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Library As Place:

Being Human in a Digital World



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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasingly digital nature of information retrieval, both users and computers continue to occupy physical space, and the library – as place – offers an essential location for inspiration. In an age when one might assume that the digital negates the physical, a finite place can root the individual within space regarding both composition and information retrieval. In this seeking for the essentially human element of the physical book within space, we may also discover a need for the library as place.

How, where, and when the viewer interacts with the written word – whether reading it or writing it – profoundly alters the experience for the user. Regarding her concept of the physical book, artist Pati Scobey (2011) stated, “The viewer must hold, touch, and look at it closely. This is a private, intimate experience” (p. 300). Physical objects, like physical spaces are, as Carolyn Steedman (2002) suggested, “a place which for the moment shall simply be called Memory” (p. 67). A physical book, a computer, and a library building are each memory vessels of history, and by extension, humanity.

There is, then, a sense of the sacred as perceived in the physical book and the typed and written word. While defying time, the physical book waits to be handled and rediscovered over passing ages, which necessitates a place to rest in anticipation of this future use. The library patron, or inhabitant of space, is summoned into the ever-present, ever-fleeting immediate moment within place, that is, the library. There is no digital equivalent to this mindful presentism. Reality, as considered by St. Augustine (397/398), is that which is present in the physical moment (see Book XI) in space and time. The physical book is arguably more “real” than its digital analog, which, since digital exists outside of place, space, and time, by its very nature vanishes without a trace until it is transformed into a physical manifestation.

The Relationship of the Real

A relationship generated in handling a book is an intimate one, and *where* it is handled – in that iconic building, the library – matters. Consider the geography of the library as a landscape through which the user moves. There is an element of performance,

and pacing is crucial. Performance occurs within the building, at the checkout counter, in the Writing Center, or on a couch. The book within the building has time to wait on a shelf, waiting to be viewed. Walter Benjamin (1936) asserted that reproduced objects are “lacking in one element: [the] presence in time and space, [the] unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (p. 251). The place where it happens to be may be the authoring center, makerspace, or at a traditional library table with green glazed lamps. Benjamin’s philosophical understanding of space and time may be considered in this case as the “library as place.”

Two questions emerge: How is the book bound within and experienced in space and time, and how does the library function as a container of objects? As a starting point for analysis, and in the vein of art historian Erwin Panofsky (1972, pp. 5-9), I consider the library-as-place in three modes: first, simply a building; second, the iconographic symbol of a library building representing the university as a whole; and third, the iconological implications of the library as part of a larger context, a place in society for both social gathering and solitary work. The discourse of the building speaks to us.

Place, Space, and Time

The physical book may itself be seen, as Giorgio Maffei (2008) has stated, as a “place for research” (p. 14). Further, the library is a place for multi-layered research and composition experiences. Modern conceptions of the terms space and place emerged following the age of Isaac Newton, when interest in finite place shifted to an interest in infinite space. This shift, wrote Edward Casey (1998), occurred early in the later Middle Ages with debates on the infinite nature of God. In the contemporary era, concepts of infinite space gradually came to dominate the intellectual and artistic landscape, becoming better understood in relation to the self (pp. 122-124). This notion of space is defined as here, and the here is shaped by the space I occupy. The viewer, the I involved, within the moment of the reading and composing, is here in the library, interacting with a particular item at a specific time. This embrace of the physical provides a foothold for finding place.

Concepts of place, space, and time are illustrated in the 2009 artwork of book artist Julie Chen, *A Guide to Higher Learning*. Questions are posed as flaps to be unfolded. The viewer is brought into the present moment through a sequence of folds, both in time and in paper; it is in some ways a simulated participatory origami.

Reading and composition may not relate entirely to the linear time of recorded events. Determined by the fluid and dynamic time chosen by the user, it is fixed to a moment, but the occurrence of that moment is flexible. *Unpacking My Library*, for example, is a double production by artist Buzz Spector. The original installation

involved the time and place of packing, unpacking, and then arranging the books; in this manifestation – the recording of that installation – we as viewers are offered the opportunity to share in the artist’s musings on the time and space occupied by a personal library. The viewer holds in his or her hands this book recording the story of various other books that can likewise be held and contemplated. Like an infinite retreat of images in mirrors facing one another, the viewer is posed as pondering a book, or series of books, within a book, and the time and space they occupy, now, then, and in the future. The experience is defined by the physical format of the book, by the medium of the object itself. It is through the medium that a particular communication occurs, a communication that is rooted in place/space/time relationships. Each physical book object came into being at a singular moment, then sat on a shelf for a particular duration before being contemplated by the viewer in a particular place and for a specific length of time. There is a provenance at work here that is itself a rich historical record. It is through such material density that the viewer locates meaning, and finds, essentially, the sacred.

Finding Humanity in Materiality

One strand of continuity to be found in this line of thinking is the concept of space: the space of the library, the space of physical book, and the space that the written word occupies on a page. Another strand is materiality: that of the physical book as object and the library as place. Springing from the library philosophy of librarian Jesse Shera (1973), I propose considering a reading of the library as engendering an increase in humanity and humaneness (see p. 99). In this making of history the creators of composition, of book, and of building hold a role of preserving an intimate vessel of communication and cultural capital. In his famous “rearview mirror” statement Marshall McLuhan (1967) asserted: “What we ordinarily think of as present is really the past.” How we author or compose, when we write and where, offer views into a distilled material culture and reveal a future that includes both a place for the physical book and the physical place of the library.

While the linguistic turn emphasized the intersection between language and knowledge, the spatial turn by critical geographers attends to the importance of recognizing that space and time touch every aspect of studied knowledge. The physical book is a cultural record and expression of the modern lived experience, a creative record and social memory. To quote Kierkegaard (1843), “life must be lived forward, but understood backwards” (p. 23). My approach is an exchange between researcher and researched: first, that there is a power to physical experience, an intimacy evoked by materiality; second, that physical books, as material occupants of place, must not be conceptually removed from physical space and time; and third, that libraries are repositories of valuable historic social transcripts. As Heidegger (1935) asserted: “...let us go to the actual work and ask the work what and how it

is” (p. 414). In this case the work is the library as place, and the result of this asking is a critical examination of the significance that these render to our understanding of ourselves. †

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