The Discursive Construction of the Academic Library as Learning Place in A2K

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The academic library has become a hot commodity in selling the university to prospective students across North America (Cain and Reynolds 2006). There has also been a shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered technology-enabled approach to undergraduate college education. Consequently, the academic library has now a role to play in the American university that goes beyond providing access to information; it has the obligation to facilitate undergraduate learning and facilitate knowledge creation. The need to incorporate components of the increasingly complex information infrastructure of the knowledge society and its A2K philosophy has accompanied the rise in academic library construction and renovation projects. During the construction boom of the last fifteen years, information and learning commons have become important new features of academic library design. Meanwhile, there has emerged the library-as-place movement. Although early on there was more written on the public library as place, a discursive stream on the value of the “academic library as space and place” has emerged in the professional literature of the last decade (Baker 2000; Bennett 2003, 2005, 2006; 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Shill and Tonner 2003, 2004).

The study presented in this chapter was done as part of a doctoral dissertation (Closet-Crane, 2009). The general topic of this dissertation was prompted by anecdotal reports by librarians’ of challenges encountered with the academic library design process. The author has a multidisciplinary background in architecture and library and information management which led her to wonder how academic librarians have discussed library design and whether they have considered the role architecture and environmental design play in supporting learning behaviors and the acquisition, utilization and creation of knowledge. A simple question gave direction to the research for this dissertation. What is going on in professional discussions of library planning and design that attempt to (re)-define the academic library as space and place in the 21st century? (Closet-Crane 2009)

By examining the social construction of a new brand of academic library and weaknesses perceived in the discourse on the information and learning
commons, this chapter shows that the space management approach taken to discuss the design of library commons fails to consider the physical and emotional components of architecture. It stresses the need for future inquiry into the role library architecture and environmental design can play in library users’ sense of place and in facilitating learning and access to knowledge.

Literature Review, 1995-2009

Library as place

Within the LIS discourse of the last fifteen years, there exist themes that describe various aspects of the library as space and place. They include accessibility to information resources and information and communication technologies (Beagle 1999, 2002, 2009), symbolism (Jackson and Hahn 2008), learning place (Bennett 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008), public place (Leckie and Hopkins 2002; Leckie 2004), and third place (Fang 2008).

The term library as place has been liberally used as if its meaning were transparent. In fact, there is a range of perspectives on the library as place (Buschman and Leckie 2007; Council on Library and Information Resource 2005). The term has often been used to differentiate the brick-and-mortar library from the library as institutional entity or to place it in opposition to the digital alter ego of the library (Bjarrum and Cranfield 2004; Dowlin 2004; Foote 2004; Templeton 2008). At other times, concerns for space planning, facilities management, and the other aspects of the physical plant have been implicated (Beagle 1999; Kratz 2003; Thomas 2000).

The more theoretical writings have conceived the library as place with regard to the purpose the library fulfills, the function it performs for a community of users, or the place the library occupies in its community and in society (Alstad and Curry 2003; Bennett 2006; Eigenbrodt 2008; Waxman et al. 2007). In the field of LIS research, the pioneering work of Gloria Leckie and her collaborators is noteworthy for having introduced the concept of sense of place in the scholarly discourse on libraries (Leckie and Hopkins 2002; Given and Leckie 2003; and Leckie 2004). This concept relates to the affective bond people develop with a place through their experience of space and place in that setting (Yi-Fu Tuan, cited in Buschman and Leckie 2007).

Academic libraries

The point of departure for understanding the evolution of the discourse on academic libraries is to be found in Academic Libraries: Their Rationale and Role in American Higher Education (McCabe and Person 1995). Within the last decade, three reports by the Council on Library and Information Resources
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIS Journals</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACRL Publications</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advances in Library Administration and Organization</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annals of Nagoya University, Library Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Libraries</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Library Administration</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of the Medical Library Association</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Libraries</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Administration and Management</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Hi Tech</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Issues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Libraries</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New library World</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portal: Libraries and the Academy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Services Review</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Strategies</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Journal of Academic Librarianship</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non LIS Journals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educause Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chronicle of Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Journals from which articles were selected for the literature review on academic libraries as space and place

(CLIR 2002, 2003, 2005) have provided an updated platform for envisioning the roles that the research or academic library can play in the digital age namely its future role as a place and space that supports learning (CLIR 2003). More recently, there has been a surge of monographs on information and learning commons: a handbook (Beagle 2006), cases studies (Bailey and Tierney 2008), and a field guide (Forrest and Halbert 2009).
From the professional literature on academic librarianship between 1995 and 2009, 64 relevant articles and essays that discuss the academic library in terms of theoretical, conceptual and programmatic issues as well as planning and design were selected for review. Journal articles came predominantly from four periodical sources: Journal of Academic Librarianship (JAL) (20 articles), New Library World (5 articles), Research Strategies (7 articles) and ACRL publications (7 articles). The other articles were culled from 14 LIS journals and three non-LIS publications (see Table 1).

By the frequency of their publications and of references to their work, Beagle (1999, 2002, 2004, 2009) and Bennett (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) emerge as prominent authorial figures in the discourse of academic library planning. There are two broad perspectives that dominate the literature reviewed: the library as learning space and the library as information center for the digital age; they tend to overlap with the themes of the learning commons and the information commons. Table 2 provides a listing of references for articles according to the perspective they present.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Theme</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forrest &amp; Hinchliffe (2005), O’Connor &amp; Bennett (2005),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simmons, Young, &amp; Gibson (2000), Snavely (2000), Spencer (2007),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Van Pelt (2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library as digital age information center</td>
<td>Bailey &amp; Tierney (2002); Beagle (1999), Cowgill,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dewey (2002), Forrest &amp; Hinchliffe (2005), Halbert (1999), Kratz (2003),</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Periodical articles and essays developing the dominant themes

Philosophical and Methodological Frameworks

A critical realist constructionist perspective was adopted as the philosophical framework for critical discourse analysis (CDA). A critical realist constructionist approach combines a critical realist ontological stand that is influenced by Bhaskar’s critical realist philosophy (Archer et al. 1998) and a moderate social-constructionist epistemology (Nightingale and Cromby 2002). Leading LIS researchers Budd (2006), Frohmann (1992, 1994) and Talja (1999, 2004) have already demonstrated the advantages of using discourse analysis in LIS research. As a theoretical and methodological domain, discourse analysis encompasses a variety of approaches that focus on the study of language use as
well as the use of other forms of semiosis as elements of social processes (Fairclough 2001a).

The methodological framework used for the research design was inspired by the critical realist approach to CDA developed by British analyst Norman Fairclough (Fairclough, 2001b, 2001c, 2003). Derived from Foucauldian discourse analysis, Fairclough’s version of CDA is textually oriented and concentrates on the social character of texts (2001b; 2003). A Marxist approach to CDA was consciously avoided with its a priori focus on power relationships in society in order to let the data talk without the filter of an ideological lens and to enhance a sense of interpretational possibilities. Taking cues from Talja (1999), the identification of interpretative repertoires and the institutional functions and effects of the narratives they constitute became the focus.

The methodological approach for practicing CDA that guided this analytical work is outlined by Fairclough in his five stage CDA process (2001b; 2003). The researcher’s role was to:

1. Identify a problem and select a body of representative texts to analyze (stage 1);
2. Map relationships between discourse and social practices (stage 2);
3. Interpret critically these relationships (stage 3);
4. Suggest directions for action or for initiating change in the real-world (stage 4); and to
5. “Reflect critically on the analysis...[and] where s/he is coming from” (Fairclough 2003) by being sensitive to “what resources [she or he is] relying upon to do analysis” (Fairclough 2001c) and her or his own positioning in relationship to the object under study (stage 5).

This analytical process is not linear; it is fundamentally recursive. A great deal of time and effort are spent reading and re-reading texts at every stage of the analysis and the researcher goes back and forth between different texts usually working on different stages of the analysis at the same time (see figure 1 for a diagram illustrating the methodological process).

Research Design

In discourse analytical research, the primary data are texts; they are qualitatively analyzed by the researcher whose role is to provide a critical interpretation. The sample of texts selected for study is called a corpus. The size of the corpus is in general relatively small because doing discourse analysis is labor intensive and time consuming; in fact, some discourse analysts have successfully focused their studies on as little as one single text (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Potter and Wetherell 1987). Texts constituting the corpus can be the
production of a single author, a group of authors, or an institutional entity. They can be collected from one single source (one journal for example) or from a variety of sources (journals, websites, institutional reports or media). In keeping with the theoretical principles of critical discourse analysis, the primary criteria established for the consideration of a text to be included in the corpus is that it should have “an obvious social or institutional significance” (Taylor 2001) and that it should present interesting discursive features and mechanisms.
Corpus selection

In the preliminary analysis of the literature on academic library planning and design three discursive threads – the information commons, the learning commons, and the library designed for learning – were found to dominate discussions of academic library planning and design since 1995. To constitute a corpus for analysis, texts from the LIS literature published between 1995 and 2009 that take up one or more of these dominant topics were identified. The Library Literature & Information Full Text database was searched using the subject headings and keywords “College & University Libraries”, “Architecture and Building”, “Learning Commons”, and “Information Commons”. A body of more than 90 documents emerged which included some of those reviewed earlier in the research process. From these documents, whole monographs and book length works were weeded out because these texts are better suited for content analysis research or discourse analysis focused on a single work. A smaller sample of essays and articles was then extracted by evaluating their potential for CDA (for references to all the texts that were reviewed during the corpus selection process, the interested reader is invited to refer to Closet-Crane 2009). A close reading allowed the weeding out of texts that did not discuss planning and design of the library as learning space and place and those that reported on a particular library building project. A reduced sample of 31 documents was thus constituted.

This still represented an unmanageable number of documents for exploratory discourse analytical research. As a result the researcher, adopting the role of discourse analyst, extracted from the list the most important texts in an attempt to describe and explicate discourse formation about the “academic library as place”. This analysis was done from the perspective of a LIS scholar and an architect seeking to understand the nature of the academic library as a particular type of place from an environmental design perspective. Focusing on texts that discussed the information commons, the learning commons, or the library designed for learning, 12 texts were selected for potential study: Bailey and Tierney (2002), Beagle (1999, 2004), Bennett (2003, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2008), Boone (2003), Halbert (1999), Spencer (2006), and Tramdack (1999). Beagle and Bennett had emerged as dominant authorial figures in the author’s review of the literature (Closet-Crane 2009); therefore, their texts were automatically included. The texts by Halbert (1999) and Tramdack (1999) were included because they were published together in one issue of the JAL as answers to an article by Beagle (1999). Also, Bailey and Tierney (2002) judged that “in 1999, Donald Beagle, together with commentators Martin Halbert and Philip Tramdack, presented substantive theoretical and applied roadmaps for an integrated Information Commons in an academic environment.” The texts by Bailey and Tierney (2002), Boone (2003), and Spencer (2006) were selected on the basis of a preliminary content analysis and for po
### Table 3: Bibliographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and date, Text title</th>
<th>Articles’ provenance</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beagle (1999)</strong>. Conceptualizing an Information Commons. <em>JAL</em>, 25(2).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beagle (2004)</strong>. From Information to Learning Commons.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bennett (2008)</strong>. The Information or Learning Commons: Which will we have? <em>JAL</em>, 34(3).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Halbert (1999)</strong>. Lessons from the Information Commons Frontier. <em>JAL</em>, 25(2).</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Bibliographic information

Potential intertextual and interdiscursive relationships existing with other selected texts they cited. Finally, one more text discussing the evolution of the academic library as learning commons was added for analysis late in the process.
when its publication was brought to the researcher’s attention by its author (Beagle 2009). Table 3 summarizes bibliographical information about these texts.

In order to assess the importance of these 12 texts, citation analyses were performed using Social Science Search and Google Scholar for comparison (results of citations analyses are presented in Table 4). Since the dissertation research has been completed, the Journal of Library Administration (2010, vol. 50) published an entire issue on the topic of information commons lending credibility to the selection of a corpus of texts by Beagle, Bennett, Halbert, and Tramdack (see the introduction by Seal 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Times Cited</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soc. Sci. Search</td>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey &amp; Tierney, 2002</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>56*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beagle, 2004</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2003</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2005</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2006</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2008</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boone, 2003</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Halbert, 1999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer, 2006</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tramdack, 1999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Citation analyses

* Note: Interestingly, the links to 27 of the works citing Bailey & Tierney are in the Chinese language.

Analytical process

Fairclough’s guidelines for the CDA process were used to perform textual and discourse analyses on all the texts in the corpus. First, each text was identified for its origin and style, the participants in discursive activity (authors, audiences, participants called-in or referred to) and the discursive themes presented. Then, the selected items were examined to discern the perspective or viewpoint from
which main themes were represented, the discourses drawn upon and how the characteristics of each text were worked together (intertextuality, interdiscursivity and how a text does valuing, representing, relating, and identifying work). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide detailed documentation of the analytical work undertaken; the reader interested in seeing samples of textual analysis is referred to Closet-Crane (2009).

After analyzing all the texts in the corpus, interactions between texts were examined and a possible interpretation of discursive activity was drawn, the aim of which was to clarify how objects of discourse were constituted and how interpretative repertoires (different ways of viewing the object of discourse) were woven together to construct a vision of the academic library as place. Secondary data created through textual and discourse analyses was then submitted to the last stage of the analytical process, critical analysis.

To construct the analytical toolbox for performing critical discourse analysis, analytical approaches and lines of questioning borrowed from Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), Locke (2004), Phillips and Hardy (2002), Van Leeuwen (2008) and Wood and Kroger (2000) were combined. The critical analytical and interpretive work undertaken was also inspired by the approach of leading discourse analysis researchers from LIS (Frohmann 1992, 1994; Budd 2006; Talja 1999, 2004). The researcher’s training and experiences in librarianship and architecture were also used as a means of examining the tensions that arise in the context of academic library practice from the discourse constructed in the corpus analyzed. The next section represents the interpretation of the results of the discourse analysis.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study arise from using critical discourse analysis as a research method. Doing discourse analysis is labor intensive and time consuming; this restricts the amount of data that it is manageable to analyze. Respected discourse analysts Potter and Wetherell (1987), however, consider that “it is not the case that a larger sample necessarily indicates a more painstaking or worthwhile piece of research”. The validity of this study needs to be evaluated on the strength of the interpretative argument, its believability, and its coherence with the data and its context.

Another limitation resides in the types of texts chosen as data. Other types of texts could have been used such as transcripts of interviews or focus groups with librarians and library directors/managers, or internal documents produced during an academic library design project. Such documents will be used in the future to extract textual data that can be analyzed for comparison with the present interpretative critical analysis. The constitution of a corpus for analysis tends to be value laden. Theoretical and experience-based knowledge of archi-
tectural design, libraries and librarianship of the researcher may have influenced, at cognitive and emotional levels, how texts were selected to be used for data.

Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability of Critical Discourse Analytic Work

Questions of validity, reliability and generalizability have plagued the domain of qualitative research. As an interpretive method discourse analysis (DA) has been particularly vulnerable to critics’ attacks. However, the domain of discourse analysis research has evolved into a field in its own right, and DA scholars have developed accepted definitions of validity, reliability, and generalizability that are consistent with “the nature of the beast”. In this regard Talja’s (1999) article “Analyzing qualitative interview data: The discourse analytic method” is a particularly useful reference work for LIS researchers.

In CDA practice, the validity of a study can be evaluated on the sole strength of the interpretative argument – its believability, and its coherence with the data and its context. Wood and Kroger (2000) propose that validity criteria can be met by achieving the alternative criteria of soundness (by means of orderliness and demonstration), coherence and plausibility. Coherence is achieved by formulating claims clearly and unambiguously. Plausibility answers to the questions: Are the claims acceptable? Are explanations persuasive? Do they make sense in relation to other knowledge?

Reliability depends on the verifiability of the researcher’s interpretations, which must be based solely on research data. Wood and Kroger (2000) suggest that alternative criteria of trustworthiness apply to discourse analytic work rather than reliability criteria; they propose that orderliness and documentation support trustworthiness. Orderliness refers to the ways in which all aspects of research are conducted, recorded and reported (2000). Documentation entails describing clearly all the facets of research, including how the researcher goes about doing discourse analysis and should contribute to the reader’s trust in the analysis. Together with providing data excerpts, documenting ensures the researcher answers to the requirement of accountability (2000). One way to document the research process is to take notes and use journaling to constitute an “audit trail” that allows an external auditor to examine processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation (2000). During the discourse analytical phase of this research, notes were kept by the researcher on the process of selecting and analyzing texts; Drs. Nancy P. Thomas, Gloria Leckie, Lynne Cooper Chase, and Rebecca Miller, advisors on the dissertation committee for the thesis on which this chapter is based, acted as auditors.

In qualitative research and particularly in DA, transferability (Heracleous 2006) and fruitfulness (Wood and Kroger 2000) are considered substitutes for
generalizability. Heracleous describes transferability as a type of generalization that he calls “moderatum generalization”, where the aspects of a situation are exemplars of broader sets of features. Conclusions and interpretations should be transferable and should demonstrate fruitfulness, that is, their potential for making sense of new discourses and for generating fresh explanations (Wood and Kroger 2000).

Findings, Interpretation and Critical Analysis

Findings

Three metaphors play a major role in the constitution of interpretative repertoires. They are “the academic library as information commons” (IC), “the academic library as learning commons” (LC), and “the academic library as space designed for learning” (LDL). Used as repertoire categories, these metaphors stand for new ways of thinking about library planning and design. Four secondary themes were found to have ancillary functions in discourse construction: the traditional library; change; the digital age environment; and, library space. These secondary themes help weave together the interpretative repertoires that construct visions of the academic library as place from complementary perspectives into a single order of discourse on the academic library as learning place (or more simply ALLP discourse). Table 5 summarizes the distribution of interpretative repertoires and secondary themes in the corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Interpretative Repertoires</th>
<th>Secondary Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information Commons</td>
<td>Learning Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beagle, 20004</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beagle, 2009</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2003</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2006</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett, 2008</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>Halbert, 1999</td>
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<td>Tramdack, 1999</td>
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Table 5: Distribution of interpretative repertoires and secondary themes
Construction of interpretative repertoires

The academic library as information commons (IC) interpretative repertoire is elaborated primarily in a group of five texts by Beagle (1999, 2004, 2009), Halbert (1999) and Tramdack (1999) which have been seminal in defining the concept of information commons for the profession. Three articles written by Beagle (1999), Halbert (1999) and Tramdack (1999) were published together in the same issue of JAL. The articles by Halbert (1999) and Tramdack (1999) were presented in JAL as responses to Beagle’s ideas; this dialogical relationship between the three texts establishes them as a collective point of departure for the constitution of the IC repertoire. In fact this interpretation is coherent with the argument made by other participants in the discourse on the academic library planning and design that these three articles acted as roadmaps for the development of information commons in academic library environments (Bai-ley and Tierney 2002).

Linked together in a discursive continuum, the texts by Beagle (1999, 2004, and 2009) are another interesting unit of analysis. In them, Beagle develops an explanatory narrative that describes the development of the information commons as a conceptual model for library service and as a new vision of library space. Among them, the most often cited in the LIS literature on information commons is Beagle’s 1999 article which emerges as a seminal reference. The capitalization of the term Information Commons actively constructs the information commons as an object of discourse by naming not only the concept elaborated by Beagle but a new category of library. Described in its embryonic form as a “computer lab on the first floor of the library” (Beagle 2004), the Information Commons is constructed as a physical manifestation of a concept of service (Beagle 1999, 2009).

In his discussion of the information commons, by not capitalizing the term information commons, Bennett (2008) reduces the constructive power of Beag-ple’s definition. Bennett also minimizes the potential for place-making associated with the information commons concept by describing the information commons as nothing more than “a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools”. The name “information commons” introduced in the discourse on academic libraries thus comes to represent a collection of physical objects (Bennett 2008), a place in the library (Beagle 2004; Tramdack, 1999), or a concept of service (Beagle 1999, 2009; Halbert 1999; Tramdack 1999). In the LIS literature, the information commons as a concept of service (Bailey and Tierney 2002; Cowgill, Beam and Wess 2001; Crockett, Mc Daniel and Remy 2002; Samson and Oelz 2005; Spencer 2006) has received more attention than the information commons as a space or place in the library (Dewey 2002; MacWhinnie 2003; Malenfant 2005); the latter is generally discussed in case studies of academic library overhaul that involved building construction or renovation, administrative reorganization, and service improvement.
Delivered in installments, Beagle’s narrative culminates in the construction of the learning commons as the ultimate transformation of the academic library. The verbs revitalize, reinvigorate, and reposition (Beagle 2009) used to describe the desired impact of the learning commons model on traditional libraries have the effect of anthropomorphizing the academic library. As an institution it is thus implicitly constructed as sickly and in need of a regenerative treatment of some kind. The prescription offered for restoring its health is for it to embrace information technologies and enter the digital age. Within Beagle’s narrative, the transformation of the traditional academic library into the IC (1999) and the evolution of the IC into the LC is explained away as the result of “change dynamics” and “change initiatives” (2004), or “adaptive change” (2009). Terms such as strategic alignment (Beagle, 1999; 2004,), strategic fit (1999; 2004), functional integration (1999; 2004) and change dynamics (2004) are lexical immigrants in the LIS vocabulary that are used along more familiar terms from the LIS discourse on the management of information organizations such as: organizational planning, organizational scope, organizational domains and corporate learning organizations. Their role is to buttress the concept of “Strategic Alignment” (1999) that Beagle borrows from the discourse of management theory. For Beagle, strategic alignment is both the cause for change and the explanation for how the academic library needs to adapt “to [be able to] manage service delivery in the highly complex and fluid digital environment” (1999). Beagle’s constructive rhetorical move has the effect of locating the IC repertoire within an existing order of discourse on academic library administration and management.

The 2003 and 2008 texts by Bennett introduce a critical voice in the IC interpretative repertoire. Bennett’s critical perspective on the information commons can be better understood in the wider context of the sub-group of his texts (2003, 2006, 2008) in the corpus. When he discusses libraries designed for learning (2003), his choice to italicize the term learning commons and not the term information commons in the same sentence (2003) expresses subtly the relative ideological significance of terminology for him. Effectively, by representing the physical information commons as a lower order library type than the learning commons, and perhaps a model that is already “passé”, Bennett buttresses his own argument in favor of designing the academic library for learning (2003, 2008).

The construction of the learning commons as an object of discourse is effected by Beagle (2004) in a manner that parallels the construction of the information commons as object of discourse – the term Learning Commons is capitalized and contracted into the acronym LC. From a discourse analytical perspective, the process of constituting the LC repertoire out of the IC repertoire rests on Beagle taking an evolutionary perspective to changes in the academic library in terms of services, equipments, and physical settings. This time, Beagle borrows a model of change from the American Council of Educa-
tion to explain the IC/LC evolution as the result of far-reaching organizational change (2004, 2009). Evolution occurs when the academic library progressively adapts to a changing social, educational, and technological context surrounding teaching, learning, and the evolution of educational perspectives on information literacy. This discursive move positions Beagle’s explanation in relationship to the LIS order of discourse on library administration and management.

Constituting the role of the learning commons in opposition to that of the information commons, Bennett views the LC as “enacting [an] institutional mission” and moving “from the support of learning [which is the IC’s mission] to learning itself” (2008), the LC model is presented as a desirable evolution of an outdated service-focused IC model to a learning-focused LC model said to respond to current learner-centered trends in higher education as well as to the evolving needs of library users. Bennett’s 2008 article presents some interesting semantic characteristics: in particular extensive overwording and repetition express his preference for Beagle’s learning commons concept. The choice of the verbs used to describe the respective roles of the IC and the LC in regard to an institutional mission is meaningful as well. The verb support (2008) is used to imply the passive role of the library as information commons in the university. In comparison, the verb enact (2008), which is action oriented, is used to portray the library as learning commons as a pro-active institutional unit participating in the university’s mission to produce student-learning.

The theme of the library designed for learning is activated in all three texts by Bennett (2003, 2006, 2008). Textual analysis demonstrates the versatility of the writer in constructing persuasive texts to reach different audiences and contribute to the diffusion of the library designed for learning (LDL) repertoire as ideology. In the 2006 and 2008 articles, “The choice for learning” (2006) and “The information or the learning commons: which will we have?” (2008), Bennett’s discursive style calls to mind political discourse and its propaganda. The titles of these articles could in fact be those of manifestos. The traditional library has been rendered obsolete by the digital revolution and it needs to be overhauled (2006). While the IC and LC repertoires developed by Beagle (1999, 2004, 2009) construct change as evolutionary, the LDL repertoire (in particular as activated in Bennett 2006) constructs change as essentially revolutionary. Bennett’s solution to obsolescence is to produce a paradigm shift that will result in aligning academic library services and practices with learner-centered educational trends (2003 and 2006 in particular). In two of his texts (2006 and 2008), the discourse is oriented towards strategic action; the repetitive collocation of the words library, space and learning creates the effect of a mantra-like incantation from which emerges the seductive expression library designed for learning. In marketing, brand mantras often consist of “three to five word phrases that capture the irrefutable essence or spirit of the brand positioning” (Keller 1999). Brand positioning is about creating the optimal location for the organization’s identity in the minds of customers and of the organization’s
employees so that they think of the brand in the “right way” (1999). The LDL repertoire provides academic library administrators with such an expression; *Library designed for learning* performs as a “brand mantra” which aligns the library’s mission along that of the institution. The term can be subsumed within a palatable and institutionally acceptable argument to sway “the willingness of academic administrators to invest in library facility improvements” (Shill and Tonner 2003a) and to “sell” the library within the academic community by re-positioning the library’s identity to fit the learner-centered trend in higher education.

In the process of constituting the LDL repertoire, Bennett pulls in an education-based interpretative repertoire that works at constructing discursively a call for a “paradigm change” in academic librarianship toward “adopting non-foundational views of knowledge” (Bennett 2006). This discursive strategy serves to buttress Bennett’s argument for the design of library facilities that support collaborative learning inside the library instead of “primarily supporting information use-information consumption” (2006).

The library designed for learning is constituted at once as the object of discourse in Bennett’s texts. The writer’s vision of the library as “space to advance learning and teaching” (2003) is constructed by way of categorization, comparison, and contrast of “two conceptions of the library as a place” (2003). The library as a space “where learning is the primary activity and where the focus is on social exchanges through which information is transformed into the knowledge of some person or group of persons” is constituted as a library category and contrasted against the category of “libraries as service places” (2003). In turn, the discursive construction of the “library as service place” (2003) rests on the description of another library category: the “traditional library” (2003). The “traditional library” is constructed as an undesirable and outdated model with a bibliocentric service ethos that serves primarily as a document warehouse or a sacralized book repository. In the LDL repertoire, the library designed for learning is ideologically constructed as the library of the 21st century. Bennett writes authoritatively and persuasively to convince the library community that this new paradigm should supersede all models for library planning and design; the data and discussion of his research presented in the CLIR report *Libraries Designed for Learning* (CLIR 2003) are used effectively to build his case.

Over time, a dialogical process is enacted predominantly in the texts by Beagle and Bennett that constitute a progression of coherent explanations for the need to plan and design academic library services and spaces in response to the new conditions of the digital age (Beagle, 1999, 2004, 2009; Bennett 2006), to “the unique management challenges and demands of information technology” (Beagle 1999), to the focus on information literacy in the practice of academic librarianship (Beagle 2009; Bennett 2008) and to changing trends in teaching and learning approaches in higher education that focus on learner-centeredness (Beagle 2009; Bennett, 2006).
Construction of the “Academic Library as Learning Place” Order of Discourse

The respective visions of Beagle and Bennett converge to construct the overarching concept of the academic library as a space and place for learning. This concept is enacted in a model of the academic library as a digital age commons appointed with high tech facilities and services for information access, information management and information use that contribute to information and knowledge production. The purpose of the academic library as commons is to provide a learning place aligned with the trend in higher-education toward learner-centered practices (Beagle 2009; Bennett 2008) as such it caters primarily to an undergraduate student population.

Constructed as an object of discourse, the academic library as learning place provides not only access to traditional and emerging tools for the dissemination of knowledge but also adequate and updated spaces to support collaborative knowledge work. An order of discourse has thus been formed through the convergence of the three interpretative repertoires present in the research corpus. Figure 2 illustrates the constitution of the “academic library as learning place” (ALLP) order of discourse in the sample of texts studied.

![Diagram of Academic Library as Learning Place order of discourse]

Figure 2: Constitution of the Academic Library as Learning Place Order of Discourse
Interpretation

For Talja (1999),

“the aim of discourse analysis is not only to identify interpretative repertoires, but to point out the power and influence of particular narratives and to analyze their potential societal and institutional functions and effects”.

Therefore, in order to understand the effects of discourse on social practices related to academic libraries, it is of importance to recognize the agency of Beagle and Bennett in the translation of the IC, LC and LDL interpretative repertoires into the re-conceptualization of the academic library as a learning place. At the discursive level, a community of discourse has emerged where practitioners have contributed to the growth of the literature on information commons, learning commons, and library spaces designed for learning. Another effect of discourse has been the construction of the IC and LC brands with “the library designed for learning” functioning as a brand mantra. The physical enactment of the ALLP discourse is perhaps the most noticeable effect of this discourse. The remodeling and construction of library facilities into information and learning commons is a direct outcome of the implementation of the IC and LC conceptual models at many North American universities.

The ALLP discourse is inserted in a process of diffusion of innovation in the area of academic library planning and design where the model of the commons is constructed as the innovation. Only six years after the publication of Beagle’s (1999) seminal article, Albanese wrote “the concept of an information commons or learning commons has been the buzz for the last five years in talking about the new wave of academic libraries” (2006). A rapid survey of the literature on academic libraries published since 2000 shows that a growing number of journal articles have discussed the concepts and models for academic libraries advocated by Beagle, Bennett, Halbert and Tramdack (Bailey and Tierney 2002; MacWhinnie 2002; Malenfant 2006; Spencer 2006; Roberts 2007; Halbert 2010; Lippincott 2010). A discourse community exists of practitioner-writers who have contributed to the diffusion of the IC and LC models and the evolution of the discourse on libraries as learning places. Adding to the academic librarianship community’s knowledge base on library commons, three monographs have been published that offer extensive guidelines for the implementation of information and learning commons (Beagle, 2006), case studies of information commons (Bailey and Tierney 2008), and a field guide to information commons (Forrest and Halbert 2009). As proof that this discourse has an international reach, there are more and more articles reporting on information and learning commons outside the geographic boundaries of Northern America, for example, Watson (2007) from England, Degwitz (2007)
from Germany, Mountifield (2003) from New Zealand, and the English lan-
guage abstracts for a number of articles published in Chinese in the e-journal
Da xue tu shu guan xue bao (Journal of Academic Libraries) that are accessi-
ble from <http://en.cnki.com.cn/> demonstrate that the trend is far from being
a Western world phenomenon.

Case studies published between 1999 and 2009 provide ample documenta-
tion of the remodeling or construction of many library buildings called informa-
tion or learning commons as well as other transformations that include ad-
ministrative reorganization and creation of new services. The websites of
North American academic libraries offer a dazzling array of photographs de-
picting improved and new facilities designated as commons which provide ob-
servable evidence of the physical effects the ALLP discourse has had on the
transformation of the academic library landscape and on library spaces. Whether this phenomenon can be directly attributed to the texts by Beagle
(1999, 2004), Halbert (1999), and Tramdack (1999) included in the corpus
might be difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, a practical handbook by Beagle
(2006) and a monograph edited by Halbert with Forrest (Forrest and Halbert,
2009) are included in the catalog of numerous academic libraries. Other evi-
dence in the literature shows that the authors studied are regarded as experts on
library commons. Bailey and Tierney (2002) believe that in their 1999 articles
Beagle, Halbert and Tramdack collectively provided roadmaps for incorporat-
ing information commons in academic library environments. Beagle (1999) is
oft quoted, most recently by Seal (2010) and Lippincott (2010) in reference to
the initial and “classic” definition of the IC. Bennett, in turn, is cited in discus-
sions of learning commons; in fact Seal (2010) presents Bennett as a “noted
expert on library learning spaces”. Roberts (2007), who advocates the learning
commons as place as a “center of community” on campus where technology
and space design emphasize knowledge creation, repeatedly refers to Bennett’s
report for CLIR (CLIR 2003).

Critical Analysis

Branding the academic library as commons

Branding is a marketing tool which aims at constructing an identity for a pro-
duct to capture the minds of customers with what makes it special and unique
(Dempsey 2004). The concept of branding the library was originally imported
into librarianship during the 1990s. A flurry of relatively recent articles in the
LIS literature demonstrates the currency of the topic for library practice
brand has been defined as ‘all the things that come to mind, all the expecta-
tions they have, when they hear the word library’, and how you wish people to
perceive your library.” Through Beagle’s narrative, the Information Commons and the Learning Commons are constructed as brands of libraries for which Bennett’s felicitous coining of the expression *library designed for learning* (Bennett 2003) functions perfectly as a brand mantra or “tagline” (Stimson 2007). Altogether, the effect of the discourse developed in the corpus studied is the construction of a new corporate identity of the academic library for the 21st century. The diffusion of these two brands has been effective as the information and learning commons models have been adopted by many academic libraries in North America and around the world and the labels *information commons* and *learning commons* have been used by many institutions when re-naming their libraries.

The silent metaphorization of the library as business

Prima facie, Beagle’s “Conceptualizing an Information Commons” (1999) provides general guidelines for change; however, introduced implicitly in Beagle’s discourse is the undeveloped theme of the library as business. This is made possible by the interdiscursive relationship with the discourse of management unequivocally established by Beagle (1999) when he introduces the concept of Strategic Alignment to justify the evolution of academic libraries. Yet, while adopting and adapting Henderson and Venkatraman’s theory, Beagle leaves out of his argument the fundamental assumption at the origin of the Strategic Alignment model as it was described by its creators: “[Assumption] one, economic performance is directly related to the ability of management to create a *strategic fit* between the position of an organization in the competitive product-market arena and the design of an appropriate administrative structure to support its execution” (Henderson and Venkatraman 1999).

For Henderson and Venkatraman (1999), strategic fit is a *business goal* which exists in response to the pressures of the market economy. They argue that “the inability to realize value from I/T [information technology] investments is, in part due to the lack of alignment between the business and I/T strategies of organizations” (Henderson and Venkatraman 1999). They propose that for an organization or firm to remain competitive, strategic fit should be extended from the business domain to include the information technology domain. In light of this, what does it mean then that in Beagle’s argument concepts of business domain, market/marketplace, and competition are made to disappear while there remain only mentions of “customer service” delivery and of the maximization of “fiscal resources”? (Beagle 1999). Is it possible that, as in many instances in which a theory is imported from one domain into another, Beagle selected out elements that did not fit with his vision of the academic library as organization nor, for that matter, with the traditional vision of the library as an altruistic non-profit service organization?
Interpretation of the contents of Beagle’s text suggests that the library’s business domain is located within that of “the larger institution” that is education related. Indeed, the library as Information Commons where the IC is described as an instructional space (Beagle 1999) is in the business of teaching. However, in texts written at a later date, a refocusing of the discourse follows new educational trends; the library becomes oriented towards learning (Beagle 2004, 2009; Bennett 2008). This discursive activity fits in with universities’ marketing strategies that promote student-centered education; it ensures the alignment of the academic library’s corporate image and taglines with those of the institution.

In the discourse activated in Beagle’s texts, the metaphorization “library = business,” which parallels the marketization of higher education, is suppressed but implicitly understood. A 2006 study, supported by the Center for Facilities Research of the Higher Education Facilities Officers, showed that the brick-and-mortar academic library placed second as a facility that is “extremely or very important” in students’ university selection decision process (Cain and Reynolds 2006). From a market perspective, such findings imply that if the university’s goal is to secure a competitive edge over other universities and colleges, then the library has to keep a competitive advantage in terms of the services it offers not only to its community but to prospective students and faculty that the university may want to attract. In this context, strategic alignment becomes more than the information technology management issue described by Beagle (1999); it becomes a marketing issue and the buildings designed or redesigned to accommodate new facilities and services come to perform as marketing tools for the institution.

“Prominent library changes, such as a building renovation, provide the perfect opportunity to re-examine the library ‘brand’ … and try to position the library relative to the competition (other information resources and services) favorably in users’ minds. In the case of a building renovation, the branding process can also influence decision-making regarding new building spaces, library services and collections” (Stimson 2007).

Treatment of Space Design in the ALLP Discourse

While architecture and design can be used to reinforce a brand’s image, when Beagle and Bennett set off to discuss the planning and design of learning-centered academic libraries they produce lists of desired spaces and examples of space diagrams with sketches of furniture arrangement, floor plans, and photographs from successful library spaces (Bennett 2006, figs. 4-7 and Beagle 2009, figs. 6-9). Such exemplars provide primarily a catalog of forms, styles, and architectural details that have a limited usefulness for librarians in
practice because they do not provide sufficient and adequate information for developing design concepts. Designing a library building with comfortable and user-friendly spaces consists of much more than enclosing and dressing up spaces that have been organized into a functional diagram drawn by a library planning and design team. “Design is about the creation of form that integrates aesthetic intention, functional performance and material durability into a spatial entity” (Shih 2004). However, the academic library as learning place discourse fails to provide a discussion of library building design from a holistic perspective that would encompass form and function as well as comfort (environmental qualities) and delight (aesthetic intentions). Instead, the texts analyzed project an image of architectural design as being an elementary matter of form simply following function subordinated to ideals of service that seems to pervade much of the literature on library planning and design.

Notwithstanding the use of the descriptors “architecture and building” in the bibliographic descriptions for articles written by Beagle (1999), Bennett (2006), Halbert (1999) and Tramdack (1999), in these texts the writers discuss the design of new library services more extensively than the building design attributes of the different versions of academic library they propose. The treatment of library design issues focuses on the types of library spaces that are needed to accommodate activities, the objects and equipment that populate those spaces and operational needs. This approach is characteristic of a vision of library design and planning as facilities management; it dwells on the specifics of a space program where the building is a behavior setting reduced to its non-psychological components – a behavior setting is defined as “a bounded space that is constructed and defined through two sets of components, psychological and non-psychological” (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001) (author’s emphasis).

Interestingly enough, Bennett (2006) deplores that “the knowledge base that guides library space planning is ... poorly balanced, tilted heavily towards library operations”. He makes a step in the right direction when he identifies the cognitive values present in traditional library buildings designed in the idiom of churches (2006). According to Bennett (2006), the cognitive values that draw people to a place are coherence, legibility, complexity and mystery; however, he does not show how those values might relate to the design of learning places. Beagle, Halbert, and Tramdack as well fall short of discussing the role of psychological factors and place making in their discourse on the information and learning commons.

Place-making and the ALLP Discourse

The ALLP discourse tends to address what is known through the mind about a library – its role and location on campus and the functions of spaces and their contents; but it fails to address what is known about the library as place
through the senses. From the perspective of an architect, it is frustrating that this discourse does not address issues of place-making. One of the goals of architecture is to create a physical/material place; but a place can also be architecturally created in the imagination or remembered in memories. The ALLP discourse seems to indicate that in the imagination of library managers and librarians the library designed for learning ought to be a place that embodies a culture of learning and that the brick-and-mortar library should be designed in such a way that its users can experience learning. Apart from the usual listing of tasks, activities, and behaviors associated with what has come to be viewed as learning, there is no discussion of what the experience of learning may be in a particular architectural space.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General information and referral desk</td>
<td>functions as first point of contact and general help center</td>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer lab</td>
<td>on the first floor of the library near the reference department</td>
<td>Beagle, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction rooms/electronic classrooms</td>
<td>networked and flexible</td>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support space(s) for library staff’s activities</td>
<td>for instructional activities in information literacy and staff development</td>
<td>Bennett, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group study spaces/rooms</td>
<td>networked collaborative learning environments where group process can shape knowledge</td>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual study spaces</td>
<td>individual carrels</td>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social spaces</td>
<td>comfortable seating spaces role of food in the social dimension of learning</td>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Spatial Needs for a Learning Library

To provide a demonstration of the weaknesses of the discourse elaborated in the corpus in terms of helping to conceive of the “library as learning place” in terms of place, the author’s experience as an architect was used to extract from the research corpus the skeleton of a hypothetical architectural program. Using canonical architectural programming categories, goals, needs, and con-cepts were derived from the information contained in the eight texts analyzed (for an excellent primer on architectural programming see Cherry 1999). Finally, based solely on the researcher’s interpretation of the texts’ contents, a project statement was drafted (design problem) for the design of an academic library as learning place. Results of this exercise are presented below in Tables 6-8 and in Figure 3.

The results of the texts’ content analysis for programming purposes only permitted the researcher to extract a few conceptual requirements. In regard to psychological components of design, nothing more useful is offered in the texts than the vague notion that in order to learn students needs to study and for that they require spaces for quiet individual study and spaces for collaborative/group study. Concepts associated with spatial qualities and the sense of place in terms of the environmental qualities and mood or ambiance that would foster learning are found to be sorely missing in the project statement; this reflects an important gap existing in the ALLP discourse.
The Discursive Construction of the Academic Library as Learning Place in A2K

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form and Image</td>
<td>The library building will “exert a significant presence across campus”</td>
<td>Beagle, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Building design will reflect the library’s role as a “powerful community builder on campus” and “express the unity of knowledge that that underlies the idea of the university.”</td>
<td>Bennett, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Building design will reflect the library’s role as a “powerful community builder on campus” and “express the unity of knowledge that that underlies the idea of the university.”</td>
<td>Bennett, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolism</td>
<td>Building design will reflect the library’s role as a “powerful community builder on campus” and “express the unity of knowledge that that underlies the idea of the university.”</td>
<td>Bennett, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>The library building will provide an environment deeply responsive to the educational mission of the institution</td>
<td>Tramdack, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological factors</td>
<td>The library building will provide an environment “where curiosity, creativity, and lifelong learning are sparked and nurtured.”</td>
<td>Tramdack, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>The library environment will aim to provide a parallel to “the new corporate environments students will be competing within” after leaving the university.</td>
<td>Beagle, 1999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Concepts for a Learning Library

Architectural Problem Statement

The library building will have a significant presence on campus and reflect the library’s role as a powerful community builder. The building design will provide an environment deeply responsive to the educational mission of the institution where curiosity, creativity, and lifelong learning are sparked and nurtured. The library environment will aim to provide a parallel to the new corporate environments students will be competing within after leaving the university. Space design will reflect a focus on student learning that shows an understanding of the social dimension of learning and acknowledges the role of food in social interactions. Provision of adequate learning environments will reflect the need to comfortably accommodate individual and collaborative learning practices supported by a variety of networked spaces organized for work, study, service delivery, and information literacy instruction. Space design will incorporate the flexibility needed to accommodate changes in the future uses of spaces.

Figure 3: Statement of the Design Problem
Conclusion

Since the mid 1990s, the discourse developed in seminal texts from the academic library planning and design literature promotes information commons, learning commons and libraries designed for learning as the new facilities and services that respond to student-centered educational trends and to the needs of students and educators in our changing digital environment. Discursive activity effectively constructs the library designed for learning as a brand mantra useful to market the models of the information and the learning commons while conforming to the spirit of the A2K philosophy. This discourse has provided academic library administrators and librarians with a new corporate identity for the academic library. With time, the diffusion of this discourse throughout the professional community has resulted in the adoption of information and learning commons models for the construction of new and remodeled library facilities that provide innovative library services. In effect, the expansive literature that has been produced on the topic of library commons contains “a great deal of descriptive research documenting the specifics of [the information commons trend]” (Halbert 2010).

Yet, in the professional discourse on the learning commons, there remains to be included a meaningful discussion of the role that library architecture and environmental design may have in supporting the library’s mission to facilitate learning and access to knowledge. It is alarming that existing discussions concentrate on high tech information infrastructures and on space planning aspects of the library – such as floor plans and furnishings – and fail to consider the psychological role architecture can play in the way users experience the library and its sense of place. As a result, generic spatial configurations have become a standard feature of learning commons; yet, should not librarians question the appropriateness of jumping on the bandwagon and buying trendy models wholesale? How does the one-stop shopping information helpdesk work out in practice? It is meant to centralize check out, reference service, orientation and sometimes other non-library services offered at this point. The design of this multipurpose counter has been advocated to serve information and learning commons as a magnet in the middle of a vast reconfigurable multiuse space where an archipelago of computer-islands stands for a vamped-up lab. Sometimes, this configuration works but at other times it does not. As if proof were needed that something is amiss with the cookie-cutter or pattern book approach to library design, some (to remain unnamed) academic libraries have had to remediate to the shortcomings of the central help desk in their newly opened learning commons.

Knowledge gaps still exist in the existing discourse; it fails to help academic librarians think about the library as learning place in experiential terms. It would be more useful for all those involved in academic library planning and design if librarians discussed in greater depth what they mean by learning
in the context and physical environment of the library. The information commons model aimed to propose a one stop-shopping environment supporting the transformation of information into knowledge into final product (Church 2005); it originally had a strong focus on high-tech information infrastructures and instructional spaces dedicated to information literacy. In the learning commons, learning is expected to happen from without the confines of the information literacy classroom; however, what learning means and who does the learning remain vague in the existing discourse. In the library environment, is learning a mental state? Or, is it a set of desirable outcomes of some type of activity? Does is correspond to identifiable behaviors? How does learning in the library feel to students? To faculty? To librarians themselves? These are a few of the questions research will need to answer.

Future research needs to move into the field if one is to understand how users of learning commons experience them as space and place. Ethnographic and phenomenological approaches should be used to study various categories of users including students, faculty and library staff. Qualitative research methods including contextual task analysis, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, participant observation and user studies yield rich and varied data while inductive methods of analysis can provide an understanding of the users’ lived experience.

Research is also needed to understand the library as learning place from the perspective of architecture, environment and behavior studies. Post occupancy evaluation techniques from the fields of architecture and environment behavior applied to case studies of existing library buildings should be made by interdisciplinary teams of librarians, architects and environmental psychologists; thus, the study of data from existing library buildings could support evidence-based library planning and design. Given the current obsession with efficacy measurement and evaluation, such as the evaluation of facility improvement on library usage and learning outcomes, it might be useful in the future to integrate such techniques into library evaluation practices.

It is hoped that in the future, by approaching library design from the mixed perspectives of architecture and human geography, ecological psychology, and environment and behavior studies, library managers and librarians could begin to free themselves from some of the conceptual constraints that limit their approach to academic library design. They would then be able to envision imaginative spaces to build the academic library of the future as a place where users can experience knowledge as alive.

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