

INTELLIGENT DESIGN AND THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN RESEARCH LIBRARY COLLECTIONS¹

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As this conference is dedicated to looking ahead, it appears an appropriate time to take another good look at the forces that have shaped American research library collections. Are they the product of careful planning or did they evolve as results of a series of random occurrences spurred by environmental influences? Are there past or recent trends that you may want to take into account as you plan for the future?

The title of this introductory paper, alluding to contemporary debates in other segments of American society, is not to be taken too seriously. There are no acts of God to be reported here, although I can recall many devilish tricks from faculty, librarians and university administrators trying to thwart the progress of building collections. The topic of this paper is really the rise and accomplishments of our profession, particularly in the collection development field - a celebration of an intelligent and industrious profession.

As you embark on a few days of contemplation and planning, I would like to send you off with a sense of encouragement and optimism. Environmental changes are always challenges, but in the evolution of library collections there is no one way of finding solutions.

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I will talk about how collection development emerged as a professional responsibility in the second part of the 20th century, and how the profession has empowered itself through research, methodology, documentation and education.

I will limit myself to the American experience. The profession in Europe developed differently, although in recent years there is much similarity. I will also limit myself to research libraries. Having taught general collection development for twenty-five years with great conviction and satisfaction, I am still convinced that much of the research result applies across the spectrum of the profession. However, we must recognize that the impetus for collection development interest and innovation really came from the research library community.

But, if we are to celebrate our accomplishments today, it is good to remember it wasn't always that way.² Until the second world war, library development was in the hands of library directors, with considerable, albeit very uneven, faculty input and effort. In several cases, the university president or the dean of the graduate school played an active role. After all, faculty recruitment and retention was the highest competitive priority and very often library collections and the promise of acquisitions were the lure. There were, of course, some formidable library directors, such as William Warner Bishop at Michigan, who paid much attention to buying books, periodicals, collections and soliciting gifts. In the departmental and professional libraries, the faculty played the dominant role. The library profession, however, small as it was, was mainly concerned and identified with cataloging and classification.

But with the decline in purchasing power in the 1930's came also concern for the collections. Library surveys in various parts of the country tried to assess the collections and explore the potential for resource sharing. Robert Downs of Illinois developed the then standard technique for collection description, an art that regrettably was lost for

² Hendrik Edelman and G. Marvin Tatum, "The Development of the Collections in American University Libraries". College and Research Libraries vol. 37(3)1976

some generations, when we catalogued so many trees that we couldn't see the forest anymore. I will return to the new prominence of collection description.

The same concern for the fate of the collections was expressed in the meetings of the newly founded Association of Research Libraries, as well as in the scholarly societies such as the American Historical Association. Studies towards regional and national cooperation were commissioned, one of which by the indefatigable and ubiquitous bibliographer, Douglas McMurtrie, in 1939³ yet to be studied in detail, but no action was taken until 1942 when the foundation of the so-called Farmington Plan was laid.⁴

The end of the second world war marked the beginning of the great expansion of American higher education. New universities were founded and they needed collections while existing libraries needed upgrading. The need for librarians to manage this process brought an influx of new talent to our libraries. Several came out of the intelligence branch of the armed forces, such as Robert Taylor and Fred Kilgour, but many were well educated soldiers, for whom a quick library degree offered great promise. David Kaser (Cornell), John McDonald (Connecticut) and Carl Jackson (Penn State) come to mind. All started their careers as acquisitions librarians and quickly rose through the ranks to become the new breed of library directors.

At the same time, the talent of several Jewish exiles from Germany, Austria were added to the ranks. Rudolph Hirsch at the University of Pennsylvania and especially Felix Reichmann at Cornell, greatly influenced the ambitious foreign acquisitions and were able to translate faculty needs into a more cohesive program. The model followed was still the one set by the larger and older American libraries, which were, in turn, heavily influenced by German academic libraries of the nineteenth century. Retrospective purchases were boosted by a large-scale reprinting program started during the war. Acquisitions and serial departments were the place to be. The money was there and

³ Douglass C. McMurtrie, A Suggested Program for Augmenting Materials for Research in American Libraries. American Historical Association, 1939.

⁴ Ralph D. Wagner, A History of the Farmington Plan. Scarecrow Press, 2002

faculty new it! Dorothy Keller, the dean of the acquisitions profession at Berkeley at one time had a staff of seventy!

The new programs also spawned a group of ambitious and well-organized booksellers in Western Europe who supplied both new and antiquarian books and periodicals. With the Library of Congress in the lead, they developed the capability of blanket orders, based on their national bibliographies thus allowing for a more orderly flow of new materials in languages for which the libraries often were not staffed. The Library of Congress became even more prominent as a pacesetter with the establishment of Public Law 480, National Program for Acquisition and Cataloging and as well as other international cooperative programs between libraries and booksellers.

The need for more international library staff became apparent in the 1950's when the United States government, under the National Defense Education Act, began to fund faculty and students in newly established university centers for various area programs, notably in Asian, Eastern European and Latin American studies. Often starting as catalogers, several of the language specialists also became bibliographical specialists and soon the major libraries had a corps of bibliographers for each of the programs. In these new area programs, faculty involvement was considerable and many times took place in the form of overseas buying trips. Large amounts of material from all over the world entered the library, often without much selectivity. There was no previous bibliographical model available. This was a new territory with new rules and it effectively established the collection as bibliography.

But faculty participation in collection development for the general library collections was waning, partly because there few rewards for the amount of work involved and partly because the new generation of faculty members was often no longer conversant with the bibliography of their fields.

It is not surprising that some library directors were beginning to be concerned about the lack of oversight over these huge and expensive programs. But in the traditional

administrative model, collection development did not fit. It was not yet recognized as a legitimate professional occupation. Nominally, this was still the domain of the faculty. Technical services and public services positions were well established. At Cornell, Felix Reichmann in recognition of his work, carried both technical services and collection development titles for a while, but that was unique. Some libraries had established the position of university bibliographer as coordinator.

Here is where I insert myself into the story. I had started working for Martinus Nijhoff in The Hague in 1958 and was sent out to the US as their sales representative for new and antiquarian books and periodicals in 1961. I traveled throughout the United States and Canada for four years, four months each year in the fall, and became very familiar with library directors, acquisitions librarians, bibliographers and influential faculty members. When David Kaser learned through the grapevine that I was interested in change⁵, he invited me to become the first university bibliographer at the Joint University Library in Nashville. I arrived in 1967 with the assignment to wrest away faculty control of selection and build a more systematic program.

Shortly afterwards, David Kaser succeeded Steve McCarthy as library director at Cornell and his first concern was the replacement of the retiring Felix Reichmann, whose stellar reputation with the faculty was very much in tact. I became the lucky choice and moved to Ithaca in 1970. Those were challenging days at Cornell with the presidency discredited and the faculty badly split over the university's response to student unrest. Olin Library was firebombed in my first week of work. The new administration was faced with rebuilding confidence and a shortage of funds. The library expenses, notably of acquisitions, came under scrutiny. The need for increased accountability became apparent, while Kaser tried to bring more management techniques to the organization. I was in need of help.

For already several years, the heads of technical services in the larger research libraries had been meeting at ALA to discuss common interest. To my surprise, there were several

⁵ Wouter Nijhoff had retired and the new management was stale

important collection development issues on their agenda. While I worked well enough with my Cornell technical services colleague Ryburn Ross, I nevertheless felt that I should be at least present. While uttering my frustration in the ALA corridors to Helen Welch Tuttle, a long time friend from Illinois and Princeton, she suggested that I simply convene my own group and take control of the collection development agenda. And so it happened. I sent invitations to the top fifty or so libraries and eagerly awaited response. At our first meeting at ALA in 1971 there were about eight of us. The other universities had no one to send. But it was an eager group and as the word about our agenda quickly spread, by the Midwinter meeting, there were some twenty-five participants, including some library directors.

With strong pressure from Harvard's Gordon Buchanan, the earlier mentioned Farmington Plan became the first concern. It soon became clear that there was no sentiment left and that we should recommend to ARL to officially declare the program no longer relevant. It had never worked well and was largely superceded by LC's blanket order program, which was being replicated by many larger libraries. The old guard at ARL was not happy with the young upstarts, but we did represent the major libraries and had support from our directors. But it was the discussion about the reasons for the demise that was the most stimulating and far-reaching.⁶ There was agreement that the lack of evaluation tools had led to all the confusion and that no other cooperative program could and should operate without such tools. But the questions was how to proceed. It was Micha Namenwirth from Berkeley, who suggested that we invite to our next meeting his colleague LeRoy Ortopan, who had developed an elaborate shelflist measurement scheme first used in 1966 at Northwestern and Wisconsin and later at Berkeley with a standardized breakdown of the major LC classes. His scheme was adopted and the decision was made to produce a collective edition including the data of all the participating libraries.⁷ Library automation had already advanced enough to produce it efficiently. Now we had a tool for collection analysis and comparison and a method to monitor growth, albeit with many faults.

⁶ Hendrik Edelman, "The Death of the Farmington Plan". Library Journal April 15, 1973

⁷ LeRoy D. Ortopan, "National Shelflist Count: A Historical Introduction". Library Resources and Technical Services, vol. 29 (Oct/Dec. 1985), p. 328-32

Simultaneously a small group of us, dubbed quickly the collection development “mafia”, had infiltrated and taken over the leadership of the ALA Collection Development Committee to work on the rest of the agenda. There we committed ourselves to preparing a series of collection development and evaluation manuals, bringing together the best of our professional knowledge and practice and organizing a series of ALA programs to introduce the topics to the profession. The culmination of all these efforts was the collection development pre-conference in June of 1977 in Detroit, the papers of which are on the conference’s website.⁸

Meanwhile, at home at Cornell pressure continued by the administration to justify continuing acquisitions budgets. The 1972 dollar devaluation had hit very hard everywhere and we were showing deficits that couldn’t be addressed without good plans. The first efforts of serial titles cancellations began to take their political toll around the country. Unfortunately and erroneously, the blame was laid on the publishers rather than on the lack of appropriate funding, and the off and on thirty-year war of the Elseviers has taken an unfortunate toll on the library’s credibility. Meanwhile, David Kaser had left to teach at Indiana, his home state, and the university was unable to recruit a suitable replacement. Gormly Miller, a senior and respected long-time library staff member was appointed, and he and I tried to develop a strategy to increase library credibility with the administration, which was simultaneously changing presidents. To give a flavor of the atmosphere at the time: our provost, a physicist and a respected gentleman, declared that in the formula of library efficiency the number of volumes should be in the denominator! More acquisition funds would lead to more books and subscriptions, the need for more cataloguers, and ultimately more space.

We approached the Mellon Foundation which had been funding various library projects in private universities and we proposed to do a thorough study of the Cornell collection development processes in the hope that the lessons learned would be applicable in other research libraries as well. Easier said than done, I found out soon enough. We established

⁸ Library Resources and Technical Services vol.23 (1) 1979

a project plan and an outside advisory committee and went to work. At the time, Cornell had made some splendid appointments of young and energetic librarians and they proved ready for the experience. In what was probably one of the better outcomes, we tried to apply the cumulative knowledge then available in the staff seminar on collection development. The ultimate results were published in two reports that are part of the reading list for this conference. I need not to elaborate, other than stating that the first report was positive and optimistic, written by Dan Hazen and myself, the second, prepared after the completion of the project was written by Gormly Miller and had a much more conservative tone.⁹ I had left Cornell and the project for Rutgers by that time. The grant, however, had an unforeseen by-product with unfortunate long-term implications. I had used the Mellon funds to replace myself in the day-to-day selection process in Olin Library with three part-time bibliographers, all of whom were already on the staff. When I left and the grant was concluded, the line was gone as well, and it took Cornell a decade before the next assistant director for collection development, Ross Atkinson, was appointed.

Several more important developments took place in the 1970's with considerable consequences for the profession. First and foremost of all, it was the emergence of collection management as a much needed additional component of the collection development process. The profession, including we at the Cornell Mellon grant, began to take a closer look at what had been wrought during the times of the great expansion. Space, of course, had become a universal as well as Cornell issue. Unable to convince the administration to provide for more traditional library space, we designed and built a major storage facility, requiring a process of triage in the stacks which took a great deal of planning.

Collection management issues also spawned a series of doctoral and other studies, using the techniques of operations research to better predict and respond to user demands. A significant corpus of knowledge was acquired, but, unfortunately, not all the wisdom has

⁹ Hendrik Edelman and Dan Hazen, Collection Development and Management at Cornell. 1979
J. Gormly Miller, Collection Development and Management at Cornell. A Concluding Report. 1981

filtered down to the operating levels. The issue of copy depth versus title depth is still not resolved on some campuses. Studies of patron failure in the stacks also were convincing in theory, but still have not always been followed up in practice. The sophisticated bibliographical databases and the improved delivery techniques, two of the most important requirements for effective library cooperation, have led to an explosion of interlibrary loan and document delivery programs, greatly improving service to library patrons and decreasing some pressure on local acquisitions. Recognizing that the old adage “build it and they will come” was being proven false in many libraries where increasingly underused collections and dwindling faculty interest were prevalent. Taking the cues developed in our great public libraries, research libraries have now joined the ranks of library marketers, with an array of educational and informational public programs on their campuses

One of the bigger collection management issues was the apparent physical decline of the collections, due to use, environmental conditions and paper acidity. This is not the time and place to review all the considerations of the preservation wave, funded largely by Congress, after effective lobbying by ARL leadership and historians. The professional knowledge about physical preservation and restoration acquired since that time is deeply impressive and nowadays is an integral part of the research library program. Preservation microfilming, however, is another story. Controversial from the beginning, it raised serious issues of physical destruction of filmed copies, storage and retrieval of microform masters and coordination among participants of the many projects, none of which have ever been satisfactorily resolved. The projected interim use of microforms begun in the 1930's will be with us for a long time to come.

But perhaps the most controversial question about the filming was the ofdecision-making process of who decides which books or periodicals should be filmed and what are the selection criteria. Two schools of thought emerged. The first was the bibliographical faction. During the unprecedented American Imprint Inventory project, directed by the earlier mentioned Douglas C McMurtrie between 1938 and 1942, some ten thousand American libraries were canvassed resulting in more than fifteen million slips with

bibliographical information and location indication.¹⁰ Without going into details about what happened to the slips after the project was stopped, the statistics proved overwhelmingly that unique copies of American imprints were distributed over hundreds of libraries, rather than in the ten largest research libraries. Adherents to this bibliographical theory, including myself, tried to make the case to those in power, essentially a small group of library directors surrounding Jim Haas, at the Council for Library Resources in Washington, that in order to achieve the goal of preserving America's bibliographical past, a systematic effort should be undertaken to preserve, year by year, volume by volume America's cultural heritage, combined with a good evaluation process. The national newspaper project, organized and funded by NEH, has been based on this concept and it has been very successful in reaching deep into the corners of the country, state by state, region by region, to ferret out unique newspaper files. The fierce criticism by conservationists about the resulting local decisions by libraries to discard, or sell, their hard copy when film became available, is justified. In retrospect, it is clear that the NEH project should have had a conservation component.

The other school of thought, composed largely of powerful library directors, subscribed to the so-called Great Library theory: Give the money to the largest libraries, let them decide what is best and all will be taken care of. In the discussions leading up the earlier mentioned Farmington Plan, the same debate took place without a firm decision being made. The discussion is taking place today once again as we contemplate the Google-Yahoo initiatives. The Great Library theorists won the preservation microfilming battle, we will shall see what happens in the digital process. I am sure it will be on this conference's agenda, and I urge you to consider seriously the arguments of bibliographers and conservationists. It may be the profession's last chance to accomplish a comprehensive and systematic conversion project, based on international cooperation, with each country taking responsibility for its own heritage, even if many of their unique copies reside in American libraries.

¹⁰ Scott Bruntjen, Douglas McMurtrie, Bibliographer and Historian of Printing. Scarecrow, 1979.

But perhaps the most significant and exciting development of the past twenty-five years has been the incorporation of the archival profession and its practices moving into mainstream librarianship. As research libraries became more and more actively interested in collecting source material, the processing techniques used by archivists became a necessity. Once again there is a Cornell connection. While I was serving as chair of the board of the Research Library Group, it was Cornell's Tom Hickerson and his archival colleagues who developed the compatible bibliographical standard which allowed the profession to integrate its archival records with those of books and periodicals. It is most rewarding to observe the great impact that these merged files and programs have had on the research and teaching community as well as on the profession in many of our universities.

Recognizing the rich and diverse talents as well as the accumulated experience and wisdom of the professional collection developers here present for this conference, I am confident that the future of our great research library collections is in splendid hands. The dilemmas, the challenges and the stakes are substantial indeed and I look forward to your guidance.

