Not Etched in Stone

By Regina Buckner

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said, “Nothing endures but change.” That statement accurately reflects what has happened to the physical interior of Waldo Library. In the five and a half years since the doors were opened to the expanded and completely renovated building, numerous changes have occurred—and are still occurring.

The first major adjustment was the moving of an entire branch library, the Physical Sciences Library of some 66,000 items. This collection was logically arranged within the major Waldo science collections, an accomplishment that required considerable internal reorganization and modification of floor plans. Then, a staff office section was “gutted,” and six new group study rooms were created. A review of signage produced multiple, readable, color-coordinated signs that direct patrons throughout the four floors of stacks and service areas; an additional service point was established in the newspaper/microfilm area; the office of Faculty Development was designed and constructed on the third floor; and the non-fiction new book collection was moved to the first floor with comfortable seating placed nearby. User demand for additional terminal access has seen the addition of a dozen terminals strategically placed in the stack sections of the library, and all terminals are now being upgraded throughout the library system. Most recently, in response to several issues related to safety and security, the William H. Upjohn Rotunda was remodeled and security cameras installed. As a result of these several actions, someone who visited the main library in 1991 might almost believe that he or she had entered a different building when entering the 1997 Waldo.

Both in this country and overseas, academic research libraries are in the midst of major paradigm shifts regarding access and collection development. Centuries-old traditions that defined the library as a collector, organizer, and repository of books have fallen away, and the contemporary academic/research library actively provides access to and information for its users through a host of print and online databases. The academic librarian works not only at library service points, but with the faculty in classrooms, to assist patrons in learning what to search, how to search, how to locate the full text, and how to evaluate the resources available in widely-varying formats. Their motto may well be, “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach him to fish and feed him for a lifetime.” An adjunct to this paradigm is the need for “open” book stacks that permit students, faculty, and researchers to have direct access, a hands-on experience in locating information. On the down side, patron access to open stacks tends to encourage theft or misplaced items. As a result, all libraries with open access to information have had to develop a number of security measures.

The University Libraries’ collection grew from 2,812,376 print and non-print items as of June 30, 1991, to 3,440,181 items as of June 30, 1996—this represents a 22% increase and millions of dollars in acquisition costs. At the present time, a comprehensive inventory of the entire collection is underway to determine the degree of lost or missing items. The results of the inventory will establish a benchmark as a basis for future inventory verification and comparisons. The data should also provide the means to substantiate the effectiveness of the security system. We know, however, that there has been considerable loss since the last inventory. At the conclusion of each academic term, the circulation department documents the titles of items previously cataloged that can no longer be found. Entries in the FINDER catalog may refer to books as Missing or Lost. A recent issue of American Libraries has an eye-catching cover emphasis asking, “Is Your Library Safe? Are Security and Open Access Incompatible?” An insert on a just-released survey bluntly states that “theft and mutilation of library materials are not only a greater concern now than in the past, but the problem will get worse during the next five years.” (August, 1996, p. 16). One article addresses a major issue reflected by its title, “Librarians: Caretakers or Crimefighters?”, while still another describes the method for “Designing Personal Safety into Libraries.” Each of these problems, existing here, requires that the strategies used by the staff, and the physical layout of Waldo be modified.

Remodeling plans to upgrade and tighten the detection and security functionality of the atrium area of Waldo are now close to completion. In this environment, the key concern was to maintain the openness and welcoming atmosphere of the atrium that rises three floors to a skylight, while adding the check and balance necessary to impede theft. A streamlined and more efficient 3M detection system is now in place with corridors for incoming and outgoing traffic along with video monitors positioned to record all atrium activity. The advanced design of the newly installed detection system offers a more comprehensive area of detection for magnetic media as well as for traditional books or non-circulating items; there are corridor-specific alarms, both audible and visible. Of course, all corridors were designed to accommodate wheelchairs and to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. During peak usage hours, a library employee is also seated at the Information Desk to assist those who are entering as well as to instruct anyone who has set off an alarm. A final control factor is the gates that have been added to monitor those who enter or exit the building. In addition to

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the audible alarm, a visible (light) alarm marks the particular corridor that has been activated by attempting to remove an item illegally.

The library has also taken steps to protect patrons and employees who are in the building. At selected points, mirrors reflect activity on otherwise hidden corridors and around corners. Video cameras have been installed in the entrances to Waldo. Unobtrusive cameras continuously record all activity in these areas. The recorded images will be used by Public Safety to identify patrons who have been or are disruptive. Anyone in the library who is suspected of violating the rights of others, mutilating items, or removing items without authority is turned over to the University’s Public Safety officers. The officers are also on call to deal with library disruptions or safety problems.

There are other, less obvious changes in Waldo Library that have been designed to assure open access, a user-friendly environment, and security. The paramount concern is that service within the building be provided within a sane and safe environment. As each day begins, another challenge to access, technological expansion, collection enhancement, effective management, and expanded service emerges. And so, “nothing endures, but change.” In that change is found the twenty-first century where nothing is etched in stone.

There’s Always a Book—Or is There?

Libraries are magical places.... There’s nothing quite like strolling the hushed aisles, letting your eye rove along dimly lit shelves. Each spine, each title, seems to beckon with a promise of incredible wonders, surprises and adventures. ...

Libraries not only take us into new and exciting realms but also help us grow. They answer questions, solve problems, enable us to better ourselves. If I did not have the library habit—which is passed on by families—I certainly couldn’t research and write the first chapter of a historical novel.

Whatever the need—from simple escape reading to learning gourmet cookery, or evaluating mutual funds, or confronting dire illness—as my son, Mike, said in his 20s, when he set out to master the handling of small boats: “There’s always a book.”

But finding the books we need or want, when we want them, is getting harder. Our libraries are in trouble. And we’d better take notice and remedy the situation before one of our nation’s most precious assets becomes a skinny, starving shell of its old self.

[Excerpted from an article by historian/novelist John Jakes found in the March 13, 1994 issue of Parade Magazine]