Library as Place

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In October 2021, about a year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic, which, among other things, altered the way we interact in and with public and communal spaces, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) held its annual meeting called "The Big Pivot Continues." Virtually, for the second year in a row. It doesn't take too much imagination to deduce that the pandemic and its consequences loomed large in all of the programming and the conversations among research library deans and directors.

One of the overarching themes in the program was that of "Library as Place," highlighted in the October 6 panel, moderated by Joan Lippincott, the associate executive director emerita of the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI). The panel featured Justin Garrett Moore, the inaugural program officer for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Humanities in Place initiative; Shrey Majmudar, chief of staff and former VP of Academic Affairs, Duke Student Government, and a past member of the Duke Library Council; and myself, representing the perspective of an ARL university librarian whose institution is in the midst of a multiyear, multimillion-dollar complete renovation of the central library on the Pittsburgh campus, Hillman Library.

In what follows, I will summarize the points each of the speakers made (with apologies to my fellow panelists in case I am misinterpreting some of their points) and offer some additional thoughts about the future of the library as place.

Prior to assuming his current position, Justin Garrett Moore, whose background is in urban design and architecture, had been the Executive Director of the City of New York Public Design Commission, and as such, he focused on the ways public library spaces allow us to experience the connections between learning, understanding, and civic

life. Through the examples of new or renovated public library spaces (the NYPL, the Brownsville Public Library in Brooklyn, the Elmhurst Library in Queens, the Hunter's Point Library, the Greenpoint Library in Brooklyn, and a quick detour to the Tenerife Library on the Canary Islands), he discussed the importance of the community context in which a library is situated, the need for accessibility and inclusiveness, and the role libraries can and should play in bridging the gap between the natural world and the built environment. Through the examples he gave, Moore positioned library spaces as part of the social infrastructure, and advocated for spaces that encourage diverse types of interactions and mindful reflection, cultivate knowledge and respect for the environment, and mix programs and people through meaningful partnerships, e.g. with an environmental education center (Greenpoint) or an arts and culture center (Tenerife). In response to a question from the audience, he also cautioned against the "paradigm shift narrative" of completely remote work environments, which is rife with issues of equity and access and concluded that the pandemic has shown that public infrastructure, i.e. shared common physical spaces, need investment, care, and innovation, as much as the virtual world does.

Shrey Majmudar opened with some student trends—current college students are more diverse and nontraditional in every respect, including having a variety of academic and learning needs; they expect a greater emphasis on mental health and well-being; they are accustomed to hybrid and online learning; and they expect and are interested in new technologies. Prior to the pandemic, the traditional and unique uses of academic libraries by students included individual study, non-academic-setting learning, collaborative work, conversations with fellow students and faculty, organized gatherings with faculty; larger program gatherings, such as academic presentations; use of archival resources; and interactions with library staff. The pandemic shattered many of these uses and affected, in particular, the communal aspect of library use. Students, Majmudar emphasized, miss gathering in places, academic talks, lectures, and events in the library. Moving on to the future of academic libraries

in a post-pandemic world, he focused on the need for meaningful partnerships, that stems, among other things, from the need for accessibility, and saw the library as the quintessential one-stop destination where students are able to locate not just the traditional library resources or IT help, but also, for instance, multicultural offerings, which, in turn, make library spaces safer, more welcoming, and more accessible. In a response in the follow-up Q&A session, he stressed the importance of working with student library-advisory groups to understand what the most desired partnerships on each campus might be. The other trends in the future of library spaces post-pandemic that he focused on included the need for wellness/meditation spaces; private spaces (conference spots); and technologically enhanced spaces where students experience and learn about emerging technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality.

The points that I tried to get across were organized around the redesign of Hillman Library and the question of whether it is worth it for a university to invest in physical library spaces in a post-pandemic world. The principles that underlie our redesign are: the library is not a mere facility, it is a place for people who are engaged in the active creation of new knowledge, not in a passive consumption of information; the library is a place where ideas are exchanged and debated; and the library is a place where emerging technologies are deployed to support both the curricular and the extracurricular engagement of our communities. It is also a place that emphasizes the unique—unique collections, unique services and expertise, unique programming, unique partnerships. The examples I used included the creation of spaces such as our book lab, called Text & conText, a partnership with Pitt's Center for Creativity, where classes and individual students come to learn how to make paper, print books, bind them, digitize them, and examine the tensions between the analog and the digital world; our Open Lab, a partnership with the Center for Teaching and Learning, which deploys innovative teaching technologies, such as VR; and our digital interactive wall for Archives

& Special Collections, which has already allowed classes to create their own special collections digital exhibits. Looking at the visitor numbers for the fall 2021 semester, and specifically at the use of these new spaces that allow for active interactions and creation, underpinned by new technologies, I concluded that library space that affords active engagement and is based on user needs and behaviors, as well as on institutional priorities (or "institutional desires," as Shrey called them), will endure post-pandemic. To counteract this point, however, I cautioned that not all library spaces are the same, in other words, not all will endure and one-size solutions do not fit all contexts.

Barely a month and a half has passed since the panel as I write this, and the news is full of pieces on a new COVID "variant of concern" and countries are beginning to close borders again. The idea of a post-pandemic world seems ever more elusive. Even if there is a post-pandemic future for libraries, I can't help but be reminded of a recent piece in *Inside Higher Education* by my colleague David Banush, the dean of libraries and academic information resources at Tulane University, in which he discussed what climate change and natural disasters mean for libraries in affected areas, and posited that libraries need to focus on collective services, rather than just on collective collections.[1]

The common theme that emerges for me from the panel, and as I try to think about the future of the library as place, whether in a post-pandemic or a permanent-pandemic world, is that of partnerships. Partnerships between libraries (to offer collective services); partnerships with instructional and research faculty around the creation of new knowledge; partnerships with the community (to provide equitable access, to address the issues of concern to the community, such as environmental degradation); partnerships with student and other campus organizations (to enhance accessibility, meet students' current and anticipated needs, and support institutional strategies); and ultimately a partnership with the (natural, built, or human) context of the library.

It seems to me that in building those partnerships, adapting them, and evolving them, the library as place will endure.

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Endnotes

1   David Banush, "When Will the Library Be Open?," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 15, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/11/15/climate-change-operational-disruptions-and-research-library-opinion.