out as we anticipated," he says. "The second floor service desk (originally thought necessary to serve current periodicals and the curriculum collection) was not used at all so we are reconfiguring it as a media design and print center. The main service desk on the first floor may be much larger than we need, particularly with the move to all-digital reserves. However, every time we tour the service desk with librarians from other academic libraries, they wonder if we have enough room, so our original thinking was not outside the mainstream expectation. We will experiment with new service models and new desk arrangements over the coming year."

Whatever the size of the library, service desks need to facilitate patron-staff interaction in an approachable, comfortable environment.

Flexible Design

Because the special library serves multiple populations with differing needs, multifunction spaces, especially in small facilities, allow the library to meet a wide range of research, instructional, and social needs within the same area. At the Africana Center, the community room offers space with moveable furniture that is adaptable for a variety of social, educational, and cultural events yet is also distinctive, light-filled, and inviting. At peak times of year, the library utilizes the main-floor classroom as an additional study area. The building configuration, with a direct view from the library service desk through the lobby to the classroom, allows the library staff to supervise the classroom without leaving the main library area. As demands for additional study and group work space grow, the library is looking at the feasibility of utilizing technology—through the use of a web-cam—to provide supervision and support for study areas that are not within sight of the main reading room.

At Teachers College, the library has held small conferences, program receptions and student parties, but these have been limited by the logistics of relocating the traditional, heavy wood reading tables and chairs. For more informal and impromptu gatherings, students are flocking instead to the open, soon-to-be-renovated fifth floor to create their own social venues—a clear signal to the library that the remaining floors of the building to be renovated should maximize flexibility.

The design of open study carrels can also offer flexibility. As an alternative to assigned carrels, mobile, lockable carts might be assigned to individual researchers, providing them with greater choice and freedom in their place of study. Or locking files or cabinets assigned to researchers can be located adjacent to study areas, providing secure storage space for research materials without interfering with multiple uses of the open study carrels.

The Library as Place

Design elements must create a sense of place that reflects the institutional mission and the needs of the unique population being served. For libraries that serve a specialty, design elements should convey tangible evidence of that focus.

Introducing art into the library was very important to Marquand's constituency. By creating a below-ground exhibit and reading area featuring mosaic fragments from an archaeological dig in Antioch, the colorful display and rich Venetian red walls transform an otherwise dreary space into a vibrant and inviting environment.

Large expanses of glass in the upper floor "treehouse" reading areas provide expansive views that have become a trademark for the library. "Patrons and staff at Marquand Library are thrilled with the feeling of being outside when you are inside—and inside when you are outside," said Powell. "There's a wonderful transparency between the outdoor natural surroundings and the interior of the building. It's easier to work when you can bring your eyes up to the green outdoors."

Despite the intimate size of the special library at the Africana Center, Acree says that students, faculty, and visitors feel a very keen sense of place in the newly renovated and expanded building. With the new library on the main floor, the Center is attracting more visitors from the neighborhood. The books are visible from the street through large windows. "This sends a clear message to the community that the Center is an academic enterprise," says Acree. The students have taken ownership of the space, making it "home" and adapting it to their needs. Some faculty members who never used the old library are now regular visitors, finding it a pleasant place to browse through periodicals and newspapers. The Center also expresses the unique elements of African culture through the use of bright colors, motifs, and geometric patterns in the brickwork that are reminiscent of traditional African textiles.



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At Teachers College Library, the renovation has created a distinct sense of place that is attracting more students.

"Of all the buildings on campus, only our library offers a total, unified environment that is open, filled with natural light and conducive to communication and collaboration," says Natriello. "It inspires scholarship and learning. The sense of place created by the design also reflects our service approach; there are no dark, closed spaces on the public floors of the library."

Natriello cites a number of deliberate design elements that support the institutional identity and mission of Teachers College. Classrooms and group study rooms are oriented so that any student or teacher can participate equally, which is consistent with the college's mission to prepare future teachers and stimulate student engagement. The third floor reading room includes an exhibition hall that features student dissertations, books written by the faculty, Teachers College Press books, research center

reports, and other intellectual works of the college. Most important, the library is designed as a "teaching space." Patrons encounter learning opportunities throughout the building: from the artwork, video screens, books, and magazines in the cafe video announcement boards and the organization of key resources in easy-to-find, easy-to-navigate locations throughout the building.

Special libraries are also promoting the informal, cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas in relaxed environments such as cafés and lounge areas.

Making a Difference

With contemporary work and research environments offering unlimited access to information, contemporary design strategies must create spaces that enable special libraries to be significant collaborators with their patrons. Successful special libraries must stimulate users in new ways of searching and synthesizing materials and foster collaborative research, events, and activities that enrich their learning communities. While certain architectural elements will remain constant, the interior spaces of special libraries must be designed with sufficient flexibility to adapt to future uses and technologies so that the library as place continues to play a dynamic role in enhancing the excitement of research and collaboration. ●