The academic library has long served as a community anchor on campus, welcoming all students, faculty, and staff regardless of disciplines or areas of study. This spirit of inclusion and the pursuit of knowledge will always be at the core of an academic library's mission; however, with new understandings about how we learn, unprecedented access to an ever-growing amount of information, and technology-driven education platforms, today's academic libraries are experiencing a transformation.

SCB's Campus Environments practice group is working with colleges and universities across the country to understand how a new generation of learners and educators are impacting the design of campus spaces and buildings. What possibilities lie ahead for the academic library? We offer five key observations for thought.

Collections

The library continues to serve as a central resource for information on campus, but an ever expanding spectrum of formats is changing how students and faculty access and utilize this information.

What does this mean for library design?

01. Access to, not just the storage of, the print and digital collection should be a primary driver in space planning and design.

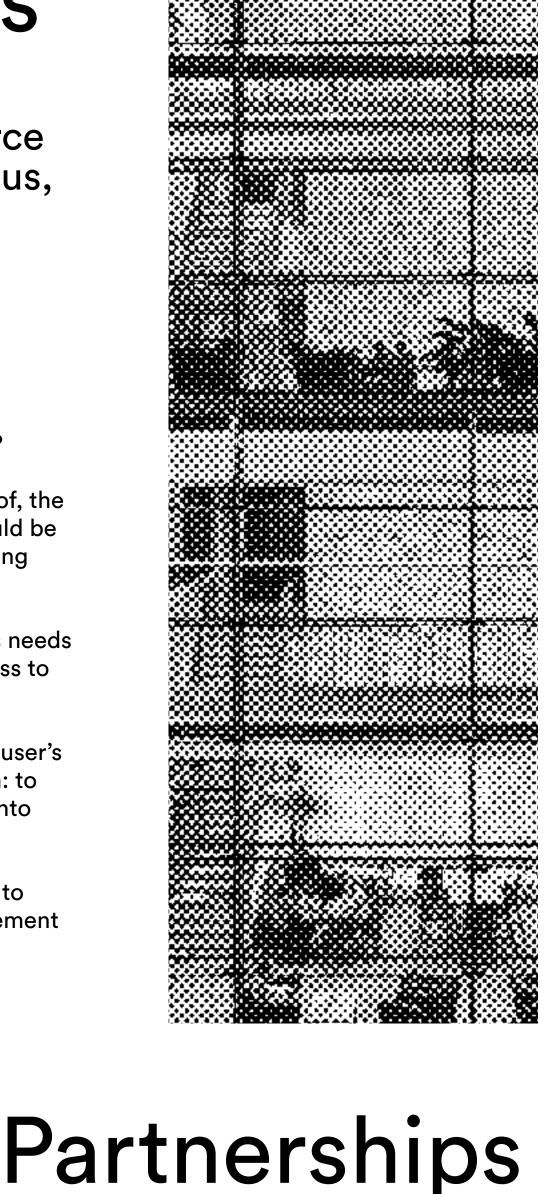02. Spaces have to support a user's needs for easy and simultaneous access to information across mediums.
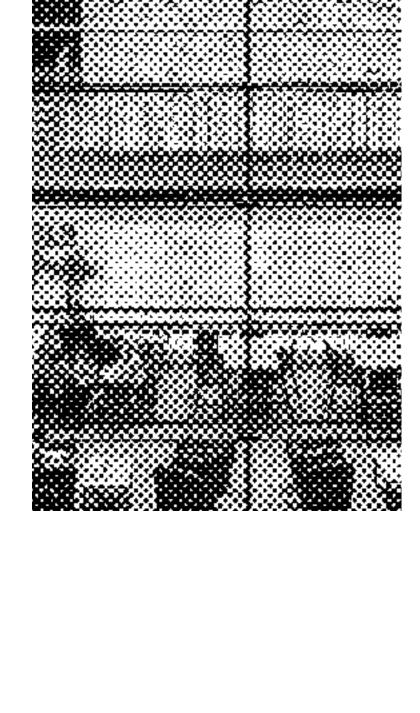
03. Design should accommodate a user's need to manipulate information: to access, combine, and convert into other formats.

04. Arrange key space adjacencies to support the need for fluid movement between the collections and study spaces.

Partnerships

The library has always been a place that encourages interdisciplinary study and exploration. This continues today in a more planned manner with surveys showing that nearly 75 percent of academic libraries share space with programs and departments administered by non-library staff.

What does this mean for library design?

01. Planning for library spaces should be an inclusive and transparent process that engages multiple campus stakeholders.

02. Designers must understand the various goals and needs of all stakeholders, and communicate and facilitate a shared understanding among the library and its partners.

03. Adjacencies are key to encouraging departmental convergence and interdisciplinary activities.

04. The process, and subsequent design, must respect that librarians are the stewards of the building.

Contemplation and Collaboration

Many students learn by toggling back and forth between engagement and introspection. As a result, three primary modes of study have emerged on campus:

Alone: focused, quiet, heads-down work.
Alone-together: individual study amongst others
Together: collaborative group work

What does this mean for library design?

01. In addition to an infusion of spaces to host and support active group work, dedicated space for quiet individual study will continue to be a critical part of the library experience.

02. Design elements can encourage a desired behavior; lighting and acoustic levels, color, furniture layouts, etc. can come together to signify to users that they are in a quiet space vs. a group space.

03. Flexibility can be achieved through technology, allowing students to plug in when needed and unplug when they want.

Information Into Knowledge

New insights about how we learn has taught us that knowledge is a multi-stranded network of visual and aural language, memory, emotion, and sensation. Thus, design must take into account all of these factors to create spaces that truly foster learning.

What does this mean for library design?

01. Spaces and technology to support data mining and visualization, immersive virtual reality investigations, the digital humanities, and the emerging importance of AI will be increasingly important in the academic life of students and faculty.

02. Wellness will make its way into the library through design and materials that prioritize health and comfort.

03. Sustainable design strategies, like natural lighting and ventilation, can serve a dual purpose, reducing energy use and cost while creating healthier interior environments.

The Librarian

With information now ubiquitous, librarians are more important than ever, serving as stewards of large multi-media collections. With the library as their workplace, attention must be given to the spaces and resources they need as professionals.

What does this mean for library design?

01. With librarians shifting from services providers to co-collaborators, spaces for teamwork are necessary as spaces for individual research.

02. Library design should balance librarians availability to patrons with space and privacy to perform their work.

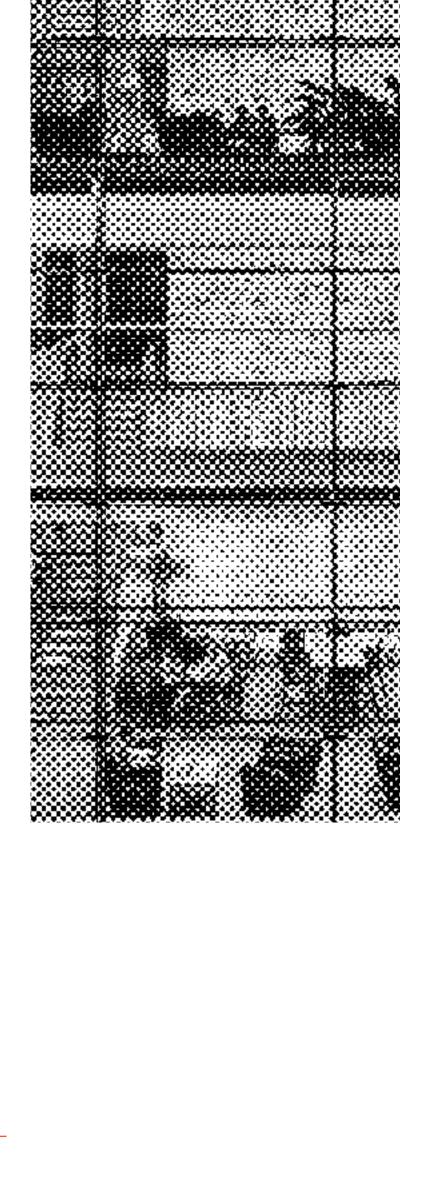03. Clear sightlines are critical, both in establishing accessible points of service for users and allowing library staff to easily monitor spaces.

04. Library staff need flexible spaces where they can test workflows and adjacencies.