

Libraries as hybrid space

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Abstract

This paper connects some trends and issues in planning and architecture with trends and issues in network design in order to consider the shape of hybrid space—created by the flowing together of spaces and networks. Referring to ideas of space articulated by Manuel Castells and to some of the ideas and architectural work of Rem Koolhaas as examples, this paper considers openness and boundaries, as well as individualized and public spaces.

1. Introduction

...and so, said Austerlitz, we began a long, whispered conversation in the *Haut-de-jardin* reading room, which was gradually emptying now, about the dissolution, in line with the inexorable spread of processed data, of our capacity to remember, and about the collapse, *l'effondrement*, as Lemoine put it, of the Bibliothèque Nationale which is already underway. The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy, might be described, so Lemoine thought, said Austerlitz, as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past. (Sebald, 2001, 286)

Manuel Castells argues that architectural space and the space created by information and communications technologies, what he calls the space of flows, are becoming more at odds and at the same time more intertwined. He defines his concept of flows and places in this way:

The space of flows links up electronically separate locations in an interactive network that connects activities and people in distinct geographical contexts. The space of places organizes experience and activity around the confines of locality. (Castells, 2005, 50)

The "intertwining of flows and places" (Castells, 2005, 54) has created a hybrid space combining

structured, bounded location with a technology that transcends boundaries. The development of hybrid space raises fundamental questions about how human beings will act and live in them. The spaces that exist within a library, for example, are made into usable and hospitable places because they enable certain activities and discourage others. This place making activity now needs to be carried out through the articulation of these two spatial dimensions. The work of Manuel Castells and Rem Koolhaas can provide a starting point and examples for exploring some of the features of hybrid space. I will examine how openness and structure are balanced, how boundaries can be used to shape and make place dynamic, and the possible impact of social networks on place.

2. Openness

When Castells first wrote about flows, highly connected nodes on the network were unusual places: for example, the lower end of Manhattan Island or the City of London which were wired for high speed, continuous data and communications connections to other important nodes around the globe. These highly connected areas stood in contrast to areas perhaps just a few blocks away with little or no connection to the flows of information. In this arrangement of connectivity, libraries could see themselves as significant public locations in the space of flows. Resources of connectivity were scarce, and access tended to be restricted, and so the library was the door through which one could enter this other space. Rem Koolhaas, in a conversation with Sarah Whiting about his plans for the Seattle Public library, talked about one idea of the library in this economy of scarcity:

it could ... be, for example, a business community that needs to be presented with the latest publications or latest information. Certain magazines have become so expensive that certain businesses don't buy the magazine, but they would buy the right to consult the magazine in the library. Such a system creates a layering of virtual space where the ubiquity of information is still manipulated to create hierarchies, scarcities, authenticities—circles of access and nonaccess. (Koolhaas & Whiting, 1999, 45)

Koolhaas imagines the library as a place of "embedded systems" (as McCullough calls them) (McCullough, 2004, 142). Entering the library, one enters the space of flows and even this space is further

divided into different levels of access to special resources. The space thus become shaped or structured in an architectural way with walls and passages separating zones of access. In this arrangement, the idea of a hybrid space is easy to imagine. Entering a specific room would be the same as entering a node or a zone of connectivity.

However, these walls have, in many ways, fallen or shifted. First, more and more areas are highly connected, and many communities and places (including, of course, university buildings outside of the library) have come to view broadband internet access as a basic need or utility, like power or water. What was once a closed system, bound to small highly-wired and networked nodes, is now more open. In addition, new connected devices—3G or smart phones, for example—have further eroded what were once the solid boundaries dividing connected and unconnected areas. In terms of connectedness, there may not now be much to divide the library from the Starbucks or even from the local park (in some places).

Second, the tendency of online resources is also towards openness. The "layering of virtual space," as Koolhaas describes it, which could be imagined as a series of boxes within boxes, containing ever more valuable resources, has dissolved in large measure. Of course, there are still valuable resources that are restricted by the library to specific insiders, and not to the general public, and there are still many digital resources that some libraries have and others do not have. But, in terms of access, systems librarians have sought to eliminate as many login screens or unique passageways to resources as possible. At the same time users used to Google expect and demand barrier-less and rapid access to resources. So, the route to a resource could be through a library workstation, or it could be through Google Scholar via a proxy server to a remote database, where the proxy server is an automatic, unnoticed doorway in what seems to the user an undifferentiated information space.

Third, as one can infer from the above, the new network space is no longer coextensive with the physical space of the library. The real and the virtual spaces no longer fit neatly into the same footprint.

A sense of place is dependent upon space, and space is defined by boundaries. So, in an environment where boundaries dissolve, place is threatened. Virtual space has grown and become shapeless (or at least of an unpredictable shape), but this ex-

pansion and loss of a sense of unique place has also been happening in architecture. For Koolhaas, uniqueness is disappearing and being replaced by the generic. In his essay on the "Generic City" he begins by asking: "Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport—all the same? Is it possible to theorize this convergence? ... Convergence is possible only at the price of shedding identity. ... What is left after identity is stripped? The Generic?" (Koolhaas et al., 1995, 1248). And, more recently Koolhaas has written about what he calls Junkspace.

Continuity is the essence of Junkspace; it exploits any invention that enables expansion, deploys the infrastructure of seamlessness: escalator; air-conditioning, sprinkler, fire shutter, hot-air curtain ... It is always interior, so extensive that you rarely perceive limits; it promotes disorientation by any means (mirror, polish, echo) ... Junkspace is sealed, not held together not by structure but by skin, like a bubble. Gravity has remained constant, resisted by the same arsenal since the beginning of time; but air-conditioning—invisible medium, therefore unnoticed—has truly revolutionized architecture. Air-conditioning has launched the endless building. If architecture separates buildings, air-conditioning unites them. (Koolhaas, 2002, 175-6 *Koolhaas's ellipses*)

"Junkspace," he concludes, "is the body double of space" (Koolhaas, 2002, 176). The very idea of space defined by architecture relies on a unique identity and on such basic distinctions of outside and inside, of walls and doors to separate and enable entrance, and to separate the distinct climates of outside and inside. In the type of endless space without definition which Koolhaas describes, the very openness of the space works against the distinctions which enable "identity" or a sense of place.

The tendency in architecture, urban design, and network design is to openness, but the sense of place requires restriction or limitation, a sense of a limited range of appropriate or possible uses or activities enabled or encouraged by specific spaces. According to Sack's definition, places "constrain and enable our actions and our actions construct and maintain places" (Sack quoted in Leckie and Buschman, 2007, 10). Someone seated at an opac in a library's information commons can use the workstation not only to search, but also to connect

to a resource and to read it. But, someone using a card catalogue can only search. So, an information commons cannot be a place in the sense that a card catalogue is a place because there is, as we know, very little restriction on the types of activities the workstation enables, nor would these sorts of activities be possible only in an information commons; they could equally happen in some other networked environment.

3. Responding to openness

Nodes in the space of flows have an inherent openness or generic quality which works against the sense of place. Some library designers and architects have responded to this openness by creating physically open areas where a range of activities is possible, and there is no attempt, for example, to define a space by putting in it a desk labelled "Reference." This is the situation sketched out by John Berry in his February column in *Library Journal*:

Our circulation desks are disappearing. The humans who once greeted and discussed with patrons our wares and services as they dispensed them are being replaced by self-service. Those circulation clerks are either being terminated or sent to work elsewhere in the library.

Our reference services and the desk from which they were delivered are gone, too, replaced by wandering "librarians," with or without an MLS. They are supposed to be proactive in searching out patrons in need but are too often summoned on walkie-talkies or terminals to come to the aid of only those who ask or to respond to the few inquiries that arrive online. (Berry, 2008)

Koolhaas's Seattle Public Library does not take this unbounded open approach to library space. Koolhaas arranges a series of rooms each with a specific function, and each with relevant library staff. The reviewer of the building for *Library Journal*, Brian Kenney, sensed a conflict between the openness of the physical spaces and the restriction created by desks:

Poke around in the back of the fiction collection and—surprise!—there's a fiction/readers' advisory desk. Why these librarians with all their knowledge are hidden away, or even sitting behind a desk at all, is a mystery. This ambiguous relationship with public service (do we want a desk

or don't we?) surfaces repeatedly throughout the building. (Kenney, 2005)

Later Kenney writes about the reference room (or to use Koolhaas's term, the Mixing Chamber):

The room features computers dedicated to the catalog and subscription databases, a general reference print collection, and a long, minimalist reference desk that seems almost an afterthought. Is it necessary?

"Perhaps not," admits Craig Kyte, manager of general reference services, who foresees a day when librarians just work the floor.

"But we are grappling with how to identify librarians to the public." (Kenney, 2005)

In trying to give definition to a space (and definition to those who work in the space), a structure like a desk with its two sides, enables or encourages specific uses—e.g. asking a question—which in turn creates a sense of identity and place. However, Kenney's sense of unease with the barrier of the desk, illustrates, to borrow Sebald's phrasing, the "increasingly importunate urge" to openness and lack of boundaries (Sebald, 2001, 286). As an architect, Koolhaas seeks to balance the expectation for openness and the need for structure. The tension created as a result might even be useful.

Instead of creating an entirely open space where any library activity can happen in almost any part of the building, the Koolhaas, in his proposal for the library, imagined a strategy of "spatial compartments dedicated to and equipped for specific duties" (OMA/LMN, 1999, 10). Goldberger notes that the architects began their design process for Seattle "by investigating how libraries actually work, and how they are likely to change" (Goldberger, 2004).

When Koolhaas and Ramus designed the building, they did what architects often do—they made a diagram. It was, essentially, five boxes: the book stacks were one box, the administrative offices were another, and there were boxes for staff work areas, meeting rooms, and below-ground parking. Then they did something remarkable. For all intents and purposes, they built the diagram. They sketched the boxes floating in space and placed the large public areas—the Living Room, the Mixing Chamber, and the Reading Room—above and below them, surrounded by glass. Turning a diagram into an actual architectural form seems like something of a parlor trick, not to mention being crudely indif-

ferent to aesthetics. In fact, it was neither of these things. The building has a logic to it: functional sections are the starting point, but they are placed so that the spaces between them are large enough and spectacular enough to produce powerful architectural effects. (Goldberger, 2004)

Building the diagram of the library functions is a tool for giving space the type of definition that allows a sense of place to develop, but it also allowed Koolhaas to achieve another aim: to have the library an image of the library as it exists on the web. The compartmentalization of library functions gives these functions a shape in the space of flows. For Koolhaas, the real and the virtual "can be made to coincide, become each other's mirror image" (OMA/LMN, 1999, p.8). As his proposal for the library states:

Real and virtual space are conceived in parallel, as part of the same architecture. The communication strategies that provide access and clarity in the space of the library are mirrored in the virtual platform (OMA/LMN, 1999, 37)

In other words, if one can create a place built around clear functions in the built structure of the library, and if one can transfer that same sense of place to the network, the result will be a hybrid place. In other words, from the user point of view, both spaces should be recognizable as images of each other, and being comfortable and knowing how to fulfill one's goals in the both spaces will enable the library to exist simultaneously as a real and a virtual structure.

4. Marking the space of flows

While Koolhaas's talk of mirroring and balance between the real and the virtual manifestations of the library is significant, the physical structure of the library has an importance that crosses over into the space of flows. In talking about the main issues arising for cities in the Information age, Castells argues that there is a crisis for the city "as a socio-spatial system of cultural communication" (Castells, 2005, 46), and that "recent trends in architecture signal its transformation from an intervention in the space of places to an intervention in the space of flows, the dominant space of the information age" (Castells, 2005, 59-60). He gives a list of examples of the types of buildings he means, beginning with Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and ending with the statement that these are the "new cathe-

drals of the Information Age, where the pilgrims gather to search for the meaning of their wanderings" (Castells, 2005, 60). One feels that this same use of the power of space was one of the goals for Deborah Jacobs, Seattle's chief librarian, "I thought," she says, "it was very important that you have a sense of awe when you come into a public building, especially a library" (Goldberger, 2004). Kenney, in his review of the Seattle library, notes that visitors react in a way "akin to tourists entering one of the great European cathedrals" (Kenney, 2005). So, marking a place in the space of flows, involves creating a space which inspires and moves its patrons and users. Of course, this sense of space does not need to be cathedral-like, but it must avoid the characteristics of the generic and of junk space.

5. Febrile boundaries

At the same time that systems and architectural spaces move towards openness, people seek for borders and enclosure. City dwellers and planners and architects see the need for boundaries and structured space to create liveable and functional places. In planning for hybrid space, there are two types of boundary creation which are important. The first is the creation of a boundary space. The second response, which can be found in networks, is the creation of boundaries which allow a high degree of personalization, in a fundamental way, allowing users to define a personal space with barriers of one's own definition.

Some architects have reacted against openness and created works which have not responded to the ways space has changed. Goldberger notes that the new Chicago public library was designed, "as if the world is unchanged since 1911" and as a result the building "looks vaguely like a nineteenth-century train station and is overbearing and bombastic" (Goldberger, 2004). Architects can look at openness as something to be feared and resisted. Sebald's character, Jacques Austerlitz, senses this spirit in the Bibliothèque Nationale, arguing that the building seeks "to exclude the reader as a potential enemy" (Sebald, 2001, 286).

Similarly, in urban planning, as Richard Sennett argues, "people are ... trying to compensate for their dislocations and impoverished experience in the economy by celebrating place—but on exclusionary terms" (Sennett, 1999, p.23). Finding one's own place often means keeping others away from it. "Less obviously, but as powerfully, modern place-

making involves a search for the comforts of sameness in terms of shared identity, uniform building context and reductions of density" (Sennett, 1999, p.23). Castells also notes the "Breakdown of communication patterns between individuals and between cultures and the emergence of defensive spaces" (Castells, 2005, 47). The defensive spaces which Sennett describes can be imagined as a combination of the gated community and the Generic City.

In libraries and in communities, one can respond to openness by building walls which define space but do not exclude. Sennett discusses some of these ideas:

There are planning strategies that can counter claustrophobia and open places up. For instance, new buildings can be directed to the edges between separate communities and away from local centres. This makes the edge a febrile zone of interaction and exchange, a zone where differences are activated. Planning work by Hugo Hinsley and others in East London is based on this principle of the active edge. Or within central spaces, dissimilar uses can be introduced: many planners in the USA are, for instance, seeking ways to put clinics, government offices and old-age centres into shopping malls which have been formerly devoted solely to consumption activities: planners in Germany are similarly exploring how pedestrian zones in the centres of cities can become civic as well as commercial sites. (Sennett, 1999, pp.23-24)

Bringing together dissimilar groups or communities and encouraging different activities at the border of communities can create new patterns of interaction and new possibilities for social relationships. Similarly, the border between the library and the street can also be treated as an active edge. Instead of attempting to exclude the user, planning strategies can create borders which create definition for the space they enclose but are in-between places in their own right, encouraging and enabling entrance or interaction. Using the dynamic energy inherent in boundaries can add to the sense of the library as place. From Kenney's description of the Seattle library, we can see this type of border space:

Enter from Fifth Avenue, the upper part of the slope, and you are in the Living Room—one of the most exhilarating public rooms in the nation. ... There are information and

circulation desks, self-check stations, a bank of computers, and a large number of surprisingly comfortable cubist chairs. Opposite the seating, visitors can browse a selection of popular magazines as well as the library's fiction collection. A coffee stand—not Starbucks but run by FareStart, a program that empowers the homeless—and a gift shop are nearby. (Kenney, 2005)

This area which is neither obviously library nor bookstore nor Starbucks but is "exhilarating" illustrates the dynamic friction between the street (and its community) and the library.

6. Individualized spaces

On the network, creating this type of boundary place is more challenging. Interestingly, some of the first theorists of cyberspace were architects who imagined cyberspace in terms of architectural space. They understood the benefit of public spaces separating and yet connecting private task spaces and repositories of data. In 1991, Michael Benedikt wrote in "Cyberspace: Some Proposals":

There is good reason to be in transit for significant periods of time, and in relatively public areas. For it is between tasks, both spatially and temporally, that one is most open to accident and incident. In the real world, chance meetings in hallways, lobbies, airports, on sidewalks, and so on are essential to the formation of informal personal networks. Browsing is essential to the acquisition of new information. Without time in transit in cyberspace—open, spatio-temporally coherent, and free—one is imprisoned by one's discrete task domains, blinkered and locked to destinations. (Benedikt, 1991, 170)

In other words, Benedikt imagines a space within cyberspace very much like the active edge described by Sennett. Without this in-between type of space, Benedikt imagines users trapped in "task domains," cut off from valuable sources of information and ideas. In many ways the developing boundary-free space of the web is an expression of the desire to avoid these types of in-between spaces. In addition to the signs of openness already discussed, one can think of search technologies which seek to connect users by the most direct path to the most trusted resources, and users have shown their impatience with exploring anything beyond the first page of search results. In part, this attests to a discom-

fort of open, unstructured places. Speedy connection to resources, if it means being "imprisoned by one's discrete task domains" (Benedikt, 1991, 170) or living in a "closed system" (Sennett, 1999, 23) is better than having to find one's way through a maze of loosely structured data or ideas. But, paradoxically, a world without borders or doors or in-between spaces becomes, by its very nature, a closed system.

The work of Castells on social relations can help us understand these paradoxical impulses. Castells argues that in the information age,

Social relationships are characterized simultaneously by individuation and communalism, both processes using, at the same time, spatial patterning and online communication. Virtual communities and physical communities develop in close interaction, and both processes of aggregation are challenged by increasing individualization of work, social relationships and residential habits. (Castells, 2005, 46.)

For Castells, individuation is "the enclosure of meaning in the projects, interests, and representations of the individual" (Castells, 2005, 49). And, communalism is the "enclosure of meaning in a shared identity" (Castells, 2005, 50). We can see both these urges active in the social networking and peer production initiatives of Web 2.0, which involve the creation of communities of shared interests and, at the same time, afford high degrees of personalization.

Malcolm McCullough sees the need for a spirit of "casual extensibility" in the ecology of developing networks (McCullough, 2004, 114). He recognizes the complexity of this "galaxy of independent systems" (114), but argues that the challenge of working with them "becomes much more like architecture" (115). However, McCullough assumes that these systems will be within the architect's power to comprehend and to shape. Increasingly, these systems are outside the control of the architect or the systems designer: think of online social networks—mediated through social networking applications like Facebook—or the "ubiquitous connectivity, and self-constructed networks of shared social practice" mediated through increasingly powerful mobile communications devices, like smart phones (Castells, 2007, 245).

These social networking applications or self-constructed networks can work in ways to enhance the user's ability to make use of physical space, and

can be used in ways to work together with a network created by a library, for example. Castells discusses how personal networks can allow what he calls "social patterning," enabling users to organize activities in space, arranging meetings at a specific location (Castells, 2005, 46). This activity could fit in well with the hybrid space of the library. However, library users could look to these personal networks as sources for services already provided by the library: for example, virtual reference, book recommendations, information seeking questions, and so on. The challenge for the library is to create a public space with a sense of openness as a way of counterbalancing the "increasing individualization of work, social relationships and residential habits" (Castells, 2005, 46).

Many librarians have experimented with social networking applications or created spaces on Second Life as ways of connecting with their clients and of drawing people to the real and virtual services the library offers. These efforts could be seen as running the risk of moving too far away from the hybrid space of the library, and of turning library services into, for example, Facebook applications. Or, one could argue that these efforts attempt to create a sense of place in the library using tools not specifically designed for that purpose. Or, one could see the use of these applications as the thin end of the wedge in the privatization of the hybrid public space of the library.

What social networking applications, and online bookstores, and virtual spaces like iGoogle have is a vast amount of data about users, their interests, their research and browsing habits, their typical spelling errors, and so on. They can use these to individualize, or to let the user individualize his or her experience of, for example, an online bookstore or search engine or social network. When Koolhaas was planning the Seattle library, he was aware of some of these possibilities.

In the Seattle Public Library, this issue of privacy is becoming pertinent. We began this project with a research period to enable us to explore virtual identity and its role within the library system. We hope to work with Judith Donath from the MIT Media Lab. She's someone who's looking at how cyberspace can generate new communities. It's interesting in terms of what that implies, because you can create different communities based on reading patterns, and those communities can coexist in cy-

berspace, but they can also use the library as a point of actual human contact.

So the potentials are enormous. The alarms are equally enormous because the library is not willing to give away who reads what or base its effectiveness on violating that confidence. (Koolhaas and Whiting, 1999, 44)

Of course social networking applications are doing exactly what Koolhaas describes here, using information gained from users to create powerful recommender systems, like that of Amazon.com, or mining user activity to create an individualized profile to enable the application to pitch targeted advertisements or to offer personalized search results, such as we can see in the iGoogle service. Users who are brought up with these systems are willing to trade some of their privacy for the benefits these systems offer. And it is likely that many users would embrace the types of personalized services that a hybrid library community could offer. In addition, libraries could learn from the errors of social networking systems in deciding how to use their own user data. One has only to remember the newsfeed feature which Facebook launched and then withdrew after an online petition rapidly gathered more than 700,000 signatures (Gonsalves, 2006). Users, as a group, are sensitive to certain kinds of use of personal data. Users are also used to managing their own profiles and setting limits on the type of personal information they would like to reveal, and the types of services they are interested in receiving. As time goes on, users may expect the library to offer these types of personalized services as they become more and more a part of how communities are formed and maintained and how place is defined.

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