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Guest editorial

Places and spaces: mapping the library of tomorrow

Have you returned after 20 years to a place you once knew well? The mental map does not match the physical reality. Some features are the same. Others are different. After a day or two, the edges of the unfamiliar wear away, and the mental map is without conscious effort, aligned with what is in front of us. Updating or making new maps is difficult but necessary work.

Visit a library on a college campus. For those who have not been in a major university's undergraduate library since graduation, mental maps of the library need freshening. Many familiar landmarks remain – shelves with bound volumes, a reference desk, and ranks of keyboards and video display monitors.

The students' clothing styles are often more eclectic than my 1960s tan pants and white shirt. The mobile phone is now ubiquitous in many universities, even in schools for 10-13-year-olds. Electronic devices are plentiful. Handheld computers, laptops, and other miniature blocks of plastic and aluminum are in hand or resting on a table near tomorrow's linguist or electrical engineer. Most work quietly, furiously entering data or peering intently at reference materials, or the tiny screening of a buzzing electronic device. Other students work in groups, discussing quietly among themselves an important issue, mimicking the behavior of

20-somethings in their first jobs. Some were walking around with their notebooks, glancing at the screen every few moments, engaged in thinking and computing simultaneously, and it is real time to them, unreal time to me.

What was different from what was on my mental map was how few students were in the library when I visited. Perhaps it was an anomaly. Perhaps it was a sketch of the future, idealized like the drawings of estate developments under construction.

When I visited, the new semester had begun. I looked at my mental map of the library and saw a more noisy, more crowded space. The reference desk sported a permanent queue of impatient students seeking guidance. The creak of reshelving carts was the leitmotif for the hum of conversations. Although not empty, this library – possibly an anomaly – had room for more students and faculty. There was space for more shelves, more of the physical stuff that makes a library a library.

Some idle wandering and casual conversation helped me to update my map.

First, the library had made certain reference material available via the campus network, "fiber to the facilities" was the phrase I recall hearing. Each residence hall room and classroom included Ethernet ports. Students could connect, log on, search bibliographic materials or the "card catalog", and access full-text documents from the library's server from almost any place on campus. Internet access was a mouse click away. Use of digital information was universal among students and faculty. The university's information technology group had installed 802.11b wireless technology and was adding the faster 802.11a as budget permitted. The core of the campus, including the student center and a handful of near-campus watering holes, fell under the umbra of the wireless transmitters. Students with a wireless device and a password could log on to the network from the local pizza joint and the mandatory dark, smoky pub.

The library was a place, just as I recalled from my university days. But the space the library occupied was far greater, orders of magnitude larger, if such an adjective makes sense to the unplugged. This part of the university library was not empty. It was a busy, bustling place.

With my mental map freshly updated, my focus sharpened. My place-space insight made me realize that more changes are coming with what I call "hyper-electronification." Just as the video recorder allows time shifting of programs for television viewers, the digital university is likely to undergo a transformation of the rigid scheduling of classes. The combination of wireless access and digital information seems likely to melt the rigid grids of 9 a.m. classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday with a study group at 2 p.m. on Thursdays. Time is melting, softening, and ultimately transforming the learning experience. With changes in time will come changes in learning style.

Next, I realized that libraries perform a more important mental function than providing a warehouse for books. The physical library's documentalists, books, magazines, printers, and filing system is a magnetic pole. Once one is in its field, the physical library provides an important metaphor for learning itself. The shelves and their logical schema are potent instructional models. The physicalness of the library puts facts, thought, and discourse in an environment of value. The library's physical presence is the polar opposite of the free-wheeling approach to information that I envision at such intellectually and morally corrupt institutions as Adelphia, Enron, Arthur Andersen, Tyco, *et al.* The library embodies verification and mental deliberation in the information environment.

Finally, I recalled the sight of young girls in Bergen, Norway. Five or six were leaving school to meet friends at a small shopping area near the old fishing dock. Despite the rain, one teen was talking loudly on her mobile phone. Two others were furiously thumb typing on their mobile devices. The others were chattering and trying to catch a glimpse of the SMS messages and listening to their companion's telephone conversation with appropriate squeals and side comments. These young people will carry this multimodal, mobile, free-flowing communications style into their academic and professional lives.

Now at age 60, I have difficulty typing on a laptop keyboard without hitting the touchpad and inserting a string of characters where they do not belong. Such a concern troubles not the young people, who are happy with always-on, persistent connectivity.

The physical library wherever it is located has to embrace what I call ambient computing, a somewhat euphonious but quite fuzzy buzzword. Nevertheless, a library's map of its duties, responsibilities, and services require updating and soon, certainly before these young girls from Bergen enter their first year. When these young girls go to the university library, their expectations about connectivity, the type of working and communicating styles they favor, and the types of information available to them must fit their mental maps and models.

The libraries – public, medical, special, research, school, and academic – that want to serve students and scholars, patrons and casual visitors, have their cartographic individual tasks before them. Libraries' administrative and technical professionals must pick up their digital quill pen, click in the depth and breadth of online resources, bump up against the boundaries of collaborative communities, and make a map. This map reflects today's information territory. The library's map must have the elasticity we associate with electronic data so that tomorrow's places fit in its spaces.

Stephen E. Arnold

*Postal Box 320, Harrod's Creek, Kentucky
40027, USA*

Voice: 502-228-1966; e-mail:

sa@arnoldit.com

Stephen Arnold is an Independent Consultant working from Harrod's Creek, Kentucky, USA with two boxer dogs and 13 servers. His forthcoming book is Knowledge Management Sense and Non-Sense: How to Make Data Payoff. It will be published in 2003 by Infonortics, Ltd, Tetbury, Glos. Mr Arnold specializes in competitive intelligence and technology analysis for libraries and other organizations. He is a columnist for Information World Review and a member of the editorial board of The Electronic Library.

