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The Nabb Research Center at Salisbury University: A Case Study in Programming & Designing a Special Collections Facility

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Abstract:

The larger trend in academic libraries toward democratizing access to information and responding to new forms of pedagogy has brought many institutions to reconsider and broaden the mission of their special collections libraries. While the immense value of the items within a special collections library has certainly not diminished and still warrant attentive care and protection, the librarians and institutions that guard these collections recognize that the true value of having an outstanding collection lies in providing access. This leaves many special collections librarians grappling with how to strike the right balance between providing access and protecting those assets from harm or misuse.

Utilizing the recent programming and design of the Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture at Salisbury University as a case study, this paper explores the issues and opportunities inherent in designing a special collections library. Discussion will include a brief overview of some of the recent trends in new facilities, as well as an overview of the design process in general.

The Nabb Research Center at Salisbury University: A Case Study in Programming & Designing a Special Collections Facility

The Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture at Salisbury University offers a window into the rich history of the Delmarva region, a peninsula on the eastern coast of the United States bordered to the east by the Atlantic Ocean and the west by the Chesapeake Bay. Comprising portions of three states—Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia (thus the amalgam “Delmarva”)—the area was one of the earliest colonial settlements in the United States. Throughout most of the 20th century, historical land records, inventories, and wills dating back to earliest colonial days were contained in as many as 36 different repositories scattered throughout the peninsula. In 1982, Sylvia Bradley and Dr. Ray Thompson, two history professors at Salisbury University, began an ambitious program to consolidate these archives in microfilm format in one central location, then called the

Archives Center. In 1998, with an endowment from Edward H. Nabb, the Nabb Research Center was formalized as such.

The center's mission is to cultivate and sustain the advancement of scholarly research through collecting, preserving, disseminating, and providing access to records and artifacts that illustrate the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Delmarva region. The center quickly became a popular repository for family journals and papers, surveyors and civil engineers papers, maps, research notes of local historians, book and pamphlet collections, business records, and other ephemera. Over time, the inclusive nature of the Nabb Research Center's acquisition policy resulted in an exhaustive and wide-ranging collection that extends to farm implements, hand tools, furniture, and even pieces of architectural ornaments from demolished buildings.

In the spring of 2013, Salisbury University engaged Sasaki Associates and Ayers Saint Gross Architects to spearhead the design and construction of a new academic commons for the university, with careful planning for the integration of the Nabb Research Center.

Trends in Special Collections Space Design

Before delving into the design process and solutions we conceived for the Nabb Research Center, let us contextualize the project within broader trends we see spurring change in this specific genre of library design. A library's special collections have historically been viewed as a temple for serious and silent study of the academic world's most treasured artifacts. Collections were safely stowed away in dry, dark stacks behind lock and key. But the special collections of today are throwing the metaphorical and physical doors open to invite greater engagement with precious books, maps, artworks, and objects. While the immense value of these objects has certainly not diminished and still warrant attentive care and protection, the librarians and institutions that guard these treasured collections recognize that the true value of having an outstanding collection lies in providing access. Access is stymied when few know the contents of a collection, people are discouraged by an overly cumbersome process to gain access, and spaces for collections use are ill-suited for the ways people use them today.

Many keepers of special collections now grapple with how to strike the right balance between providing access and protecting those irreplaceable assets from harm or misuse. As such, more and more academic institutions are rethinking and re-investing in the design of their physical collections spaces through renovation or rebuilding—a welcome challenge for library architects to drive meaningful, user-driven design. In our work with special collections facilities we have seen a number of trends that continue to drive innovation in spatial design.

First, the increasing desire to make special collections more accessible stems from the larger trend toward democratizing access to information, spurred by technological advances enabling vast aggregation and dissemination of information. The broad impacts of the internet are obvious, but it is specifically the recent digitization of whole collections for online consumption that has inspired a significant change in thinking about how library special collections can and should be accessed.

One such example is Artsy.net, which provides a curated online collection of the world's greatest works. The site has added over 140,000 artworks by 25,000 artists to date, making it one of the largest contemporary art collections available online. In their own words, "Artsy's mission is to make all the world's art accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. We are an online platform for discovering, learning about, and collecting art."(1) The Smithsonian, a leader among peers in its digital cataloguing and online sharing efforts, has even incorporated 3D-printing into their digitization program. This allows educators to create direct replicas of artifacts for delivering hands-on learning experiences. Through the prints, the Smithsonian can also record current-state conditions of some of its most prized pieces as benchmarks for continued preservation.

On one hand, private and public entities that cultivate mega-collections online inspire similar efforts to digitize special collections. On the other, these mega-collections elevate the physical holdings of university special collections as all the more unique and differentiating—adding to the need to create the in-person physical experience of these collections inviting and user-friendly. Duke University president Richard Brodhea emphasizes that the physical experience of collections is still supremely important, saying, "while digitization is making more of our materials accessible around the world, Duke still places a high value on engaging with primary sources and learning how to do original research."(2) Georgetown University Librarian Artemis Kirk agrees that "in the digital age, when research libraries acquire many of the same materials, it is special collections that will distinguish libraries and their universities."(3)

Another significant force driving special collections redesign is the imperative to convey relevance and value amid increasing fiscal constraint. Institutions must choose how to allocate limited funds and find creative sources revenue. Creating special collections spaces that invite community engagement can contribute to overall use of the library—making the case for continued investment. Many special collections spaces designed today incorporate classrooms into their floor plans, which cultivates greater integration between the university's academic programming and its unique holdings. Also, displaying collections in prominent and flexible spaces designed for such use provides the campus community with regular and meaningful encounters with highlighted pieces of the collection. Useful, modern design encourages engagement with these invaluable holdings and elevates the collection's reputation in the minds of students, educators, the public, and funding bodies.

Georgetown University's Booth Center for Special Collections and Duke University's Rubenstein Library—two new special collections spaces slated to open in 2015—reflect these trends. Georgetown's renovation of its special collections space will incorporate 1,200 additional square feet of teaching classrooms, reading rooms for researchers, secure shelving area and vault, exhibition space, collaborative workspace for staff, and "museum-quality climate controls."(4) These investments "allow Special Collections to expand its impact on the Hilltop and around the globe,"(5) Georgetown says on its renovation website.

Duke University's renovation of its Rubenstein Library is a part of the Perkins project, a decade-long library renovation project. It will include a research room, rare book classroom, seminar room, assembly space and a photography gallery, and additional study space—along with a new stack storage system, fire protection, and air control systems.(6) The Duke library blog explains, "the overall goal of this renovation project is to create a new space that will allow Duke researchers and project teams to experiment with new ideas and approaches with

experts, technology, and training available in close proximity. It should be the kind of space that invites discovery, experimentation, and collaboration.”(7)

Projects like those underway at Georgetown and Duke are becoming more common. Through a rigorous process and collaboration with the many users of special collections, designers can facilitate and encourage the new and varied uses of these special spaces. For the Nabb Research Center at Salisbury University, we employed several high-level approaches, as well as many specific tactics, to inform a successful special collections design—which we explore in the following sections.

Case Study: The Nabb Research Center Design

In the spring of 2012, Salisbury University (SU), located in the center of the Delmarva Peninsula, received funding from the State of Maryland for the Salisbury University Academic Commons, a \$96 million new building to be located in the heart of the campus. The building will contain the main academic library for the university as well as academic support programs, a faculty center, dining facilities, and a 400-seat assembly space. As part of the funding award, provisions were made to also create a new home for the Nabb Research Center. This bequest had two motivations: first, by bringing the Nabb Research Center into the new academic commons, it opens up the opportunity for the center to be a more integral part of the academic experience at SU and, second, with its more central location on campus, the Nabb Research Center will be more accessible to the community. After an extensive search, the school selected the architectural team of Sasaki Associates and Ayers Saint Gross Architects as the architects for the new building in January 2013. Sasaki Associates was responsible for the programming and design of the building, and Ayers Saint Gross Architects was responsible for the documentation of the construction drawings and administration of the construction process. The design process began later that spring, with the initial kick-off meeting on April 19, 2013.

Case Design Process

Before describing the specific design process undertaken for the Nabb Research Center, it is worthwhile to describe in general components of a typical design and documentation process. Ushering a building from a conceptual idea to a built form typically occurs in six phases:

- Programming/pre-design
- Schematic Design
- Design Development
- Construction Documentation
- Bidding Construction Administration

The goal of the programming/pre-design phase of a project is to develop a list of spaces, their approximate sizes, and a basic sense of primary adjacencies (i.e., what spaces should be near each other). Often, this list is supplemented with a site concept that outlines a basic strategy for how the building should be oriented on the site. This “wish list” is compiled by the users, typically referencing their existing space as a starting point (e.g. “We need a meeting room that is twice the size of the one we have now”). Often, this list is supplemented by benchmarking recently completed or noteworthy projects by peer institutions.

Working from this program document, we test various strategies and approaches for organizing the spaces during the schematic design phase. The focus during this phase is to develop an organizational logic, or diagram, for how the rooms are arranged, and to ensure that the building's structure and mechanical systems support this logic. At the end of this phase there is a basic floor plan showing rooms and spaces, a structural grid that explains the logic of how the building holds itself up, and models and drawings that begin to describe the look and feel of the building.

During the design development phase of the process, we fill in the details of the design. From a technical point of view, we finalize the mechanical (heating/cooling/ventilation) strategy and size the structural columns and beams. An important component of this phase is compiling what is typically referred to as "room criteria sheets" or "room data sheets." Working from the floor plans developed during schematic design, the various users of the spaces identify all of the requirements for the space to function successfully: location of electrical/data outlets, storage spaces, furniture layout, lighting, and floor, walls, and ceiling materials.

Subsequent phases are of less relevance for our purposes here, but are a critical part of the design process. Construction documentation explains how everything is assembled; bidding secures firms to carry out the work; construction administration entails the construction process itself. It is usually during this construction administration phase that the specifications and ordering of furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FF&E) takes place—a particularly critical part of the process for a special collections facility.

Designing the Nabb Research Center

One of the most interesting aspects of a design process is that it forces an institution to articulate its values and mission. This was certainly the case with the Nabb Research Center. Although it has always been organizationally a part of Salisbury University, the Nabb Research Center was located at the edge of campus in its own leased space, and it independently fundraised to support its mission—encouraging a semi-autonomous identity within the university. With its new address at the center of campus, within a building containing all the core academic elements, the Nabb Research Center was suddenly thrust into the spotlight and asked to be a much more integral component of campus and community life. This circumstance precipitated robust dialogue between competing visions of the key constituents—Nabb administration, library administration, and university administration.

While it was relatively easy to develop an initial program of spaces (with the exception of the archival storage component, which we will examine later), it was more difficult to determine where in the building the Nabb Research Center should go and who its neighbors should be. Deliberating location and neighbors quickly got to the heart of the issue of mission and values. Some committee members advocated for a location on the ground floor near the main entrance based on the opinion that the Nabb's collection and focus—the cultural history of the region—should be celebrated and presented to all who enter the academic commons. Other members believed that the Nabb Research Center was more of a contemplative, scholarly organization and therefore should be located apart from the main flurry of activity. This dichotomy in the understanding of the Nabb, as community resource versus scholarly enclave, became a theme throughout the design process.

In the end, the Nabb Research Center was placed on the fourth floor (the top level of the academic commons) along with the assembly space and the University Board Room. This decision combines the best of both viewpoints. Placing the center on the top floor set it slightly apart from the critical mass of the building and made it a destination or terminus rather than a crossroads. At the same time, placing it adjacent to the assembly space and the Board Room assured that the Nabb Research Center would be a highly visible element. Another positive outcome of selecting this location was the new ability to convert the fourth floor into one large conference venue at Nabb for use as lecture, seminar, or symposia space. Lastly, nestling these three program elements on the top floor assured that the visiting outside community would experience the vibrancy and dynamism of the academic experience of Salisbury University as they ascended the dramatic staircase that overlooks the main reading room of the academic commons.

Shifting focus from the overall composition of the building, we turned our attention to the internal workings of the Nabb itself, taking into account several factors impacting design—visitor needs, staffing constraints, and collection composition.

As with almost all special collections facilities, the essential workings of the Nabb Research Center can be divided into two primary zones: a public zone open and accessible to visitors and a staff zone secure from the public. Visitors to the Nabb come in different types, or tiers: unaffiliated, unannounced visitors from the Salisbury community perhaps coming to do research on their family or simply to learn about their community; Salisbury University students coming to do specific research related to their coursework or to attend courses that are taught using material from the Nabb; and outside scholars and researchers who come to the Nabb to do highly specific and targeted research. In designing for these different types of visitors, we set out to ensure that each of these groups would feel at home at the Nabb, and that each of these groups would not compromise the experience of another.

Another consideration is staffing. Particularly at a public institution such as Salisbury University, budget and fiscal considerations dictate a lean level of staffing. In the case of the Nabb, the expectation was that its new location and expanded capabilities would result in a higher level of use—with the understanding that staffing would not likely increase alongside with it. Therefore, it was critical to create a design that allows staff to do their work and also enables them to monitor the activities of various users. Creating spaces that provided a clear line of sight to the public areas from service points and staff work areas became an important focus of the design.

Finally, and most importantly, the design team addressed the needs of the collection itself. The inclusive nature of the acquisitions strategy, coupled with a “make-do” approach to space management meant that, over time, the Nabb had acquired an eclectic collection ranging from hotel ledgers and land records to retail signs and residential furniture—all stored in less than ideal conditions. The first order of business was to get a grasp of the scope of the entire inventory and an understanding of the proper manner of storing each item. For this specialized work, the design team turned to Wendy Jessup & Associates, who exhaustively examined all of the elements of the collection, quantified them, and made a determination as to the proper approach for storage. One result of this indispensable work was the decision to divide the archival storage area into two rooms. The first room would be directly adjacent to the staff work areas and consist of compact shelving for archival boxes and print materials. The second storage room would be for three dimensional objects and would be located closer to the receiving room and freight elevator. Connected to this second storage area would be an

archeology lab for staff and students to work with this material. Among the advantages of this approach was the ability to have two separate climate conditions for these collections.

At this point in the process (schematic design), the design team understood the basic requirements and characteristics of each of the three primary space types of the Nabb: the collections area, the staff area, and the study/research area. The next step involved intensive testing of various alternatives for the detailed arrangement of the rooms. Utilizing physical models, three dimensional computer graphics, and two dimensional floor plan layouts, the design team worked back and forth with the building committee to test numerous iterations of layouts and alternatives. The value of intensive workshops and candid communication between the design team and the client during this phase cannot be underemphasized. Each new plan layout and every new perspective sketch raised an issue or consideration not previously addressed. But with each new iteration, the layout and flow of spaces the solution got closer to a solution that began to feel increasingly right for the given set of circumstances.

The outcome of the schematic design phase resulted in a plan and concept enthusiastically endorsed by the committee.

Key Design Characteristics and Conversations

Designing the Nabb Research Center required careful thinking around how to sequence and arrange a gradation of user experiences. The entrance to the Nabb is intentionally aligned with the main, monumental stair such that it is the first thing one sees upon arriving on the fourth floor. Approaching the entry doors, one passes through two exhibit galleries: a permanent exhibit space and a space for revolving exhibits. The revolving exhibit gallery is configured as an alcove or adjoining space off to the side of the permanent gallery space. This design solution addresses the client group's concern that a key issue with temporary exhibits is the amount of time it takes to change exhibits, during which the space is essentially a messy construction site. By configuring the revolving exhibit gallery space as an alcove, it allows the Nabb to close the space off in an unobtrusive manner while it disassembles one exhibit and assembles the next.

As with all special collections libraries, design of the actual entry into the Nabb required special consideration. Directly adjacent to the entry doors is a room with lockers and shelves for visitors to store their personal items prior to entering. This locker area backs up against the reception desk, with a glass wall separating the two, allowing the locker area to be monitored by the staff person at the reception desk. The desk serves as a gate post, the only point of entry and exit for the visitor. The desk is also strategically positioned to allow the staff person situated at the desk to simultaneously monitor the main reading room of the Nabb.

The public spaces of the Nabb are arranged to allow for a variety of user experiences. A classroom is located near the entrance and off to one side of the reading room, allowing for student groups to enter without disrupting the research activities of the staff or visiting scholars.

The classroom itself is configured as a square, as opposed to something more rectilinear, in order to accommodate a wide range of teaching styles. Tables can be shifted around to create a lecture-style format (rows of seating facing in one direction), a case method format (U-

shaped configuration that encourages student dialogue and engagement), or project tables of 4 to 6 students each. Lockable archival storage cabinets along one side allow material to be stored temporarily when there are multiple classes utilizing the same material in the same day.

Open shelves are kept low, which allows for clear visibility across the length of the main reading room and enables staff to easily monitor the space. Printing and scanning machines are directly adjacent to the staff desk, further ensuring the proper monitoring of materials.

A technology infrastructure of cable and power is placed throughout the public areas, which will allow for future technologies to be integrated.

Staff offices are designed around a common module and arranged so that they can open into either the staff areas or the reading room. This enables future flexibility for these offices for potential additional staff members or visiting scholars.

In the course of deliberating about the merits and demerits of the various design alternatives, we uncovered several interesting issues.

The first issue was what the design team nicknamed “the chicken and egg dilemma.” A key part of the Nabb’s mission is the continuing acquisition of items. The obvious outcome of this is the need to design a quarantine room, processing area, and archival storage area capable of accommodating growth. While this seems a rather straightforward equation, it is a difficult argument to make to senior academic leaders or public officials managing the project’s budget within the context of increased fiscal scrutiny. On one hand, it is clear that any prospective donor will demand assurance that the material will be well cared for and stored properly. It is not a good selling point if the archival storage area is at or near capacity. On the other hand, it can be difficult to convince senior administrators that the desire to “build empty space,” in the words of one administrator, is in the best interest of the institution.

Another intriguing area of discussion goes to the heart of what a library is all about. Among the attributes of a great academic library is that it reminds students and faculty of an arc of time greater than next week’s deadlines. Moving through the spaces and sitting amid the material, the user should sense a tradition—a continuum that broadens one’s perspective. Certainly a special collections library is a part of this conversation. In our collaboration with the Nabb we were thoughtful about designing space that not only cultivates study and collaboration, but also honors a history of scholarship that extends back to the earliest Delmarva artifact and will be carried on infinitely.

Best Practices in Project Management

For an institution about to embark on designing a new special collections library—or perhaps a major renovation or addition—there are a number of recommendations we can make to make for a positive project process and outcome.

There should be a clear understanding of project leadership and how decisions are made. A building committee should be formed and given the clear mandate to make decisions. This committee should consist of a range of major stakeholders: senior library administration, representatives from the Board of Trustees, representatives of any larger umbrella institution

such as a university or foundation, and perhaps representatives from key user groups. Once this committee is formed there needs to be consistency of membership—members should not be added or subtracted.

There also needs to be clarity around who owns final decision-making, and transparent communication regarding this. While the committee should reach out to constituents for input, everyone should understand that the committee is charged with the task of arriving at final decisions and choices.

Given the level of complexity of the library and the project, institutions should consider forming a second committee, a user group committee. While the first committee would be charged with all strategic decisions and assuring alliance of the project with larger institutional goals, the user group committee would be tasked with assuring the proper functional workings of the facility.

The pace and scheduling of meetings is critical to the success of a project. If the meetings are held too far apart there is a loss of momentum and institutional memory of the key project issues. If the meetings are held too close together, there is not enough time for the design team to give the issues the proper deliberations and produce a substantive response for the next meeting.

Conclusion

Finally, we'd like to acknowledge—and celebrate—that every special collections library is unique. There is no “one size fits all” special collections library design. While it is certainly useful to benchmark other special collections libraries, we must account for the unique mission and values of each individual library. A brilliant solution at one special collections library does not necessarily translate well to another.

Projects like the Nabb offer great complexity, and it is through grappling with that complexity that we create beautifully functional design. It is undoubtedly a great challenge to create environments for special collections that are safe, useful, and engaging, and achieve the true to the intent of the collection's mission and *raison d'être*. But it is at once a joyful, important, and satisfying endeavor to play a part in the preservation of our treasured collective histories.

Acknowledgments

Put acknowledgments here.

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