

The Concept of Space, with Reference to the Evolution of Library Spaces from Traditional to Digital – A philosophical perspective

C. Hema

Librarian, Harvey Library, The Madura College (Autonomous),
Madurai – 625 011, Tamil Nadu

Abstract: New technologies have created social networks and public spaces which have brought about a sea change in the way education is being imparted and new learning environments have created a need for librarians to explore new vistas in fulfilling their roles as a valid partner in research and learning. This is due to the false perception that libraries are not indispensable because information is available everywhere - not just within the four walls of a space called library. This arises from the traditional view that libraries are huge store houses of information. The fact is that libraries have travelled a long way and currently there is a long list library functions which range from collection management up to delivery of information to the user in the format of his choice, which is ever growing according to needs of the user community. The paper examines the role of libraries as an important agent of change in both coping up the rapid changes in technology and preserving its identity in bringing about the change, in the field of knowledge with special reference to space and the concept of space in a philosophical perspective.

Keywords: Library Space, Digital space, Change management, Library services, Knowledge Management.

1. Introduction:

The earlier part of 18th century was filled with conflicting theories of space both in the scientific and philosophical realms. But what we are concerned here is not the metaphysical idea of space but the space as we have understood as librarians in the context of managing information and information services; the space referred here is two-fold- namely physical and virtual. With rapid changes in the field of technology, librarian have been quick to adopt new technologies to the advantage of their work; in spite of this, there seems to be some imbalance in the demands of the user on one hand and the information environment on the other which is flooded with information with a plethora of organizing systems, service models and interlinked digital content. Yet the libraries have been coping up with the situation by adopting new technology and constantly redefining and reshaping themselves to remain relevant to their times. New technologies have created social networks and public spaces which have brought about a sea change in the way education is being imparted and new learning environments have created a need for librarians to explore new vistas in fulfilling their roles as a valid partner in research and learning. This is due to the false perception that libraries are not indispensable because information is available everywhere - not just within the four walls of a space called library. This arises from the traditional view that libraries are huge store houses of information. The fact is

that libraries have travelled a long way and currently there is a long list library functions which range from collection management up to delivery of information to the user in the format of his choice, which is ever growing according to needs of the user community.

2. Libraries in India- a brief history:

India is one of the three countries which could boast of a very ancient culture and civilization apart from Greek and Chinese civilizations. Libraries reflect the cultural and intellectual wealth of a nation during the different periods of time. Knowledge and information is archived in different forms for posterity. Sadly, there hasn't been much effort to record the history of libraries in India¹. Historical studies of libraries have been a much neglected area even within library and information science studies². The earliest accounts of libraries in India is that of Nalanda university library which flourished in 12th century AD which had a rich collection of thousands of volumes relating to texts, Vedanta, and the Samkhya philosophy, grammar, logic, literature, the Vedas, the Dharmasastras, the Puranas, Astronomy, Astrology and Medicine. The library flourished till the beginning of 13th century AD when it was burnt down during a muslim invasion by bhakthiyar Khilji. The other famous universities like Kanchi, Vikramasila and vallabhi which flourished in other parts of the country had rich libraries (*Pustaka Bhandaras*). The seeds of modern library development could be seen in the first half of 19th century, where the first public libraries were set by the Europeans at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The development of libraries was also due to the establishment of colleges as a result of the Charter Act of 1813. The direct consequence of this act was the establishment of some colleges at Kottayam (CMS College), Calcutta (The Hindu Presidency College), Cuttack (Raven Shaw College), Which had libraries of their own right from the time of their establishment.

2.1.Modern Libraries:

The first and oldest modern library in India was first established in Calcutta University, when there were recommendations from the senate and the sub-committees for the provision of a separate building for library with suitable dimensions in 1872. This was later on followed by establishment of libraries in Bombay University (1880) and Madras university (1907).

3. Concept of Library as a physical location:

Traditional libraries were those places with huge collections of books and other materials of information and knowledge arranged in a particular order to facilitate easy retrieval of any book or material the reader calls for. The various schemes and classification systems that were created were built on the primary goal that any book or reading material could be retrieved only when

¹ Bhatt R.K. , "Status of Academic Libraries", ICAL vision and roles of the future academic libraries 2009, http://crl.du.ac.in/ical09/papers/index_files/ical-10_180_494_2_RV.pdf (12 August 2014)

² Donald G. Davis, Jr. and Mohamed Taher, "Library History in India: Historiographical Assessment and Current Trends", World Libraries Vol. 3, No.2, Spring 1993, http://www.worlib.org/vol03no2/davis_v03n2.shtml (12 August 2014).

they are properly arranged according to a particular schema. The books need to have unique numbers to serve this purpose and the watch words were simplicity and brevity of the book number.

While at a macro level, library space was a physical location where print materials and manuscripts were arranged and the access to the books required the physical presence of the reader, at a micro level, information was available in the books which were arranged in a particular scheme or order which means that the reader was completely dependent on the librarian for his information needs till such time he was familiar with the physical location and the arrangement of the books. Thus library was once a place of solitude where books were arranged in a particular order. In the traditional sense, libraries were the “Heart” of any institution both by their physical location and their role in the academic pursuit of the institution as the “temple of learning”.

4. Traditional library spaces:

Traditional libraries have always been designed primarily to collect, access and preserve print materials. In spite of their stately exteriors, the interiors generally were dim and difficult to navigate for an ordinary person and all the specialized collections and services were available only to serious scholars. Libraries were highly revered places as centres of knowledge, but as centres of learning they were static but for the growing collection of library materials. In short the features of a traditional library could be summed up as,

1. Library was a physical place
2. Collections of the library were confined within the physical location
3. The readers had to approach the library or the librarian for their information needs.
4. Access to the materials was through a particular classification system.
5. Libraries were oblivious to those changes in information patterns outside their collection.
6. Libraries were static.

Thus libraries in the traditional sense were storehouses of knowledge in the form of print materials and as the library collections grew in volume occupying much physical space, that posed a real problem in collection management and managing the physical space of the library.

5. Library ‘place vs space’- Technology as an agent of change:

Coravu makes a difference between library space and place³. According to him “Library is both a space and a place. The difference between space and place is the same as in the difference between house and home.” Just as technology has made its impact on education, health, banking,

³ Coravu Robert, “library spaces: new values, new functions”, Biblio 2010, https://www.academia.edu/2522896/Library_Spaces_New_Values_New_Functions, 7th August 2014

telecommunication and other fields, it has made a strong impact on libraries as well, especially in the past three decades characterized by rapid changes in information and communication technology. The proliferation of information in the World Wide Web through the internet, though initially was viewed as a threat to library as an institution whose main component was information, later on libraries turned the situation to their advantage by exploiting the very same technologies to their advantage, in organizing their functions and redefining their services and expanding their collections in a new way thereby carving a niche for themselves in the education and research industry. The changes brought about by technology could be listed as,

1. Library as both a physical cum virtual space.
2. Library collections were beyond the physical space.
3. Libraries reaching towards their clients in serving them through e-mails and social networks.
4. Multiple access to various collections in multiple formats.
5. Libraries as dynamic learning places, with all the latest facilities in their smart technology infrastructure.

The changes in technology and the learning environment have only given the libraries an opportunity to redefine themselves and provide support to the learning community by facilitating self learning through a wide range of services and access to information resources.

6. Copernican revolution:

Copernican revolution denotes the paradigm shift from a heliocentric universe (earth as the static Centre and planets revolving around the earth) to a universe with Sun as its centre and planets including earth revolving around it. The Web 2.0 brought about this kind of a drastic change with its tools in the information and communication field and this had its effect on the services of the library, where the libraries reached out to the users who became the centre of information activities. The user could obtain the information as and when he needed just in time on his desk, in the format in which he wanted and was in a position to articulate the information thus obtained to fulfill his information needs. This user-centric environment has enthused the libraries of the information age to provide many value added services and create strong clients base through social networks and interest groups in promoting their services.

7. Libraries as learning spaces:

While we observe the fact that the electronic media has not completely replaced the print media we should acknowledge the fact that library collections are still a combination of print and electronic media and their services are a mixture of both the traditional and modern methods of information delivery. Libraries have to be approached from this perspective and this leads to the integration of modern methods into the existing system rather than viewing the latest technologies as a threat to the traditional libraries. This is precisely the answer to the question that why there is a need to a separate library building in an institution when information could be

accessed anywhere anytime. “The library is the only centralized location where new and emerging information technologies can be combined with traditional knowledge resources in a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today’s social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research.”⁴

With the new learning environment accelerated by emerging cutting edge technologies, it is time for the libraries to focus on the users and the different learning processes of the users. Library services go beyond just introducing technology enhanced facilities to its clients. It involves creating a rich space where its reading community could gather, interact in pursuing their intellectual needs and goals and in the process be mutually enriched. The functions and the facilities offered by a library as a learning centre would be,

1. Provide global access to a wealth of information in different formats.
2. Provide necessary tools for interactive learning.
3. Design the interiors in such a way that it is flexible, accessible, compact, controlled , secure and comfortable.
4. The furniture and seating arrangements have to be ergonomically created.
5. The acoustics in the building has to be taken care of so that noise is either avoided or maintained at minimum levels.
6. Services and facilities extended have to be inclusive. The library both in terms of physical location and services extended should be planned in such a way that it is disabled – friendly.
7. Making use of natural light to the maximum ensures a comfortable learning atmosphere.

The above points are not exhaustive. However we could say that an ideal library environment should be the best combination of both physical and virtual library spaces. Changing needs of the new educational environment combined with technology calls for a user centred service and programmes and space design.

8. Libraries in transition – A Paradigm shift:

As we saw earlier, the World Wide Web in the early 1990s accelerated the revolution in Information and communication technology which resulted in a less noticed change in the academic culture where academic institutions were considered more as “learning centres” than as traditional “teaching centres”. The shift was from teaching to learning. This resulted in a student centred environment where focus was on how best could learning be imparted to him. Education is not merely a transfer of ideas and concepts any more. Libraries as important part of the whole system have to promote a rich dynamic environment which offers facilities and services that promote collaborative research, community learning and in short a rich educational experience to the reader. The major changes that have been occurring over the past few decades are,

1. Shift from possession to access
2. Increase demand for better and faster access to information.

⁴ Geoffrey T. Freeman, AIA, The Library as Place: Changes in Learning Patterns, Collections, Technology, and Use, Council on Library and Information Resources Washington,2005, <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub129/pub129.pdf>, 14 august 2014.

3. Networking has resulted in collaborative research and exchange has become an important method of collection development.
4. Scope for providing inclusive library services and therefore there is a need to provide resources and facilities in both physical virtual space for the differently abled users.
5. Need for highly skilled and techno savvy library staff is the need of the hour to properly disseminate information and to meet the individual needs of each user.
6. Need to offer value added services due to rich collection of materials and the diverse ways of sharing them.
7. Increased need for maintaining user profiles for data analysis and user studies based on the digital trail of the user and this helps in assessing the information needs of the users.
8. User centred approach towards scholarly communication is another effect of Information and Communication Technology. Feedback from the users regarding their needs and the use of library materials on a one to one basis with the help of e-mails and social networks.
9. Better outreach and liaisoning with publishers and journal editors.
10. Assessment is somewhat easier when the library is already automated and able to generate various types of statistics about its collection.
11. Resource sharing through consortia has led to decreased cost in subscribing online journals and e-books.

9. Library as a meeting point of the past and the future:

Though modern technologies have redefined the functions and services of the libraries, libraries are still considered and looked up as those quiet places where one can have good reading and enjoy peaceful contemplation. Still reading rooms are the best choice for a serious user. The reading racks can never be completely replaced by digital collections. Library is a place where one becomes a part of the larger community. In this way a library is a social organization as told by the father of library science Dr. S.R. Ranganathan. He further says that library is a means of universal, perpetual, self education⁵. Such was the vision of this genius that it remains relevant even today and will remain forever.

10. Library space – Challenges:

While both physical and virtual collections continue to be important in a hybrid library environment the real challenge would be to decide upon the ratio between print and digital resources in terms of budget and user requirements being the main considerations apart from other factors. Planning the space is very vital since digital resources have to be made accessible within the library premises. As more and more materials are provided digitally, the library has to be more explicit and exposing its services in inviting scholars, faculty and students in making use of those materials. It is very obvious that people are drawn to beautiful, functional and

⁵ Sekhon S S, "Dr. Ranganathan's Contribution Towards Social Education", *Development of Libraries in New India*, ed. N B Sen, New Delhi: New Book Society of India, 1965, 128-132.

technological sound physical spaces. Thus the library has to plan well to design its interiors in order to attract users to its collections.

It is very important that the library should reflect the vision and mission of its parent institution. Each library has its own identity which is unique and reflects goals of the parent organization and its user community.

Library will be a place where the user will be able to acquire information in all formats and the real challenge will be to educate the users on different information sources and training and orienting the library staff for the same.

Different learning styles calls for provision of different reader spaces like quiet study rooms and group study places for collaborative research, computer workstations etc.. This requires a careful planning of the building since the noise levels have to be kept at the minimum.

Thus the role of space in planning a library's physical and virtual design is very vital in making its collections and services functional.

11. Conclusion:

The concept of library as a location in a spatio-temporal context has always evoked a feeling of a library being a temple of knowledge and learning. Though, at the periphery, it seems that modern technologies have left the libraries and their functions redundant, they have only enhanced and helped the libraries to examine their roles in the knowledge society and redefine their services, by making use of the very same technology which was viewed as a threat. Thus librarians have been using the various technologies for the advantage of the libraries and have carved a place for them in the information world. They have proved themselves to be valid partners in building knowledge bases. It is very important to remember that, information is available everywhere but knowledge has to be created systematically as it is result of human intellect and research.

Select Bibliography:

1. Sen N B, *Development of Libraries in New India*, New Book Society of India, New Delhi: 1965.
2. Kaula, Prithvi N, *Libray Buildings, Planning and Design*, Vikas Publications, Delhi:1971.
3. Sohair F. Wastawy, libraries: the learning space within, http://www.iatul.org/doclibrary/public/Conf_Proceedings/2006/Wastawypaper.pdf
4. Mavrinc Mary Ann, The evolving Nature of Library as a Place , <http://library2.utm.utoronto.ca/publications/foreword/articles/volume10/issue2/evolving-nature-library-place>
5. *Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space*, Council on Library and Information Resources Washington, D.C:2005