

Imagining the Edifice: Library Consultation & the Social Construction of the Ideal Space

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Libraries as imagined communities exist in the academic sphere to respond to and reflect myriad needs, desires, whims, and dreams. This is especially true in the largest academic library systems where disparate buildings, faculties, units, systems, and students are served under one, often asymmetrical, multi-limbed creature. How this being is best served, its collective identity, and in what ways it works are the subject of frequent debate and reflection. Meanwhile, the idea of library as place has taken hold to the extent where papers on the topic are published on the regular, conferences are proposed, and an annual institution by the same name exists under the aegis of the Ontario Library Association.

How we define this place, the library, and its imagined community also varies by institution, individual, and ideal. Seductive notions of future purpose, forward thinking, and flexible spaces and programming are tossed about but how does the process take shape? How do we address a reality that may be very distant from what our community needs and wants? Using a real life example, this paper will show how a library working group harnesses the power of both the conversational and project management approaches to arrive at a socially constructed but tangible result which addresses the tension in the needs of the individual and the desire to create community.

Beginning in the summer of 2018, the Master Space Planning group at the University of Alberta brought together a motley crew of library workers to drive a project aimed at reinventing and repurposing our spaces. With no additional money outside the libraries' regularly forecast budget and an aging portfolio of buildings, a core group, comprised of the senior IT and facilities officer, the senior financial officer, an associate university librarian, two library unit heads, the communications manager, the serials metadata librarian, and an academic library resident, set off to capture the larger imagined university community's ideal library. In so doing, the group used discussion to initiate the project and plan their approach to collect good data from the communities served. The results of individual surveys, a variety of face-to-face consultations, and committee subgroup efforts will be used to guide changes to library buildings in the coming three to five years. Of particular interest to this construction, which considers the ways in which the libraries may become more accessible both ideologically and physically, are the efforts at creating an Indigenous Hub, a meditation and prayer space, and an area for students who parent. Far removed from the endless, iterative conversations conjured by the word "committee," the working group has delivered real data to achieve measurable results that disrupt the process oriented world of academic libraries.