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A Library Without Books: Working it Out in Public

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FEATURED ARTICLE

A Library without Books: Working it Out in Public

By Charlie Bennett

My library is changing, and some people don't like what it is becoming.

In November of 2013, the Georgia Tech Library announced a long-term project called the Library Renewal. It would renovate its buildings, update its services, and become a twenty-first century research library. And even though radically transforming two hundred thirty thousand square feet of sixty-year-old buildings is an extraordinary venture, it seemed like everyone who heard about the plan got hung up on one facet of the Renewal: the books were moving out of the library.

Almost all of the Georgia Tech Library's book collection will be stored in a high-density storage facility six miles away from the main building. The collection will still be available for check-out, and we will be doing a lot of research and development to create innovative, efficient discovery and delivery systems to keep that collection relevant and useful. Those facts, however, have not stopped the steady stream of questions, criticisms, disbelief, and insults directed at the Georgia Tech Library for "getting rid of its books."



Not everyone responds the same, of course. Students and faculty at Georgia Tech have told us how they use the book collection and the joy they take in browsing the stacks, and then they wonder out loud if we have thought this all through. My friends tell me that it sounds weird but okay, whatever. As you might have guessed, the most extreme criticism lives on the Internet. News items, blog posts, and other produced

pieces get comments from the dark heart of the public image of the library. A library that stores its book collection off-site has been declared an un-library, a glorified Internet cafe, a sham, a tragedy, and, most remarkably to me, proof that

librarians are ashamed of what libraries are and want to be something else.

As I have confessed many times before, I am a bibliophile and got into libraries because I love books. In my twenty years of working in libraries, however, I have discovered that libraries are more than books and librarians do not read all day. Ask ten librarians what is the most important part of being a librarian and you'll get twelve different answers, including at least five that have nothing to do with paper books. I know that and my colleagues know it,

too, but the public's response to the Georgia Tech Library's plan made me realize that the bibliocentric image of libraries has remained unchallenged for many people.

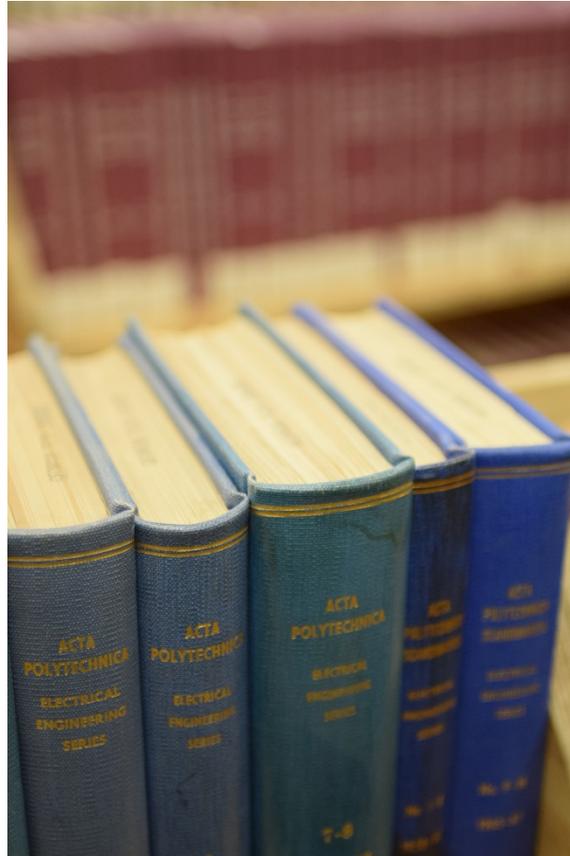
This realization came to me at a time when I was searching for some kind of structure and purpose to my professional life. I was trying to create larger meaning in my work in part because I was forty and had just become a father the year before, and in part because the astonishing changes we were planning for the Georgia Tech Library charged me with a neophilic, transformative energy that I hadn't felt since I was an angry young man rejecting the status quo and demanding social change.

The idea of devoting myself to challenging popular narratives about libraries was frightening and compelling. Frightening because I was still learning how to engage the public and speak in front of crowds; compelling because it seemed to be a perfect outlet for all that transformative energy I was trying to manage.

Starting from the new assumption "The Library is not a Collection of Books," I wrote a TEDx talk to deliver at TEDx Telfair Street in Augusta, Georgia, and thus began my public questioning of the library's image and brand.

I found that challenging the idea that the library's mission is protecting a book collection was exciting and in a way poetic. The arguments for keeping the book collection as it is—the

arguments against changing the library—are simple, direct, and conservative. They are hard to debate with complex and still-developing counter-arguments. The argument for letting go of the book-centric library definition has to be convincing in two ways: first as a reframing of the library and second as an exhortation to change. If change can be resisted by the cliché "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," then I was trying to convince people that they had the wrong definition for "broke."



My TEDx talk (and other talks and papers since) relied on a specific reframing of the book as an information-storage technology that had a long-standing superiority to any other technology. Clay tablets had books beat when it came to fire-resistance, but, other than that, books are the best way to store, preserve, and access information. They are not the only way, however, and an awful lot of our intellectual and creative output is being stored and delivered in mediums other than books. The library cannot be limited

to collecting and preserving a single medium, no matter how efficient that medium's operation or romantic its image.

I have used a Thomas Jefferson quote to illustrate my point. Jefferson wrote in a letter to John Adams, "I cannot live without books: but fewer will suffice where amusement, and not use, is the only future object."

Most people remember the first phrase and not the second. While I am no Jefferson scholar, I think it is easy to understand that Jefferson was

not implying that he would die without the physical presence of bound paper. He was declaring his need for information, mental stimulation, and amusement. One might say, these days, that one cannot live without an Internet connection: but lower speeds will suffice where amusement, and not use, is the only future object. Other classic book quotes, from the John Waters advice which I must paraphrase as “If someone you go home with doesn’t have any books, don’t go to bed with them,” all the way back to Cicero’s “A room without books is like a body without a soul,” are delightful in their love of books but perhaps too literal about the material object to be taken completely seriously. We should ask Waters about the person whose home is filled with books they haven’t read, and we should remind ourselves that Cicero died long before the codex replaced scrolls, so “books” in his quote means something quite different than most people picture when quoting him.

Trying to parse the material reality and the romantic exaggeration in bibliophilic sentiments

like Jefferson’s, Waters’, and Cicero’s quotes in order to defend or explore the Georgia Tech Library’s Renewal has made me feel like a good librarian, a terrible librarian, a corporate spokesperson, and a crank simultaneously. I return to the question “What is a library with no books?” like a dog gnawing a knotted rope and discover new answers every time. In those new answers, I am finding a deeper appreciation for libraries, for their role in our culture, for their romance, their power, and their complexity. The question isn’t really about books, just like the library isn’t really a collection of books; the question is about what is the library’s mission and how does it preserve our cultural and intellectual creations, in whatever medium they come. I am delighted to try answering that question in a public dialogue, even if it sparks the occasional accusation of being an un-librarian in an un-library.

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