The once and future library

Librarians, architects, and other scholars gather at MIT to reflect on the future of libraries.

Sharon Lacey | Arts at MIT
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Beyond being a book repository, the ancient Library of Alexandria was a working resource for scholars. Joined physically to the "Mouseion" — a Greek word meaning a place where the Muses of myth are active — the library contained a lecture hall ("exedra"), a refectory for communal meals ("oikos"), and a covered walkway ("peripatos"), where scholars could walk in the shade with their books, debating, reading, and talking. This ancient image of the library as a place for scholars to collaborate, to eat, to read, and to think endures — even as we have experienced a sea change in how information is preserved, discovered, and shared in the digital age.

For millennia, libraries have been physical places where information and society intersect. Of course, information and society are not static. As clay tablets gave way to scrolls, and then to codices, and now digital texts, libraries have adapted. As literacy has become the norm, as the scholarly community has become more inclusive, as reading habits have changed, and as many of us have access to tens of thousands of texts on electronic devices, libraries have evolved. These sweeping changes in information technology and to social behaviors surrounding reading and learning invariably affect the library’s edifice.
David Adjaye, the 2016 recipient of the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts at MIT, is one of the preeminent architects responding to the changing needs of libraries. His Idea Stores in East London and his Francis Gregory Neighborhood Library and William O. Lockridge/Bellevue Library in Washington have revitalized the public library for the 21st century, while maintaining libraries’ abiding functions as communal spaces and cultural storehouses.

Adjaye recently participated in a panel discussion at MIT about the “Future of the Library,” where he; Ginnie Cooper, retired chief librarian of the District of Columbia Public Library; Nader Tehrani, dean of the Irwin C. Chanin School of Architecture at The Cooper Union; Jeffrey Schnapp, professor of romance languages and literature and comparative literature at Harvard University; and Chris Bourg, director of the MIT Libraries, shared their insights with the MIT Libraries Task Force and the broader community. Throughout the evening, these esteemed architects, librarians, and scholars discussed precedents in their own work that hint at the future, as well as the ambitious work ahead for libraries to realize their potential as spaces for engagement, creation, reflection, or refuge.

To further explore the topic, we asked several MIT librarians — Jana Dambrogio, the Thomas F. Peterson (1957) Conservator; Lorrie McAllister, digital and special collections strategist; Cassandra Silvia, program head for access and information services; and Stephen Skuce, program manager for rare books, to share their thoughts on the transformations they have experienced at MIT Libraries and what future libraries may look like, in terms of space, and also in terms of collections, preservation, research, and patron experience. Here are some of their reflections:

Preserving the cultural record

“Preserving digital objects over time is a wild frontier. It’s a huge concern for all of us. In a library setting, we are here for the long term. Everything we do, presumably, we’re constantly thinking the future is longer than the past. We have an obligation to keep this stuff and be able to serve it quickly to people who want it. We haven’t been able to stop doing a lot. Books still have to be findable. Not everything on the shelf is available in digital form. That legacy of print stays with us.” —Stephen Skuce

“Preserving the cultural record — both digital resources and analogue materials — is a massive challenge facing libraries and facing society in general. Wrapped up in that is copyright and copyright term and digitization. What do we do with born digital collecting, and how do we preserve things that are born digital? And who gets to choose what we preserve? How do we ensure equity and inclusion and a multi-perspective cultural history? A pitfall to avoid in collections is sidelining certain contributions, or arguing that books not in use should be stored off campus. People who have been marginalized in certain disciplines may continue to be overlooked if their work is off site. We want to avoid just housing the greatest hits in each discipline. We want to include other perspectives that enrich the view of the subject. It’s a self-fulfilling prophesy that if it’s off site, it will get less use.” —Lorrie McAllister

Material culture

“The first inkling of MIT is in the form of a letter from William Barton Rogers to his brother Henry. We have this letter. It’s a man writing to his brother to say, ‘I want to make a school — a different kind of school.’ We can type that up and we can digitize it, so you could see an image of it. But it’s awfully nice to be in a space with that piece of paper. It anchors things in a way.” —Stephen Skuce

“A thrilling change that is happening in libraries’ and archives’ approach to conservation is the value placed on the
material culture. It’s not simply, ‘Let’s preserve this.’ It’s ‘Let’s preserve this tear. Let’s preserve these fingerprints. How can we repair the spine of this book without taking all the materials off?’ It’s exciting to bring this kind of conservation that I practice to MIT and have the Institute embrace it and apply this approach to the collections here — repairing the books in a more sustainable way. We are doing case studies not only on rare materials, but on books in general collections that do circulate. What are our guidelines for repair to books that may be rare materials in the future?” —Jana Dambrogio

“I don’t think people realize we have our archival materials, a growing collection of contemporary artists books in Rotch and our rare book collections. We have all these treasures that you want to touch and feel and experience and that make you want to slow down. The music library just bought an old Edison crank record player and the Edison rolls. People love the old technologies, and now we can share them.” —Jana Dambrogio

**Future of collections**

“Resources and scholarship will continue to be created in digital format. Print will not go away — whether it takes the form of general collections, special collections, unique materials or archives. We will continue to steward print collections. Something that is an issue is the metadata about those things and querying that data in a way that makes sense to you. If you are standing in a print collection in the stacks, how do you know that the book you’re looking at has electronic books that relate to it? Our methods of search and discovery and interaction will become more sophisticated.” —Lorrie McAllister

“I think a lot of libraries are struggling with the future of collections. Here, a lot of the sciences prefer electronic content, but we also have a really robust humanities program and they want the print source. So, we have to balance those needs and work within the space we have. In a place like Cambridge, you cannot always add more space, so you have to maximize the experience for the user while keeping those constraints in mind. For several years, we’ve been working on purchasing more and more digital collections, especially in journals. Journals are expensive, very heavy and they take up a lot of space, which matters in architectural terms because there is load bearing in all of these buildings. They can only hold so much weight. With some of the MIT buildings being built on landfill — because it was swampland — loadbearing becomes important and shelf space is limited. So, as we purchase electronic content, we can move those materials off campus.” —Cassandra Silvia

“What I’m excited about is making special collections available on the web. As we go along, we can digitize more of our special collections and make them available to more people. General collections will be easier to manage because they’ll be in these big packages, which means we can do more work on special collections and archives. I think that’s where we’re headed as a discipline. I think it’s a shift we are seeing and will continue to see. The shift we see in publishing is that there’s more on demand publishing, which poses problems for libraries because it’s harder to discover them or the binding is not so good, so we see cheaper and cheaper binding on these things. It’s a problem for collecting, a problem for preservation, and it contributes to the death of the small press.” —Lorrie McAllister

“As digital collections grow, people see us removing physical materials from the library. We actually never withdraw books, even if we remove them and store them elsewhere. It is hard to help people understand that our electronic collections are immense. How do we physically represent them and allow the user to understand their depth. Having a visual representation of the collection is one area of opportunity or growth.” —Cassandra Silvia

New spaces for new research

“Nicely wired, small group meeting spaces are in very high demand on campuses everywhere. I don’t think it’s a frill, and I don’t think it’s a fad. I think there is a lot to be said for collaborative work. You need that collaborative space to sit alongside the study carrels and quiet personal spaces.” —Stephen Skuce

“It would be great to have our conservation lab visible sometimes and to have the ability to invite people into the space. It would be wonderful to have a technology room with space to teach an [Independent Activities Period course]. In the background would be the study collection, the tools we use, or older technologies, like a printing press. Part of my vision would be to have that connect to an exhibition space. Imaging labs and data storage would also be part of my ideal vision, as well as it having room to relax — a hammock, perhaps. We want to be mindful, flexible, and efficient. One of our goals in this lab is to touch people’s lives and get them interested.” —Jana Dambrogio

“As far as the future, ARL Libraries are realizing what dynamism is in their special collections. And a lot of them have state-of-the-art instruction spaces; it’s something we don’t have yet and are working toward. It’s very important to have places that are optimized for protecting and sharing. We need to preserve, protect, and share.” —Stephen Skuce

“Making sure that spaces are designed to accommodate the activities of the future is key, but the spaces need to be flexible because those activities will change. And as they do, technological interventions will be necessary.” —Lorrie McAllister

The ideal library space

“Clear organization is paramount. ‘Save the time of the user’ is one of the oldest catchphrases in library science; Charles Ammi Cutter, a librarian from the 19th century said it. If you can possibly make it easier, you do so. Certainly, for a lot of undergrads at MIT, the library is a refuge — as it is for many of us. A dorm room isn’t always the most conducive place to study. The shushing librarian is a ridiculous stereotype — an offensive stereotype. The librarians I know are all about communicating and interacting. But MIT students deserve a fairly quiet place to learn the hard stuff they’re trying to learn, and that’s a very important function of the libraries at MIT. At the same time, we need places to meet and share information. Not every assignment is ‘go work on your problem set alone.’” —Stephen Skuce

“I like aesthetically pleasing spaces that are light and airy. One important thing to me is getting into a library and being able to navigate. It is also useful to have a mix of spaces: a café, a long table, or a comfy chair for reading a magazine. It’s important to create a comfortable environment where people feel they can spend a long time.” —Cassandra Silva

“My preferred library environment is well designed, welcoming, and has good signage. And for libraries, resources are important. You have to be able to know how to find materials. Having spaces that encourage you to think and feel and be creative are the most engaging spaces — not only for libraries. What libraries are for a lot of people is a clean bathroom or a place to get out of the rain. There is still a digital divide, and people need a place to draft a resume or apply for jobs or what have you.” —Lorrie McAllister

Topics: