Session XI: The Unforgiving Building: (Re) Designing the 21st-Century Library  
Monday, April 4, 2005, 9:30 – 11:00 AM


Speakers:  
Catherine S. Park, Director, Harris County Public Library  
Sara Lowman, Director, Fondren Library, and Associate University Librarian, Rice University  
Michael Morton, mARCHITECTS  
Alan Michelson, Head of the Architecture and Urban Planning Library, University of Washington

Recorder:  Trish Rose, Image Metadata Librarian, UCAI Project, University of California, San Diego

Summary:

This panel addressed recent innovations in library design for public (both urban and suburban) and university settings. All reflected an increased focus on technology use within libraries and innovations in automation of routine library tasks. Accommodations were made for a mix of public and private space as well as greater acceptance of the presence of food/merchandising services. Some of the libraries wanted to go beyond just serving functional needs and also sought to become reflections of civic pride.

Park’s talk, "Creating a Design Paradigm for Small Spaces," covered what she has learned from overseeing the renovation of twenty-six branch libraries in Harris County, Texas. Park stated the essentials for a successful branch were (1) having a detailed building program, (2) building an attractive but not monumental building, and (3) making functionality a top priority. She found today’s customers desired self-sufficiency for basic services such as checkout, holds, and pickups. Other important issues for patrons include: 24/7 online services, intuitive signage, meeting spaces, comfortable seating, food/drink services, quiet spaces and study rooms, merchandising, wireless access, and computer classrooms.

Lowman’s talk, "Fondren Library at Rice University: Diary of a Renovation," focused on her involvement with the renovation of the main library at Rice University. Originally built in 1949, Fondren was never particularly successful or beloved by the campus community. Both aesthetic and functional improvements were sought in the early 1990s. For the renovation, the main program goals were: efficiency of service points and programs, more collaborative spaces, technology support. and better seating and reading areas. The program also needed to re-orient the building’s primary axis point in order to allow students to walk unimpeded through the library from one part of campus to another.
Morton's talk, "Making a Place for the Virtual Library: Access for All," talked about a new model for virtual libraries. Morton acknowledged the phrase “virtual library” has multiple meanings depending on the community using it (e.g., online catalog, online bookstore). The Houston Public Library asked the architects to design a physical space for computers and technology rather than books, which would be located in a retail strip center rather than in a traditional single-standing library building. Morton's firm developed 3-D walk-through animations that gave a sense of the layout and relationship of spaces to each other that included: technology classrooms, teen centers, Internet cafés, coffee bars, and reading rooms.

The final talk, "Seattle's Crystal Palace: Does It Work?", given by Michelson, was an insightful look into one of the most talked about structures of the past year. Having opened in May 2004 to rapturous reviews, Michelson sought to unmask the personalities and cultural/social factors of how the building evolved. Major players were Library Director Deborah Jacobs and architect Rem Koolhaas, whose strong but divergent personalities managed to complement rather than conflict with each other. Cultural/social factors included the WTO, Bill Gates, Boeing, and a highly educated populace. Functionally, the building was designed to work smarter and more efficiently so that less money would be needed for staff than in a traditional library with more manual processing of materials.

Michelson then assessed the building in terms of functionality. Weaknesses were thought to be a poorly designed loading dock and mail room, which was located far from the loading dock; lack of money for maintenance; high cost over-run ($165 million total, second most expensive library in the country); poor signage; and an insufficient number of bathrooms. Successes include increased library space to accommodate a 100 percent increase in attendance; adding $13 million to the economy in the first year and increased energy efficiency. In addition, the library has become a civic landmark and has beautiful details that one would not normally find in a library.