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Dimensions of User Perception of Academic Library as Place

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ABSTRACT

Despite the ongoing discussion on library as place, there has not been a robust framework for understanding the meanings and the dimensions of library as place. The purpose of this study is to identify reliable and meaningful dimensions of academic library as place. The formative elements of academic library as place were elicited in terms of physical setting of place, person, and act. A cross-sectional field study was conducted at a state university in the eastern region of the United States. Principal component analysis identified three dimensions of academic library as place: information and services, reading and study, and relaxation. The conceptualization of academic library as place enables us to confirm constructs, and the established constructs advance theoretical discussions on library as place. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical evidence of user perception of library as place, thus improving our understanding of users and strategies for the effective design of library space.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of “library as place” has been appealing to librarians as libraries have long been centers of social and cultural activities as well as centers of information and learning. Contrary to the prediction that the emergence of the electronic information environment would weaken the role of the physical library, the statistics of library use and visits has steadily increased. A number of studies reported the increase in library use, especially after improvements of library facilities (Lawson, 2004; Shill & Tonner, 2004; Weise, 2004). The integration of emerging information technology into library facilities has also increased library use and expanded libraries to a more vital place for connection and collaboration. Lawson (2004) suggests that, adequately implemented, the design of library facilities can transform the physical library from a print-focused collection into a more inviting destination for discovery and learning.

It is crucial for academic libraries to support users' evolving needs to remain in a significant position on campus. Pointing out that academic libraries are moving toward being community centers in addition to their traditional role as academic centers, Sanders (2005) emphasizes the importance of fostering a sense of place in academic libraries. Academic libraries serve as places to socialize, relax, and communicate as well as places for information seeking and learning. They serve as valued public spaces on campus that enrich users' academic and social experiences.

User perception of the library environment has implications for the effective design of library space. However, there has been limited empirical research on the factors underlying user perception of academic library as place. It is crucial to understand how academic libraries as places can support users' diverse needs, and exert positive impacts on their experiences in libraries.

Despite the ongoing discussion on library as place, there has not been a robust framework for understanding the meanings and the dimensions of library as place. Researchers pointed out the lack of research focusing on libraries as a type of social activity space in spite of the extensive interest in users and their information behaviors in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field. (Given & Leckie, 2003). This study aims to identify the dimensions of academic library as place based on user perception. The formative elements of library as place are elicited based on the literature review, and the dimensions of academic library as place are identified using principal component analysis. By identifying reliable and meaningful dimensions of user perception of academic library as place, the findings of this study are expected to provide empirical evidence of user perception of library as place, thus improving our understanding of users and strategies for the effective design of library space.

PLACE

Scholars from a variety of fields, such as philosophy, geography, sociology, and urban planning, have explained the notion of place. They explain that a place is more complex than being a simple area and locale, and it involves human conception and imagination (Leckie & Buschman,

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2007). Place is defined as a location or space that has gained special meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes (Low & Altman, 1992).

Rolph (1976) asserts that places are “directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities” (p. 8). From this perspective, places are defined by focusing experiences and intentions onto particular settings rather than unique locations, landscape, and communities. On the other hand, he describes *placelessness* as “both an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places” (p. 143). He asserts that a deep human need exists for associations with significant places. He emphasizes the efforts to transcend placelessness to develop an environment in which places are reflecting and enhancing the variety of human experience.

Place is “not limited by geographical size but rather by the perceptions and personal values that play a role in the development of sense of place” (Nanzer, 2004, p. 363). Jorgensen and Stedman (2006) explain sense of place as a “general attitude toward a spatial setting, and a complex psychosocial structure that organizes self-referent beliefs, emotions, and behavioral commitments” (p. 317). They identify multiple dimensions of sense of place comprising cognitive, affective, and conative domains of human-environment relationships. A range of research exploring sense of place has studied the constructs such as place identity, place attachment, and place dependence in terms of cognitive, affective, and conative components of sense of place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006; Kyle & Chick, 2007; Nanzer, 2004).

LIBRARY AS PLACE

A range of discussion on the social role of library as place has been grounded on Habermas' (1989) conceptualization of *public sphere*. Habermas refers to public sphere as “the sphere where private people come together as a public” (p.27). The private sphere comprises civil society in the narrower sense, which is the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor. On the other hand, the public sphere is referred to as a sphere of influence between state (realm of the “police”) and civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labor), where people engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations. The emergence of public sphere has resulted in two crucial changes (Leckie & Buschman, 2007). First, opinions separated from formal government policy were communicated beyond acquaintances. Second, the critique and discussion of the state's actions created the principle of supervision, which transformed the nature of power and supervision. The notion of public sphere has provided a ground to explain how civic spaces like libraries have evolved as places (Wiegand, 2005). Grounded on the notion of public sphere, there have been ongoing discussions on the meanings and roles of public spaces and their interactions with people.

The library's role of enriching community and public life has often been discussed based on the concept of third place. Oldenburg (1997) posits the concept of *third place* to describe a place where people come to socialize outside of their work or home. He describes the third place as a “generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16). He introduces the term to signify the core settings of informal public life. The term, third place, underscores the significance of a tripod including the first and second places. The first place is the home, which is the first regular and predictable environment that has great effect upon one's development. The second place is the work setting that fosters competition and motivates people. Most common third places include cafes, coffee houses, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts in a community. These places provide public social experiences and create a sense of community. Oldenburg (1997) points out that third places exist on neutral ground and allow their guests to bask in a condition

of social equality. Third places are taken for granted, and provide their guests with the psychological comfort and support similar to good homes. While formal institutions require more serious involvement from individuals, third places evoke playful moods, and their characters are determined mostly by their regular clientele. Lawson (2004) identifies a number of reasons that third places are crucial to a community. Third places nourish relationships and a diversity of human contact. As informal gathering places, they provide opportunities for serendipity, companionship, and relaxation, thus enriching public life and democracy.

As an important foundation of community, local libraries serve as third places. Montgomery and Miller (2011) contend that the concept of third place is relevant to library as place. They emphasize the importance of libraries as naturally inclusive-third-places, in which social interactions are available, and at the same time users can maintain their privacy. A third place provides an inclusive environment for its guests to meet new people and create a common bond, thus satisfying their needs for human connection. A library as a third place provides users with a place to comfortably meet others from different backgrounds.

Libraries, as places, serve as social and cultural venues in their communities where people share their experiences. Being integrated into the unique culture of their communities, libraries create a unique ambience reflecting the characters determined by their users and communities.

As a library service quality assessment tool, the LibQUAL+ protocol includes the dimension of library as place (Thompson, Kyriallidou, & Cook, 2008). In the protocol, library as place is defined as “the physical environment of the library as place for individual study, group work, and inspiration” (Association of Research Libraries, 2009). The LibQUAL+ questions measuring the dimension of library as place include (1) space for inspiration for study and learning; (2) quiet space for individual activities; (3) comfortable and inviting location; (4) get-away for study, learning, or research; and (5) community space for group work (Association of Research Libraries, 2009). To identify gaps in service quality, the respondents are asked to rate the minimum level of service they are willing to accept, the desired level of service, and perceived level of actual service quality for each item. The dimension of library as place of LibQUAL+ appears to represent broad aspects of place characteristics of libraries.

In a study to explore the meaning of the Seattle Public Library as place, Fisher, Saxton, Edwards, and Mai (2007) identified people's perception of the library as physical place, social place, and informational place. They adopted Oldenburg's and Cresswell's frameworks to address the importance of libraries as places within society. They added an ‘informational’ component to the place-based characteristics noted in the previous frameworks for understanding libraries in terms of place. Bennett (2003) addresses two legitimate conceptions of library as place. One conceives of libraries as service places, where information is held, organized, and managed. The other conceives of libraries as spaces where the primary activities are learning and the social exchanges of information.

Academic libraries have faced the need to keep abreast of changes in the campus environment and meet users' expectations as a core place on campus. As an essential component of academic institutions, academic libraries play a role as a venue for academic and social activities.

FORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY AS PLACE

In the present study, the formative elements of academic library as place are elicited based on Rolph's (1976) explanation on the identity of place. He points out two major reasons for addressing the phenomenon of place. First, it is interesting in itself because it is a fundamental expression of man's involvement in the world. Second, knowledge of the nature of place is useful to maintain and manipulate existing places and create new places. Based on the recognition that places reflect common cultural and symbolic properties as well as unique qualities, he

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