

## Embracing the Moment - Reconceptualizing the Campus Library

Gili Meerovitch

### Abstract

This article suggests that library leaders should view space as a valuable resource for their libraries and use it to create opportunities. With older library buildings often facing deficiencies and maintenance issues, it is important for leaders to think strategically about how to repurpose and utilize the space in a way that aligns with the institution's priorities. This may involve developing new partnerships and reframing the conversation around library services as a vital component of the institution's mission. It's also highlighted that library leaders should be proactive in leading the "reconceptualizing" of what the library is, based on the campus's specific needs and positioning the library's spaces as a proactive contributor to the institution's priorities.

### Introduction

Once the calm center of intellectual pursuit, the academic library has undergone major shifts in the last couple of decades, heavily impacted by the advent of digital technology, then the onslaught of the COVID pandemic and the surge of awareness of the necessity to fully engage with issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. These changes have led to shifts in the way that libraries operate and the services they provide.

### Re-evaluating Library Space Use

Although evolutionary forces had already been at work in academic libraries, the pandemic accelerated this process, demanding a reevaluation of the value and function of the library. Our perception of space --how we use space, and what we need space for -- are entirely different now compared to pre-pandemic. Consider the following examples:

What had been a vigorous move to **collaborative study** and the spatial design for this trend—consequently eschewing investment in technology-rich spaces--has begun a reversal created by post-pandemic preferences. As academic library planners, we have

noticed increased demand for hybrid study modes such as acoustically separated rooms for one person to deliver and participate in webinars, and small rooms where 4-5 classmates can attend an online class session together.

The pandemic highlighted that housing vast print **collections** on campus is NOT an existential necessity. Libraries' innovative services ensured access to materials continued even when the libraries were closed and in-person access to the physical collections was not an option. Coupled with migration towards electronic resources and growing digital formats, the modern research library is "more than a building." The library as an organization (of resources, experts and spaces) is serving a broad and often location-less community that may never set foot in the library's building, yet they are very much the community and delivery mode the library supports, including: distance education and remote consultation, as well as synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning. This shift in approach and the resultant additional space needed across campus--not just within academic libraries— resulted in less resistance to relocating certain print collections to an automatic storage and retrieval system (ASRS) vault or to purpose-built off-site facilities.

Library priorities continue to shift toward meeting the needs of students while creating a positive, **equitable learning experience**, which is a particular challenge given today's prevalent technology-mediated teaching and learning activities. The technology required to replicate the live in-person learning experience in digital form and in real time is not yet universally available. Therefore, in the short term, we anticipate the need to plan flexible meeting/seminar rooms that can accommodate fewer in-person attendees, equipped with technology that supports enables synchronous participation in both in-person and remote modes.
















	HISTORICAL	EMERGING	FUTURE
<b>MODE</b>	 Transaction	 Service	 Experience
<b>FOCUS</b>	Collections 	User/Client 	Experience 
<b>GOAL</b>	Control 	Connect 	Collaborate 
<b>ROLE</b>	Gatekeeper 	Assistant 	Partner 
<b>MEASURE</b>	Inputs 	Outputs 	Outcomes 

Figure 1: Shift toward meeting the needs of students while creating a positive, equitable learning experience

## Library Space Is a Resource

Library leaders must consider space as a resource, and avoid losing sight of the chance to leverage it to create opportunities for their libraries. Among your institutions' facilities, the library is likely one of the largest buildings located at the center of campus. If your library building is of a certain era (midcentury, or brutalist 70's vintage) and has not kept up with the times, you are likely dealing with deficiencies (such as lacking access to power and data) on a daily basis. Occasionally, you are likely also dealing with larger deferred maintenance issues such as waterproofing, mechanical systems, and plumbing issues. Meanwhile, as stressors on university administration to accommodate new programs and faculty continue to mount, you can count on having other interests/units eyeing your library's spaces for their use. When it seems that "everybody" wants a piece of the library, and many are questioning why the library needs so many square feet, think of it as an opportunity to lead the reconceptualizing of what the library is, based on your campus' specific needs, and to position your library's spaces and services as proactive contributors to your institutions' priorities.

As a leader, you are responsible for making your organization better; your job is to improve the library for the campus. If you are a library leader/manager who is considering redesigning your space, think strategically about how you could frame the conversation to advocate for your project. This may include developing new partnerships with other like-minded groups in your institution; it may involve thinking about library services more broadly as vital components of your institution's learner-centered ethos. It may involve supporting a limited refresh or advocating for enhanced

maintenance for existing spaces. Even modest changes can have a significant impact on the functionality, efficiency, and sustainability of your library space, thereby improving the overall experience for library users.

As library planners and designers who have assisted many academic libraries in developing a master plan for their facilities, we recommend keeping the following dynamics in mind.

### A Fresh Perspective

The pandemic has brought significant changes to the way people use public spaces, and it's crucial that we acknowledge the need for a fresh perspective and ongoing observations to improve services and optimize physical space. What we thought to be true a few years ago might no longer hold, and we can't assume that users will revert to the way things were before the pandemic. Ongoing observations are critical for improving services and optimizing physical space. We need to pay close attention to the ways users navigate the space, which areas are most popular at different times of the day/week/semester, what activities users engage in, and what tools or resources they use. By gathering this information, we can gain insights into which features and aspects of the space users find useful or problematic. This allows us to design spaces and adapt services in a way that is continually responsive to their evolving needs and preferences.

### Renewing Commitment to User-Centric Service

During the pandemic, many academic libraries faced challenges in providing the usual on-boarding experience for library and digital literacy, which contributed to growing student disengagement. New students who missed experiencing the library as an integral part of campus life lack this essential attachment and a sense of the library as a learning place on campus. To encourage the campus community to re-engage, libraries have begun to expand social programs, cultural events, and enrichment activities to draw students, faculty and staff into library buildings and re-build a sense of belonging. Related, or perhaps as a result, we are seeing an uptick in planning for small gathering spaces and building flexibility into spaces so that they can easily accommodate pop-up workshops, clinic-type training activities, as well as exhibits and receptions. Proximity of such gathering spaces to a contained outdoor environment that can allow activities to flow to an adjacent patio or a roof garden are highly desirable. These examples demonstrate the libraries' role in strengthening the sense of belonging in the campus community, in addition to the on-line community of learners. This often aligns with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives and contributes to mental health and wellness which is another area Universities are focusing on, more on this below.

## Broadly Embracing DEI&A As It Is Being Redefined

The heightened attention to social justice has been a wake-up call for a number of institutions and their libraries to reassess established and unconscious biases. This has engendered a reexamination of the quality of engagement, from the simple provision of digital and physical access to a deeper understanding of individual user needs, extending to collections and programs.

Libraries are evolving their efforts to enhance student experience and outcomes have been adding new staff positions – such as User Services/User Experience Librarian and Engagement and Inclusion Librarian positions -- focused on improving innovative and user-centered services and spaces as well as policies and procedures. They have also invested in training librarians to improve team engagement and to create/ build a supportive and inclusive culture.

As a result, libraries are expanding the range of services and offerings that broaden access and promote well-being, such as increasing open-access materials, expanding virtual instruction and learning activities, creating family-friendly study spaces, partnering with student organizations to close the equity gap, and even partnering with mental health services to connect users with the right resources.

Libraries' leadership can help their institutions reach their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, not only through staffing, services, and collections, but also through leveraging their library spaces. Building renovations play a role in this by making the library welcoming to all through a number of measures, such as making the facility fully accessible, creating cultural displays and exhibits, providing assistive technology, well-lit, well-ventilated spaces with comfortable seating, accommodations such as family rooms, reflection/prayer rooms, focus rooms with specially controlled environments for neurodivergent learners, as well as improving signage and wayfinding to name a few. These efforts help create a safe and inclusive environment for all members of the community and support the institution's DEI goals.

### Focusing on Library Staff

Library faculty and staff's ability to pivot during the pandemic ensured continuity of academic activity during uncertainty. As we emerged from pandemic mode, the focus of library and campus leadership shifted from providing access and continuity, to ensuring quality of service and building capacity to pivot if necessary in the future.

Recognizing the critical frontline role that library staff play in the academic enterprise, there is an acknowledged need for high-quality staff workspace that supports new post-pandemic roles and collaborative work flows, many of which are migrating to the digital realm.

A new hurdle is the need to ensure uninterrupted library services since library staff is now a blended workforce and likely to continue to be some working on-site, some working remotely, and some working in a hybrid mode. Many recognize that this blended mode is the way forward; offering remote work may be necessary to attract and retain some staff (IT, data services professionals for example), while not everybody has an option – the space or the technology set-up – to afford working from home. Flexible work arrangements and new approaches to working from different locations present complicated space implications. Library planning seeks to strike a balance between space designated for temporary use by hybrid staff —“hoteling”— vs dedicated work space for on-site staff. One key question is synchronicity, i.e. exactly when staff members are on-site simultaneously, and how to balance space allocation that marries the tasks being performed with the frequency in which these tasks are performed on-site and in-person.

The future of library staff workspaces was a big discussion point at recent library conferences, specifically the challenges of transitioning librarians and staff from individual offices to shared spaces. Some members of library faculty and staff continue to believe they have the right (either based on existing campus standards, contracts, or state regulations) to have their own dedicated enclosed personal space, which they can personalize and control access to. Some justify needing a dedicated office space because they spend much of their in-office time on zoom calls which are disruptive to everyone around them in open-office setting. The questions are yet to be definitively answered: is the dedicated office space an antiquated notion? and, will the shift towards shared spaces for hybrid workforce continue well into the future, or will it revert to offices? It will be important for library leaders to keep up with this conversation, as it is critical to the successful recruiting and retention of staff, as well as enforcing workplace culture. As this is a complex and dynamic topic, it is important to take into consideration the different needs, preferences, and the specificities of each library and its staff.

### [Providing Spaces Dedicated to Quiet Study and Research Level Workspace](#)

Traditionally, libraries had reserved some carrels and small lockable rooms for faculty use. However, in many academic departments, particularly in the humanities, faculty members grant their graduate students access to these dedicated spaces in the library, which become the grads' primary workspaces. In contrast, in the sciences, graduate students typically have access to labs with workstations.

Currently, when libraries are reimagining their spaces, they are moving away from the traditional model of assigned spaces for individuals towards a shared space model dedicated to quiet study and deep research level work. This is often associated with graduate students, but applies to any advanced research work. This new model includes shared spaces with assigned lockers and a variety of settings for work such as computing stations, large desks, individual study carrels, lounge seating, and rooms for group work, Zoom meetings, or phone calls. On top of that, and in part due to the ongoing focus on user needs at the undergraduate level, there has been a shift in focus from socially activated spaces that accommodate collaboration towards spaces that enhance deep, sustained, immersion in research.

By providing resources, expertise, technology, and spaces dedicated to research activities, libraries are demonstrating a deep commitment to research, contributing to the institution's research enterprise, and reclaiming themselves as the sanctuary on campus and the preferred place for engaging earnestly in serious academic work. This approach is less about looking backwards in terms of re-aligning with its traditional “brand” (print materials) and more future-looking, as a place that networks researchers together and positions the library as a place that is ready for the future.

### Maximizing Partnerships

Libraries are motivated to seek partnerships with other members of their institutions, both internally and externally, in order to foster connections and advance student success, democratize technology, increase access, support emerging pedagogies and innovation in instruction. These internal campus partnerships can help to break down silos and promote interdisciplinary collaboration. External partnerships with industry, community, and other institutions can also provide opportunities for the library to act as an incubator and catalyst for these collaborations to grow, while remaining a partner for continued evolution. One way that libraries can support these partnerships is by creating dedicated centers or workshop-type spaces that enable interdisciplinary teams to work with multiple formats simultaneously, blending primary resources with technology-mediated visualization. These innovation spaces, which are free from departmental affiliation, make them more accessible to the entire campus community and provide an antidote to academic silos. Examples of these types of spaces include STEAM, arts, and business innovation centers, and they can be tailored to the specific strengths of the institution. By planning for these types of spaces, libraries can contribute to the advancement of innovation, and have a greater positive impact on the community.

## Adopting a New Role (for Media Collections) in Student Success and Workforce Readiness

Now as gaming has evolved from being seen as just a leisure activity to being recognized as an important social learning activity that fosters cooperation, improves cognition, and de-stresses, libraries can provide dedicated space for gaming activities and study. Gaming has also gained academic status with curricula being developed that include gaming as a significant component in preparing students for potential careers in media, graphics, and design. Gaming is already widely used in primary education, with some schools, such as those in California's Santa Ana school district, having advanced gaming suites.

By providing dedicated gaming space, the library can create the opportunity to foster cross-disciplinary partnerships among academics, athletics (for e-sport practice in the library's gaming space), and student life. This can also be a way for the library to proactively contribute to the institution's priorities. The willingness to rethink antiquated formats and embrace changes that contribute to the academic mission, demonstrates to university leadership that the library is prepared to evolve. The priority has shifted from being collection-centric to being student-centric, with the focus on building the skills employers will be looking for and increasing students' workforce readiness. The role of the library in the academic community has dramatically evolved in recent years and will continue to do so, and spatial design and leadership will play a crucial role in guiding this evolution towards creative solutions for the library staff, users, and the institution.

## Conclusion

The academic library has undergone major shifts in the last couple of decades, heavily impacted by the advent of digital technology, then the onslaught of the COVID pandemic and the surge of awareness of the necessity to fully engage with issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. These changes have led to shifts in the way that libraries operate and the services they provide. Amidst the considerable attention given to students, it is crucial to recognize the ongoing importance of providing librarians and library staff with quality space. The pandemic accelerated this process, demanding a reevaluation of the value and function of the library. Libraries are now focused on meeting the needs of students and faculty while creating a positive, equitable learning experience, which is a particular challenge given today's prevalent technology-mediated teaching and learning activities. Library leaders must consider space as a resource and leverage it to create opportunities for their libraries.



**Gili Meerovitch** ([gmeerovitch@pfeifferpartners.com](mailto:gmeerovitch@pfeifferpartners.com)) is Principal at Pfeiffer, a Perkins Eastman Studio, and leader of the firm's Library practice area

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