The Value of Architecture and Design Branch Libraries: A Case Study

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The viability of branch libraries has been debated since long before the turn of the twentieth century. Arguments for both sides run rampant in the literature into the 1990s with neither side making a convincing argument in its favor. This study examines a representative sampling of the literature covering branch libraries in general, then focuses on branch libraries at institutions with accredited programs in architecture, and concludes with an examination of the use of the materials in the NA call number range at Iowa State University. As with other professional programs, such as law and medicine, the author recommends branch libraries located in close proximity for architecture programs when possible.

Introduction

I recently attended a new faculty orientation on the Iowa State University campus where an assistant professor was giving a presentation on time management for new, tenure-track faculty. He presented several excellent strategies for utilizing time and resources to maximize productivity. However, one of his strategies struck a discordant note when he suggested that if the choice was between strolling to the library to check out a book from the collection or ordering the volume from Amazon.com, tenure-track faculty should order it online rather than taking the time to go to the library and retrieve the item. The sad part of this story is that his office is a short one- or two-minute walk from the main library’s front door. This comment, along with the possibility of organizational changes that would close the architecture/design branch libraries at Kansas State and Iowa State universities (neither of which has occurred as of this writing), made me consider the importance of branch libraries in design fields, specifically for architecture students.

For the purposes of this study, the definition of branch libraries encompasses all separate facilities with an administrative relationship to the main library on campus whether considered branches, departmental or divisional libraries, reading rooms, etc., by the parent institution. Branches included identifiable discrete collections within main libraries even though many of these share services such as reserves and circulation with the main library. Remote storage facilities were excluded since they lack a specific subject focus. This study examined the literature concerning branch libraries in general as well as architecture branch libraries in particular, the existence of architecture branch libraries at all institutions with accredited architecture programs (both ARL (Association of Research Libraries) member institutions and non-ARL institutions) and, finally, the use of volumes in the NA Library of Congress call number range at Iowa State University. The NA call number range was selected as it is the only range specifically examined in National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) accreditation reports even though many design libraries also incorporate other subject areas such as art, planning, and interior/graphic design.

Branch Libraries in the Literature

The issue of decentralization versus centralization of library services in higher education is not a new one, with proponents for each side fervently arguing since the the early twentieth century. Both Robert Seal and Snunith Shoham provide excellent literature reviews of the centralization/decentralization debate. Seal’s comprehensive overview of the literature on branch libraries focuses primarily on the period from 1945 to the early 1980s but with a glimpse of the literature back to the beginning of that century. Shoham’s thorough but concise review highlights studies in the fifties, sixties, and seventies and ultimately asserts that branch libraries are cost-effective, especially when viewed from the perspective of benefit to the user.

Recent authors not covered by either Seal or Shoham reach the similar conclusion that no one solution will fit all institutions. In examining music branch libraries, Lois Kuyper-Rushing stated, “the departmental library must respond to the needs of the users to be effective.” Leon Shkolnik examines both sides of the debate and asserts, “the new question for librarians is fast becoming not where information is located but how quickly can the patron receive it.” Thomas Watts feels that “to have one central place on campus where all library and information materials are housed is important in terms of convenience, yes. But a central library collection also serves as a symbolic point of unity.” Michael Hibbard counters this assertion by declaring “it is not intuitively obvious why a large centralized collection of several million titles spread over acres of floor space in a multi-story building is more convenient than a series of well thought out topical collections housed in branch libraries.”

ARL SPEC Kits published in 1983 and 1999 investigated branch libraries. Both kits reported results of a survey distributed to ARL libraries seeking information on branch library trends as well as representative policies and procedures from selected institutions. The 1983 study examined just branch libraries while the 1999 study included information about discrete collections within the main library as well. Survey return rates were 90 percent of 104 university libraries in 1983 and 44 percent of 122 ARL member libraries in 1999. Both SPEC Kits cited the influ-
ence of technology as altering the impact of branches on the library budget. The main conclusion reached by both was that there is no single best course of action and that each institution must proceed in a manner that best serves its population.

**Pros of Design Branch Libraries**

Browsing is an important methodology for information discovery in design studies, perhaps more so than in any other field. Proximity of the branch library greatly facilitates spontaneous browsing. Anatole Senkevitch, Jr. contends, “It is scarcely possible to overstate the importance of the opportunity for casual browsing afforded by the location of the architecture branch library in the same building as the design studio and related classes.” Raymond Prytherch defines browsing as “to investigate, without design, the contents of a collection of books or documents” and Stella Keenan and Colin Johnston define it as “to look through a store of documents at random, with no conscious search strategy.” Such non-focused or serendipitous browsing certainly happens in design libraries, but in many cases researchers are engaging in what Boll describes as “purposeful or directed browsing.” Researchers engage in this type of browsing with the focus of finding a single piece of information, making it much different from serendipitous browsing.

Serendipitous browsing for relevant titles is possible through the online catalog or even through online bookstores (i.e., searching Amazon.com for a title yields suggestions related to the title searched for), but the necessary specificity of indexing is not available, especially when seeking images/illustrations. The researcher will still have to head to the stacks to scan through relevant works. Users of architecture libraries often need a specific illustration of a given work, or a photograph or a detailed drawing of one feature of a building, such as a doorway or a staircase. It is common to see students or faculty looking through multiple titles of a particular architect or designer’s works in an attempt to find the illustration sought. Close proximity of the library to the classroom or studio greatly facilitates this type of focused browsing that is often conducted spontaneously when the designer runs into a problem that needs visual clarification. While many journals in other disciplines are available electronically, this is not the case in architecture and other design fields where the bulk of publications (both monographs and journals) continue to be primarily print-based. Browsing, therefore, whether casual or focused, needs to happen in the library itself rather than online.

Propinquity of the collection to the studios also greatly enhances the unique nature of the studio-based instruction practiced in architecture programs. In their 1989 essays on architecture libraries, both Anatole Senkevitch, Jr. (architecture professor) and Kenneth Herwart (recent architecture graduate student) cite the benefit of having the architecture library close to the studios to respond to this specialized method of instruction or to quickly satisfy the spontaneous need for data or research.

In addition to the benefit of close access to the collection, branch libraries also serve an important social role. Architecture students spend an extraordinary amount of time in their studios, so it is no surprise that they sometimes want a quiet place outside of the studio to study, research, work on projects, or simply relax. The branch library provides this environment while allowing the student to remain relatively close to the studio. Students and faculty do not have far to go to escape the studio atmosphere, yet can easily return. An engaging design of the branch library will enhance this behavior, but even sparsely furnished or semi-attractive branch libraries are heavily used. Shoham states, “cost-benefit analysis is a technique for helping decision making. Optimally we should be able to express the benefit, as well as the cost, in dollars. But this is very difficult when dealing with a public service such as a library which has a social (and not financial) purpose.” Not only is the value of this social function hard to measure, but also hard to quantify in terms of expenditure.

Another concept related to the social role of the branch libraries for the design disciplines is that of the user-centered library. Elizabeth Douthitt Byrne maintains that a semiautonomous branch library in close proximity offers the best model for creating the user-centered library for architecture students. Hibbard highlights the social role of the branch library in his example of a law school professor “placing a higher role on the socialization opportunities—the creation of a professional consciousness—that occur among their students as a result of working together on common problems in a common location sharing common materials separate from the general student population.” Charlotte Crockett furthered this argument by stating, “Perhaps the most important function of the library within a university department is the function of [an] intellectual meeting place, a place where people go not only to search for information but to talk about ideas and the meaning of information.” Law schools and medical schools usually have branch libraries for this reason, not because no one else on campus uses those materials, but for the professional socialization that takes place there as well as the need for nearness to the collection. Close proximity, familiar staff with subject expertise, and a tailored collection all increase the user-centeredness of the branch library. Staff members in branch libraries quickly develop relationships with faculty and students through daily one-on-one interaction. These relationships allow staff to tailor services to meet the needs of the main users, thus creating a more user-centered facility.

**Cons of Design Branch Libraries**

The increasingly interdisciplinary nature of scholarship is often given as the main deterrent to branch libraries. Having collections in multiple locations requires users to navigate separate facilities in order to pursue a single line of scholarship that crosses disciplinary boundaries or even within certain disciplines. With some materials housed in the branch and others located in the main library, a researcher must visit multiple locations to access all relevant material. Architecture is an excellent example of a discipline that utilizes literature from many areas such as art, architecture, interior and graphic design, regional and community planning, photography, and engineering. Most branch libraries do not have enough space to house all of the necessary materials, much less those that are potentially relevant.

The limitation of space becomes more of a challenge every day as spatial needs within departments and the library will continue to create problems. The demand for studio space increases as design programs expand. Libraries become more cramped as print collections grow, often requiring removal of volumes from the branch through either weeding or transfer. Madison, Fry, and Gregory provide two considerations in their
model for branch library review that specifically deal with spatial issues of existing branch libraries. They state that viable branch libraries must have adequate seating and shelving space and that any closure or opening of a branch library must be evaluated in terms of impact on the main library. Many campus libraries already have high-density remote storage facilities—or one is in the planning stages—as the need exists to transfer lesser-used items from the stacks to make room for current material. With the initiation of these remote facilities, a split collection is already present on many campuses. Indeed, in these cases the branch library may actually help the problem.

When reviewing the potential closing of the architecture library at Kansas State University, one aspect taken into consideration was the shelving impact on the main library. At Kansas State, the architecture library houses all volumes in the NA call number range, with a few exceptions. Thus, space in the main library would need to be made for 11,000 plus volumes either integrated into the current call number scheme or housed in a separate space. If a large enough separate space was not available, the entire collection would have had to be shifted to make room. A shift of this magnitude represents a major expense of time and money. This is a vitally important aspect of any consideration for closing or opening a branch library since removing items from the main library provides just as many challenges as inserting them.

Another drawback of branch libraries is the associated cost factor to the overall library budget caused by the necessary duplication of materials and effort between the main library and the branch. Satisfying the access needs of users in branch libraries as well as the main library results in the duplication of materials, especially important reference works. With most, if not all, of the primary indexes in many disciplines now being provided electronically campus-wide (or system-wide in many cases), duplication of material is much less a factor except in the cases of heavily used print titles, which would likely see multiple copies purchased anyway to facilitate access.

The second aspect of duplication concerns the staff necessary to maintain the branch. Prior to integrated library systems, each library on campus, including branches, maintained its own, unique card catalog of holdings. In many cases, all cataloging for the branch took place there rather than in the main library. Again, once automated, most libraries chose to centralize all cataloging and acquisition functions in the main library. However, staff members are still necessary in the branch library for reference services, stack maintenance, and circulation functions. Active discussion in the literature of the issue of centralization/decentralization of library services continued into the early 1990s and then dropped off. Why? The best explanation is that the proliferation of technology in libraries eliminated or reduced many of the arguments favoring the closing or consolidation of branch facilities. Hugh C. Atkinson alludes to this development when stating, “the arguments about centralization and decentralization may have been rendered moot with the passage of time.”

Integrated library systems provide centralized circulation and OPACs, thereby eliminating the need to check separate libraries or systems to see if an item is owned, where it is housed, as well as whether the item is available or checked out.

Branch Libraries Supporting Accredited Architecture Programs

When considering the importance of branch libraries to architecture education, it is important to know which accredited programs have branch libraries. Obviously, if most accredited programs function without branch libraries, the argument for creating or maintaining a branch loses credence. However, the following section illustrates that this is not the case.

The National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) Web site maintains a list of accredited architecture programs in the United States. A link to a list of Canadian Architectural Certification Board (CAB) accredited programs is also present on the NAAB Web site. The author visited each accredited program’s library Web site to determine if there is a branch library housing some or all architecture materials. Discrete collections within the main libraries were counted as branches since a quick determination of actual locations of these types of collections was sometimes difficult.

Table 1 presents data documenting the presence of branch libraries at institutions with NAAB or CAB accredited architecture programs. “NAAB (all)” and “CAB (all)” represents the total number of institutions with programs accredited by each of these organizations. “NAAB (ARL)” and “CAB (ARL)” represent accredited programs at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions and is a subset of the total number. “NAAB (others)” covers specialized institutions with accredited programs, including Taliesin (the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture), the New School of Architecture and Design, and the Savannah College of Art and Design and is a subset of the “NAAB (all)” total of 122. These institutions, due to their specialized nature and size, would not be expected to have multiple facilities but are included here along with colleges and universities with smaller student enrollment and accredited architecture programs such as Drury University in Springfield, Missouri, and Judson University in Elgin, Illinois.

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<td>NAAB (all)</td>
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<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAAB (ARL)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAAB (others)</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAB (all)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAB (ARL)</td>
<td>7</td>
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Branch libraries account for 57 and 60 percent of the libraries supporting NAAB and CAB accredited programs, respectively. Architecture/design branch libraries are present at 71 percent of ARL institutions with either NAAB or CAB accredited architecture programs. This data illustrates a clear trend toward having branch libraries associated with accredited architecture programs, especially at ARL institutions.

Are Branch Libraries Used? A Case Study

Table 2 presents holdings and circulation data for the NA call number range at Iowa State University in both the Parks...
Library (main) and the Design Reading Room located in the College of Design. “Total titles” is the number of titles at each location. “Total circs” is the number of circulations of NA titles at each location. “Circs/title” is total circs divided by total titles. Columns labeled “0 circs” and “% 0 circs” are the number of volumes with no circulations and the percentage of total volumes with no circs at each location. The “10+ circs” column lists the number of items in each collection that circulated 10 or more times. Data represents total numbers as of 2009. Circulation data is the total from the inception of the current integrated library system in 1999.

There are two limitations when analyzing this data. First is the fact that the data comes from a split collection; items have been transferred from one location to the other during this period. What this means is that while the numbers are representative of circulation patterns, they are not exact. Second, items placed on reserve at any time and at either location will reflect higher circulation numbers than would normally occur had the item remained in the stacks.

| Table 2. Holdings and Circulation of NA Call Number Range at Iowa State University |
|-------------------------------------|---------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
|          | Total titles | Total circs | Circs/title | 0 circs | % 0 circs | 10+ circs | % 10+ circs |
| Parks    | 11,723       | 66,847     | 5.7         | 1,986   | 17.0     | 2,146     | 18.0        |
| Design   | 3,439        | 40,958     | 12.0        | 279     | 8.0      | 1,490     | 43.3        |

The data in Table 2 demonstrates the high use of the NA collection in the Design Reading Room in relation to the main library. NAAs in Parks Library have an average circulation of 5.7 per title compared to 12.0 per title in Design. A larger number of the titles in Parks have never circulated (17 percent) as opposed to 8 percent in Design. Bear in mind that this data comes from a snapshot of holdings in each location at a specific point in time. Transfers of little used titles from Design to Parks is ongoing due to spatial limitations in Design, so a larger percentage of zero circulations will be present in Parks at any given time. Similarly, the percentage of items with ten or more circulations in relation to the total number at each location is higher in Design (43 percent) than in Parks (18 percent), though this number also suggests students and faculty utilize the Design collection more so than volumes in the main library.

Several 2009 LibQUAL+® statements from library patrons at Iowa State University illustrate the support branch libraries garner from both faculty and students:

The Design Reading Room is the branch I use most often. It is extremely convenient to have books available in the same building where the majority of my classes are. (Undergraduate)

Each library has a different staff, feel, and study areas... My satisfaction with the Design Reading Room staff is very high. (Undergraduate)

The Design Reading Room provides a valuable escape from the noisy environment of the studio and of the atrium. It allows me to be most efficient and that work environment is also supported by information provided there. (Undergraduate)

I love the Design Reading Room because of the helpful staff and the convenience of being able to send students down from class to pick up a reference book that I know is there. (Faculty)

Our library is a wonderful resource. We need more support for design and planning journals. (Faculty)

I use Parks Library frequently but I couldn’t function without the Design Reading Room. (Faculty)

These statements are representative responses when asking faculty and students about their use and need of the branch library. In fact, during discussion of branch closure at both Kansas State University and Iowa State University, faculty and students were very vocal and offered strong support for keeping the branch.

Conclusion and Further Research

This study provides background for further examination of the uses of architecture branches versus main libraries. In the current economic environment, further studies on the use and cost-effectiveness of branch libraries are warranted, since monetary and spatial issues will continue to arise. For instance, one might study patterns of use by architecture students in institutions with materials housed in multiple locations. As Shoham stated, a library “cannot be effective unless it is used by those for whom the system is designed.”

The Design Reading Room at Iowa State University is a highly used and important facility. Obviously, generalizing this study to all architecture libraries is not possible with only one example. The next step in this research is to collect similar data from institutions with NAAB and CACB accredited architecture programs in order to obtain a clearer picture of the importance of branch architecture libraries in accredited programs. In addition to collection usage, the study of branch libraries at these institutions will need to include information on whether new facilities have recently been constructed, updated or expanded, or closed down and merged into the general collection.

It is the author’s belief that institutions need to maintain existing architecture/design libraries to facilitate access and encourage use through attractive design and implementation of services, making the branch library the centerpiece of exemplary architecture education. Senkevitch asserts, “Removing the architecture library from the scene—and thus from direct involvement with the teaching and research activities of the architecture school—would have an adverse impact on the quality of the school’s educational experience.”

Gunnar Birkerts (architecture professor) furthers this notion by stating, “The architecture library is a space where creativity takes place.” Where practical, institutions with accredited architecture programs should aggressively maintain existing branch libraries, or examine the merits of creating a branch in close proximity to the department if such a branch does not already exist.

Referring to the “ACRL Guidelines for Branch Libraries in Colleges and Universities,” Shkollnik states that, “ACRL directors concluded that a branch library exists solely for the benefits
of the users.” Architecture branch libraries certainly exemplify this idea and can serve as a model for service for all libraries.

Notes

10. John J. Boll, Shelf Browsing, Open Access, and Storage Capacity in Research Libraries, Occasional Papers, University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library and Information Science 169 (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1985), 4.
14. Watts, “A Brief for Centralized Library Collections” and Shkolnik, “The Continuing Debate Over Academic Branch Libraries” both serve as examples of authors who mention this concept. Many of the other authors referenced in this paper also touch on this subject in one way or another.
18. See the NAAB Web site for listings of accredited programs in both the United States and Canada: http://www.naab.org/architecture_programs/.
19. LibQUAL+® is a suite of services offered by the Association for Research Libraries to help analyze library users’ opinions of service quality. See http://www.libqual.org.

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