

Evolving Identities: An Overdue Discussion of Academic Libraries and Experiential Studio Pedagogy

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This proceeding discusses the application of an experiential learning studio pedagogy to the problem of academic library space design. Through this studio course, Masters of Architecture students both proposed innovative designs for academic libraries, and were given ownership of their designs through a co-creative model which evolved through the studio. Experiential learning opens new doors in architectural education, and this case study illustrates how, through thoughtful and flexible programming, educators can achieve successful co-creative partnerships that tackle real-world design challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The late Bill Ptacek (Calgary Public Library CEO from 2014 – 2019) claimed that “the library is a concept and not a place.”¹ This proceeding is the result of a co-creative experiential learning (or “work-integrated learning”) studio which engaged the concept library, specifically the academic library, as the subject of investigation. A partnership between University of Calgary’s architecture librarian and an architectural educator, the studio engaged with Ptacek’s conceptualization of libraries less attached to place. While growing digital library services are necessary, this conceptualization marginalizes the physical interactions in the production and sharing of information which libraries facilitate. The claim also minimizes the agency of architecture with respect to knowledge production and is somewhat at odds with the vision and efforts of the same man behind Calgary’s world-renowned Central Library.

Innovative studio pedagogy also emerged in this exploration of the future of academic libraries, undertaken in the second year of the University of Calgary’s School of Architecture Landscape and Planning (SAPL) Master of Architecture program. In the process we explored the use of co-creative pedagogic models with an emphasis on student-led deliverables to increase student agency and ownership within the design process, producing new models of student engagement and flattening traditional hierarchies prevalent in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

ACADEMIC LIBRARY DESIGN

The library of only a few decades ago held an essential association with its physical spaces. Present libraries have expanded beyond their spaces, primarily due to digital resources and access regardless of location. In 1975, one ‘went to the library’ – which of course is still possible today – however now we can also get that article or e-book, comfortably from home, or across campus, or at the airport, ‘through the library’.

This has put academic libraries, in the physical sense, at a crossroads. Investments and costs associated with increased digital access and electronic resources has, at many universities, come with neglect to library spaces. Public libraries have generally adapted well to these changes.² Space redesigns, renovations, and innovative new locations happen regularly in public library systems. In these modern spaces physical books still have a presence but are more so curated and highlighted in various ways, freeing up space for technology and new services like maker-spaces, media production, and even cooking classes.³

There remains a tension between removing print collections for new technology and collaboration spaces. A PEW Research study found 20% of survey participants agreed this should ‘definitely’ happen, 39% responded ‘maybe, and 36% felt this should ‘definitely not’ occur.⁴ And while new technology and space innovations have occurred at university libraries, around the world dusty, dark, collections-heavy, and outdated spaces continue to exist, designed for a different era when amassing print collections and storage was priority number one.

A particular type of academic library most in need of architectural innovation is the branch library. Built predominately in the 1970’s and 80’s, these were placed near specific faculties to house relevant physical collections, staff, and services. With the advent of digital readings and services, branch libraries now often serve as student study space – a 1970’s and 80’s design afterthought, if there was spare room after storing all the books. Many universities now also rely on off-site storage facilities, meaning shelving can be removed for the default of replacing with more study space.

This architecture studio explored the following academic library questions. What is the future of academic branch library spaces? How can architecture and design intervene in this uncertain trajectory? How can academic library spaces be reimagined, to shed their past lives both as collections storage and mis-designed study space? How can future spaces be designed to bring users, collections (physical and digital), and staff together, resulting in inspiration and new knowledge? Is the presence of the physical book integral to the essence of a library? And how can architecture students apply their emerging skillset to engage in these challenges?

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning provides students a platform to learn through real-world experiences, a pedagogic model that is increasingly in demand both by students and funding bodies in post-secondary education. The increase in popularity and implementation of experiential learning is a result of its documented benefits, ranging from its complementary, integrative, reciprocal, and recursive modes of learning, through to its focus on interdisciplinary integration that foregrounds multiplicity and diversity in the critical thinking process, and enabling students to bridge the gap between theory and practice while developing new ways to cultivate knowledge.⁵

We sought to further explore these benefits through the adoption of a co-creative partnership between university librarians, architectural educators, and students. Co-creative experiential learning focuses on the mutual and creative aspects of the learning process, by emphasizing the active participation of knowledge and experiences by multiple collaborators: students, educators, industry professionals, and more. Co-creation encourages all participants to contribute their ideas, insights, and skills to collectively shape learning. Within the structures of a co-creative experiential learning environment, learners are actively involved in generating ideas, problem-solving, and designing -- not only the outcomes of the studio, but the methodologies, schedules, and deliverables. Collaboration between educators and other participants builds off a multiplicity of experiences to develop innovative solutions that embrace and integrate varying perspectives towards an enhanced learning process.

Through an emphasis on collaboration and creative involvement by multiple parties, it is our contention that a co-creative pedagogy enables the formation of a collective unification around a common problem. This framing acknowledges the value of individual biases, understandings, and perspectives while preserving autonomy. Coalesced around a singular project, participants are encouraged to lean into their strengths and interests to encourage unique contributions and aggregate thinking. Multiplicity and diversity are favored over singularity and homogeneity. Ultimately this framing aims to flatten the hierarchical division between “teacher” and “student” towards a process of active, and iterative learning by all.

The expansive implementation of co-creation, between all participants, was not planned from the outset. Originally structured in a more traditional manner with the act of co-creation limited to the teaching team, the technique gained wider influence folding in the students later in the semester in response to the work they produced, and the resulting questions stemming from investigations in the early phases of the studio.

COURSE IMPLEMENTATION

Experiential learning studios typically begin in SAPL with collaboration between faculty members and external partners. External partners provide the design brief, and these are sculpted into an upper-year Architecture studio course. In this case, the Architecture faculty worked with an academic librarian (also the Architecture Librarian) in the months leading up to the course to begin designing course outcomes, timelines, and assessments. The studio was organized into three phases, which included a series of scaffolded steps towards final designs. Each phase was intended to set the stage for a series of interventions, operating at a scale where said interventions could be understood as real proposals and thus increase the likelihood of uptake and implementation.

Phase 1, *Search Term*, introduced the existential crises facing academic branch libraries and their relationship to dematerializing collections. It involved exploring research and literature, context and precedent analysis, guest lectures from librarians and architects, and tours of local public and academic libraries. The first assignment was a written piece asking students to determine what priorities had served libraries well over the centuries, that may inform their future design needs. This was achieved by selecting a historical or contemporary library precedent and creating 2D and 3D diagrams that documented architecture’s historic relationship to libraries, as well as speculative images suggesting alternative possibilities for the chosen precedent.

Phase 2, *Only Our Shelves to Blame*, engaged directly with two case study branch libraries (Business and Sciences), where students were tasked with documenting the spaces through a series of as-built drawings and digital models. These documents produced the basis for a series of programmatic diagrams, and planimetric investigations that asked students to identify limitations in the current programming, as well as suggesting new alternatives to address the evolving landscape of libraries and user needs.

Phase 3, *Libraries Make Shhhh Happen*, asked students to select their interventions of choice, incorporating earlier studio work, and refining their designs. Final deliverables included a short presentation, summary board, short monograph, all necessary drawings and diagrams, renders and models, with all final deliverables presented to an audience of librarians, administration, and architects.

STUDENT DESIGN INTERVENTIONS

From the workshop over a dozen design possibilities were proposed and discussed by all studio members. Over the course of a few hours of discussion, students selected their design interventions of choice, either individually or in groups of two. What follows is three themes and a selection of related design interventions in their final form.

DISCOVERY, SERENDIPITY AND NEW LEARNING

Libraries are in the business of connecting users with information, typically in the form of collections (e.g. books, articles, data, etc.). In an academic library, the primary goal of these interactions is new learning, knowledge, or research. A larger proportion of these collections each year are digital. Online catalogues on library websites provide access, however a key theme of the studio was to design new ways users could easily and interactively engage with and discover new items in collections.

The first design proposal addressing this is a software interface combined with either a kiosk or large screen. The “Digital Stack” (see Figure 1) aims to simplify collections discovery and return an element of serendipity often missing in a digital library experience.

Students and faculty can use the simple and engaging software interface to explore new literature, browse a digital shelf, interact with items, and explore both similar (i.e. “More like this..”) and dissimilar (i.e. “More not like this..”) collections. With print collections less present in academic libraries, these digital interfaces aim to encourage discovery and create a richer library experience.

A second student design proposal embraced augmented reality (AR) to achieve similar goals. AR is used both in a standalone kiosk and in a mobile device app. AR allows the exploring of collections to be more dynamic, interactive, and personalized. Instead of a two-dimensional online library catalogue, AR can provide richer levels of data, allowing users to pursue connecting themes of interest. Personalization enabled by an app could allow users to engage and more easily connect with collections most relevant to their areas of study, enabling efficiencies and new learning.

Another proposal drew on gallery and museum programming to add a “storefronting” element to academic libraries, to bring student work to the forefront of library spaces. This supports three goals: drawing students into library spaces, fostering dialogue among students discussing their work or the work of others, and encouraging interdisciplinary learning and collaboration.

Figure 2 indicates how this could be achieved in an academic library space. Exhibits could be curated to reflect disciplines and activities relevant to the location on campus, whether that is art, architecture, business, sciences, engineering, or other areas.

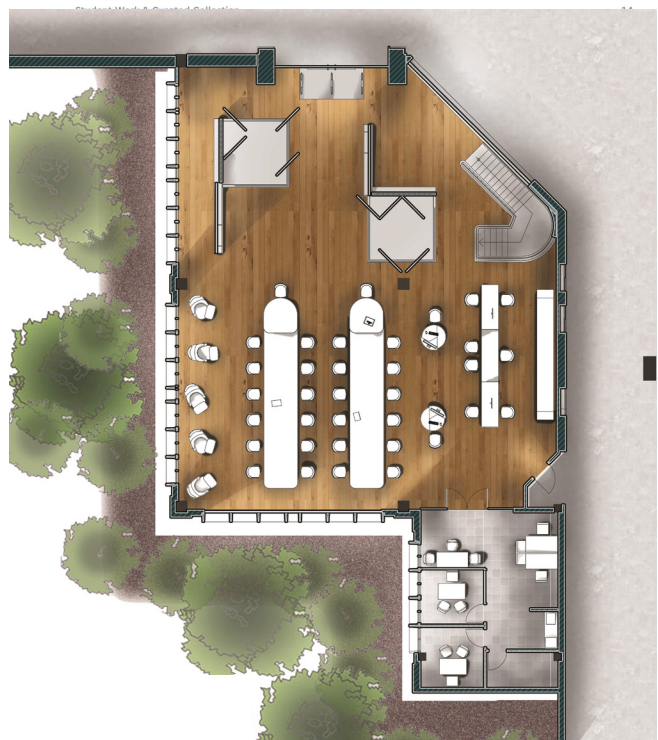


Figure 2. El Aboudi, I. (2022). Student Work and Curated Collections (Assignment 3, ARCH 700) [unpublished paper]. School of Architecture Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary

RE-IMAGINING LIBRARY FURNITURE

The bulk of library furniture in public spaces has three programming goals: storing collections, user interaction with collections, and user interaction with staff. These goals are achieved by shelving (i.e. stacks), and a variety of desks, tables, and chairs. Students in the studio brought forward proposals for how library furniture: could be more adaptable to future evolutions of library programming, could expand beyond traditional use cases, and could provide more user customization and ownership.

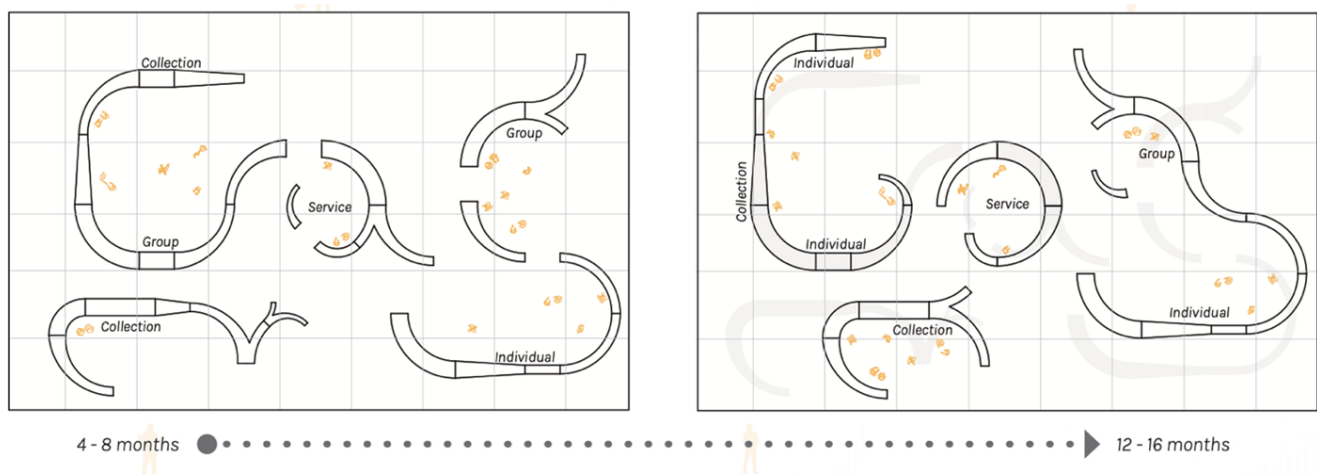


Figure 3. Lehodey, M. & Wilson, S. (2022). Library Interventions (Assignment 3, ARCH 700) [unpublished paper]. School of Architecture Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary.

New types of technology and services have forced libraries to undergo expensive renovations and furniture updates. The first student design proposal in this theme argued these costs could be mitigated if furniture was modular and adaptable by design. Figure 3 shows how modular furniture could be deployed for different programming, and then changed as demands and user preferences evolve.

Shelving, or stacks, are a quintessential feature of any library. Through the onset of digital collections, public libraries have retained their stacks but they have evolved in many cases to be more curated and bookstore-style, instead of purely storage. Academic libraries often utilize off-site, high-density storage facilities for older, less-used, or rare items. This decreased storage

dependence on campus shelving allows stacks to be removed – which is typically done to increase study space – but as another design proposal suggests, could the uses of shelving be reimagined entirely? Stacks provide structure and sound buffering to library spaces, therefore removing them entirely may come with its own negative consequences.

Figure 4 shows examples of possible new use cases for library shelving, such as workstations, study spaces, technology displays, printing and more. Retaining shelves for their space partitioning in many cases may be beneficial, however giving them new life brings innovative possibilities to the humble library shelf.

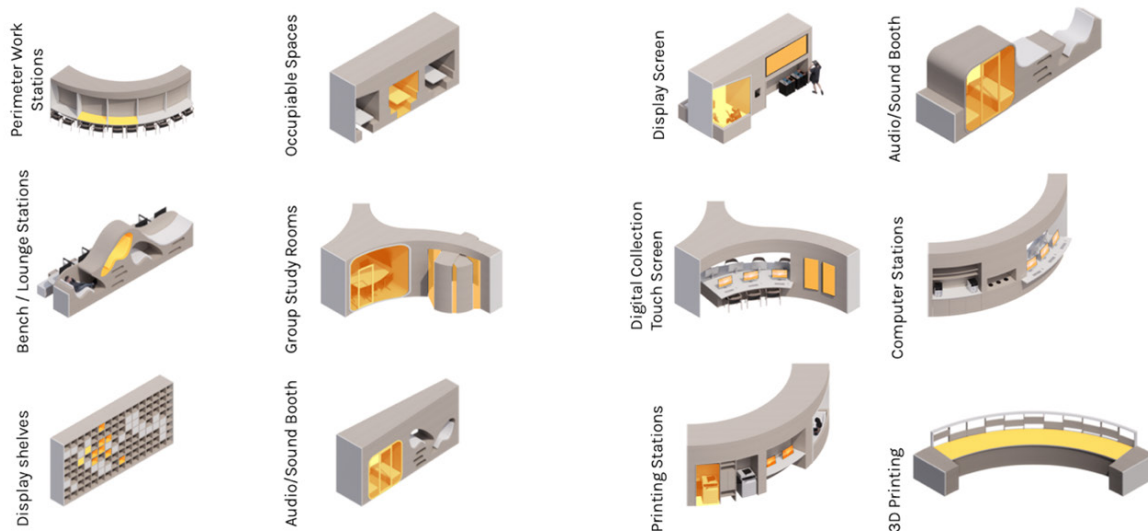


Figure 4. Lehodey, M. & Wilson, S. (2022). Library Interventions (Assignment 3, ARCH 700) [unpublished paper]. School of Architecture Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary.

A final student design proposal in this theme empowers students with adaptability and control of furniture. A primary use case of an academic library is for students to study and collaborate, therefore their comfort and agency should be paramount. Library furniture does not often allow for autonomy and customization, and this proposal suggests it should.

The furniture proposed includes pieces that can be connected and stacked, angles conducive to leaning, sitting, or standing, and individual or group options. Materials used are comfortable, durable, and easy to clean. A catalogue of pieces was developed that could be deployed in small or large-scale applications, and customized to individual library needs.

DISRUPTING POWER SYSTEMS AND NEW DIALOGUES

The final theme of student design proposals for academic library spaces aimed to examine and disrupt power hierarchies present in libraries. As academic libraries are parts of colonial educational institutions in North America and other parts of the world, the first proposal aimed to challenge this power system through a purposeful alteration of the grid layout. The grid system, as expressed by the student, is a means to “discipline and monitor individuals’ behaviours, thoughts and movements”, akin to the grid being used in colonial practices to “subdivide, domesticate, and acquire ownership of the land.”⁶

Figure 5 illustrates grid layouts often found in academic libraries, and how an off-axis platform exposes the grid and disrupts the status quo within space. The intent was to encourage users to

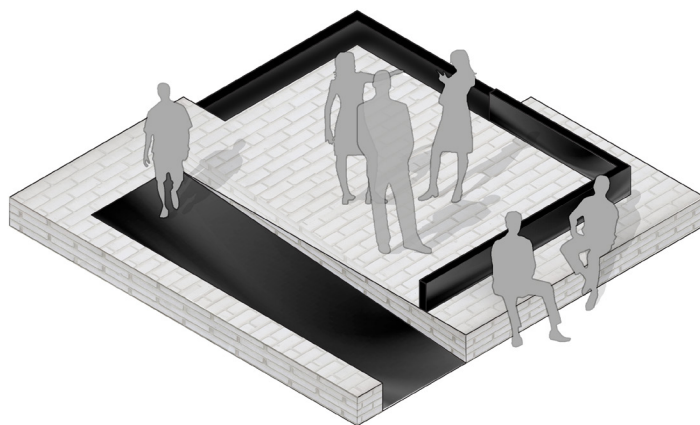
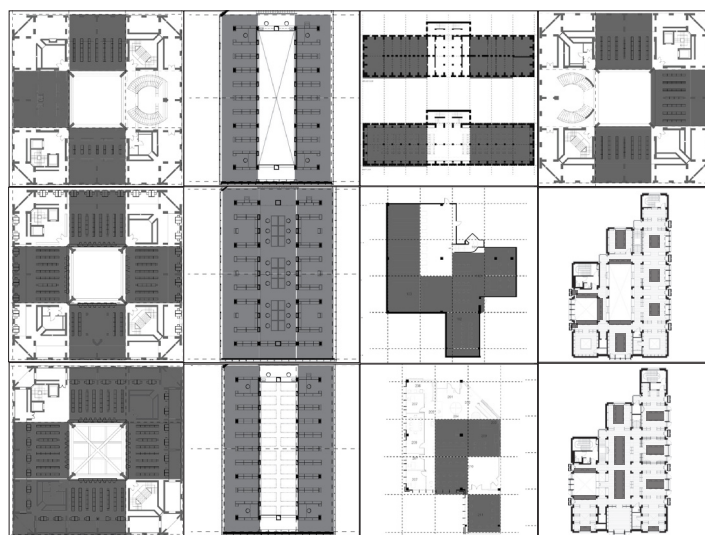
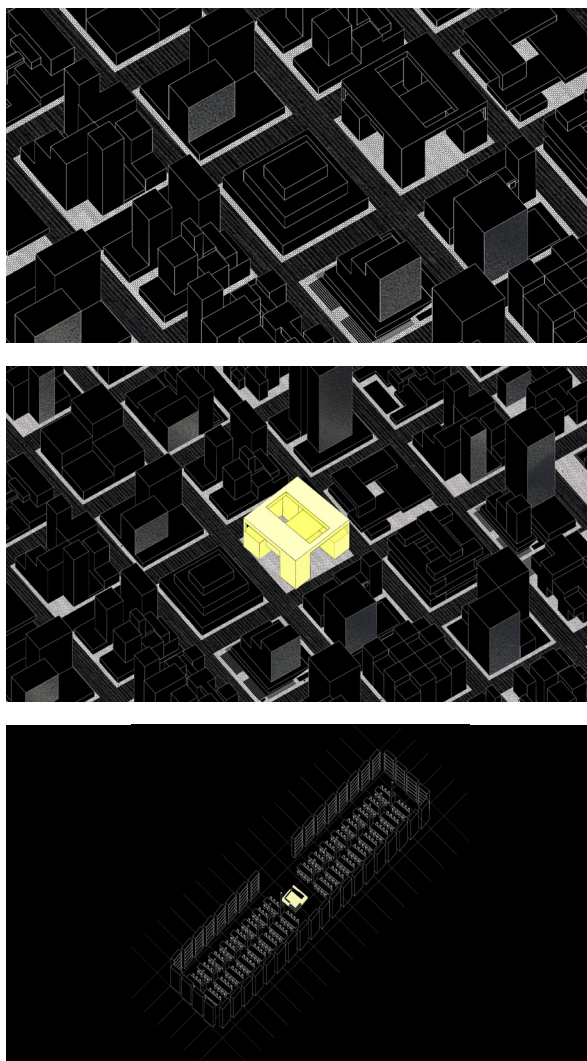


Figure 5. Divanei, A. (2022). Blind Spot (Assignment 3, ARCH 700) [unpublished paper]. School of Architecture Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary.

consider and explore alternative modes of education such as storytelling or experiential learning.

By making visible the organizational and spatial relationships that encompass libraries' physical collections, this project draws attention to the asymmetric power structures that govern knowledge production and dissemination within post-secondary institutions. Instead of conforming to organizational spatial relationships built on prevailing systems of authorial recognition, this project seeks to produce a deregulated space for open and inclusive dialogues, aimed at the production and transmission of knowledge that embraces flattened hierarchies between students and knowledge professionals, and a multiplicity of voices and lived experiences. Through this lens, the project suggests co-authorship as a technique to destabilize the privileging of singular creative genius, and individual recognition – the very characteristics that (re)produce and maintain existing power dynamics within the academy and its pedagogy.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Not only were students able to apply their emerging architectural skillsets to the problem of academic library design, they also were part of the primary user group of the spaces. This added connection brought forward memories of their own experiences, recent or distant, being in and using academic library spaces. Their notions of what academic libraries did or were for were challenged and expanded, through regular conversations and crits with academic librarians during the studio.

Ultimately the students rose to the challenges presented, and by the third phase of the studio were able to pursue specific architectural interventions they felt most connected to. Not all questions were answered (e.g. is the presence of the physical book essential to a library?) but many innovative design ideas were generated for academic library spaces. The campus libraries proved to be a beneficial partner and 'living lab' for architectural investigations in the studio. Both the larger-scale goals of an academic library (e.g. information access and knowledge creation) and the smaller details (e.g. light, noise, programming) proved to be rich grounds for discussion. Students gained practical skills and transferable knowledge regarding architecture and design for GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) institutions. The locations on campus aided in tours and subsequent student visits.

To revisit Bill Ptacek's conceptualization of the library being a concept and not a place, a key premise of this studio has been that a library can and should be both. As Ptacek explains, the vision of libraries is that "free and open access to ideas and information transforms lives and builds community."⁷ Through an experiential learning model, students in this studio have shown that architecture can make a difference in the future trajectories of academic library spaces. To truly transform lives and build community, place is as important as ever.

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ENDNOTES

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