Changing spaces: Creating the next generation of work environments for library staff

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By now it is old news in academic circles that libraries are rapidly changing. We have moved through an era when the demise of the academic library was widely predicted and into an era that places it at the heart of the academic experience. "Academic Hub", "Learning Commons", "Interactive Learning Center"—universities are frequently attaching these titles to the campus building that used to be known, simply, as “The Library” in an effort to more accurately reflect the dynamic collaboration that is at the heart of the library experience today. New activities and programs are being brought into the library, creating a hybrid building that is part digital/print media center, part classroom building, and part student center.

Likewise, an enormous amount of literature has been produced that examines the impact of these changes on collection management as well as student study spaces. Curiously, not a lot of discussion has occurred on the subject of what all these changes mean for the individuals at the epicenter of all this change: the librarians.

Modern academic libraries are working in an intensely changing environment. Many elements have contributed to this situation, but two components are significant: staffing and organizational structure, and flexible and innovative library spaces. This change environment offers many opportunities for libraries to become ever more relevant and innovative. Libraries have the potential to be flexible, creative and nimble, adapting to new trends and opportunities. Increasingly, they are becoming more outwardly focused, with less emphasis on the library as a physical collection needing protection and more on the needs of the user. As library collections become more and more virtual, and user access is available worldwide, 7/24, it is interesting to note that physical library buildings are still critical and central to the library’s services. While in the past physical library buildings had to function as vaults to protect valuable collections, technologies and building materials have enabled open, airy, flexible spaces for study, reflection and collaboration.
In terms of services, modern academic libraries tend to emphasize flexibility and variability and that extends to library spaces. They create collaborative spaces as well as quiet ones. Much of this came from moving, storing, or removing a large portion of print collections. With this extra space come opportunities for adding a variety of learning spaces and classrooms. Collaborations with other units on campus are popular. New services are added, such as increased self-service, food and drink, makerspaces, and gaming spaces. Media rooms and accessible services can be more creative and user-friendly. We are now able to experiment with spaces, and change them as needed.

The changing nature of library space is a popular conversation, but often neglected is a conversation about the new space needs for the most important asset of a modern academic library: the staff. This is ironic because as libraries change and evolve, staff spaces are becoming more important than ever. These spaces are changing in a myriad of ways, often informally and without a strategic focus. Older buildings tend to have more rigid staff spaces and they are often cobbled together to meet changing needs. When they are planned, there is no “one size fits all” solution.

There are many reasons for library staff spaces receiving less attention than public spaces. These include a lack of funds. It is not uncommon for a new construction or renovation to have insufficient resources to put into staff spaces, or funds are cut during the project resulting in cuts to this area. In the United States some states or municipalities actually prohibit their funds being used for staff offices, requiring private money to do so.

Ideally, staff spaces are flexible, adaptable and support the work of the employee. They are pleasant areas and include spaces for collaboration. Working styles, and needs of a particular type of project are also crucial. Public services staff often need space for “messy” work away from the public areas.

In order to examine the specific ways in which library staff spaces need to change it is important to understand the underlying forces that are driving these changes. The shift from transactional (static) services to consultative (fluid) services is one of
these forces. In an earlier—arguably simpler—time, library staff was organized around distinct tasks that were framed around transactional or process-driven activities. Information, in the form of printed material, was a valuable resource that had to be carefully curated and guarded. Librarians were custodians, carefully managing, collating, organizing, and distributing information. Job tasks were distinct and clearly defined. Today, however, as information becomes ubiquitous and multidimensional, and technology allows for many activities to be automated, a librarian’s tasks have become much more multi-faceted and hybridized.

Library staff organization charts and job structures are evolving. Staff position descriptions may change often. In many cases, there is fewer library staff, and they are often required to do more variety of tasks. The creation of hybrid job descriptions that blend together two or more traditional roles are not uncommon, as are the frequent emergence of new roles and responsibilities. Part-time positions, flexible hours, and seasonal employment also must be considered in designing and creating staff workspaces. And critically, libraries are increasingly testing new ideas and staffing models without necessarily committing to one solution.

It is important to understand that everything described above is, in a way, what is going on behind the scenes, unseen by the library patron. The typical library patron does not know nor care how a library organizes its staff, what a librarian’s job title is, or the staff organizational chart and lines of authority—-they only know they have a question/request/transaction that needs to be addressed. For any library seeking to reorganize its staff, looking at the situation through the lens of the typical patron is a good place to start. Here are a few tips for any library looking to re-examine how their staff spaces are organized:

1. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Each library has its own unique culture where patrons interact with the facility in a unique and nuanced way. While it is useful to examine what one’s peer libraries are up to, a brilliant solution at one library may not translate well to another. Think about who you are and what your mission is. What do you want your “first impression”
to be? What activities require patrons to interface with staff, and what activities can be self-guided? In what unique ways does your staff interact with each other?

2. Create a master plan and an implementation strategy, then stick to it. Don’t think of space planning as putting out fires. Look at the far horizon—the ideal arrangement you want to achieve—then break it down into small incremental steps. Very few libraries can afford to implement a bold vision in one giant step.

3. Design for the mission of the library, not the personalities of the staff. A common mistake is designing staff spaces to respond to the dynamics of the current staff. Your staff spaces should be designed around the library’s mission and work flow, not to accommodate the personalities at hand. Put a simpler way: if staff spaces are in alignment with the mission of the library and certain staff complain and object, maybe there is an issue of cultural fit on the part of the staff member.

4. Take some cues from the corporate sector. Corporations have done an immense amount of research and testing on new and innovative staff spaces, and for good reason. Employee satisfaction and efficiency are a high priority for them. One of the more interesting concepts being applied today is the “distributed office”, based on the idea that staff are most productive, engaged, and—frankly—happy when they have the possibility to move to different environments throughout the day, depending on what the task is. Spaces are arrayed that allow them to be isolated and contemplative when they need to focus on a specific task, or engaged and animated when the dynamics of a larger group activity are required.

5. Design for change. It’s human nature to want to believe we have the correct answer, the correct approach, the perfect arrangement—but this does not work out very well when designing staff spaces. One should have the humility to acknowledge that things change. New, unforeseen technologies emerge, new academic programs and initiatives are introduced, and leadership transitions. The master plan should provide a strong organizing
framework, but the particulars should be capable of being easily modified. Don’t be afraid to test new ideas, new arrangements, and new possibilities.