Making Room for Innovation

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Features

Two library service prototyping spaces, in two very different places, have a remarkable amount in common. Nate Hill runs and operates the 4th Floor in Chattanooga, a large public library loft space operating as a flexible community makerspace and event space. Jeff Goldenson co-ran and operated Labrary, a 37-day design experiment occupying a vacant storefront in Cambridge.

In size, community, resources, and mission, the Harvard University Library and the Chattanooga Public Library (CPL) could not be much further apart. While a reader might anticipate our library experiments would be similarly divergent, we found essential similarities emerged from beneath their differences.

The 4th Floor grew from within the Chattanooga Public Library itself, the transformation of an overcrowded storage space into a vibrant community Maker space and event venue that’s now a hot spot in town. Labrary popped up under the scrutiny of the public eye in a vacant, commercial storefront, outside the Harvard Library altogether. Passers-by watched through the glass facade as it morphed from an empty retail space into a library environment for hosting talks, exhibiting student coursework, encouraging collaboration and creativity, and gathering data from visitors about their thoughts on libraries. (See sidebar for background on the two experiment spaces and see also “Through the Labrary Lens,” p. 30, in the accompanying Library by Design supplement for examples of other experimental spaces.)

The evolution of these spaces followed different trajectories and time frames, but our shared observations about the state of libraries, information, and culture formed common guiding principles. We believe the library of the last century is the library of consumption, an institution that reflects the broadcast era of media, the place where you watch, read, and listen passively from an
The library of this century is the place where new social relationships are forged and knowledge is created, explored, and shared.

The library of this century has "beta space" like the 4th Floor and Labrary—environments within a larger library ecosystem created to prototype and deploy new ventures. At CPL, the 4th Floor is not meant to transform just library space and activities; it is also intended to transform the library's organizational culture. The plan is to develop new services in the 4th Floor and implement them in other library departments. One example would be our experiment with 3-D printing technologies. We anticipate they will be a hit in youth services, but we are refining our service delivery model on the 4th Floor first so we can roll out change with less disruption and a lower rate of failure.

Meanwhile, the goal of the Library Test Kitchen (LTK), the class driving the Labrary, is to research, imagine, and build new library products, experiences, and services. Labrary was our beta space in which to deploy student innovations in public to determine which warranted further development. Also, by virtue of being a class located outside any formal library building, projects could remain truly exploratory, often generating more questions than answers. Some student work suited libraries perfectly, others a science museum or futuristic information garden.

Atop our shared belief in the importance of a culture open to experimentation, three common themes emerged within our beta spaces, themes that bridge the academic and public library divide:

1. Real-time knowledge creation

2. Design for experimentation

3. Community-driven innovation

These themes correspond closely to both David Weinberger's "Library as Platform" and David Lankes's "Library as Conversation" concepts as they position the library not as merely providing resources, full-stop. Rather, they point toward creating environments that leverage these resources to enable the lively, networked, conversational development of knowledge.

Real-time knowledge creation

CPL's 4th Floor has hosted a number of events and experiments that have spurred impressive ongoing efforts. For example, partnering with groups like AIGA, the professional organization for design, and a business incubator called CO.LAB has allowed the 4th Floor to bring to the library incredible events that have lured people in who had forgotten the building was even there. Two highlights stand out in particular:
MAKERDAY On March 16, we partnered with business incubator CO.LAB, Chatt*Lab, and quite a few other sponsors and exhibitors for Makerday: 3D Throwdown, an expo introducing 3-D printing technology to the city of Chattanooga. Over the course of the day, a record-setting 1,200 people, ranging from babies to senior citizens, visited the 4th Floor to see everything from hobbyist machines to large-scale industrial models, 3D scanners, and an experimental 3-D videoconferencing system using MS Kinect cameras from Engage 3D. The event established the 4th Floor as the gateway Maker space in the emerging Chattanooga Maker ecosystem. It offers Makerbot access to anyone with a library card and a place to come together to build, tinker, design, and test.

CREATIVE CITIZENSHIP Months before local elections, a group of politically engaged Chattanoogans came together to start a programming series around the topic of creative citizenship. The immediate goal was to get Chattanooga's creative community of artists, designers, developers, and others to feel like empowered stakeholders in the future of the community. Creative citizenship held two noteworthy events on the 4th Floor: a collaboration with AIGA that featured Daniel Ryan and Josh Higgins, the lead developer and the lead designer on the Obama 2012 presidential campaign, and a city council candidate forum, which brought Chattanooga's future leadership into the library and onto the 4th Floor.

In the academic context, Labrary carved out its own take on events programming. As the public face to a major university library, Labrary had the Harvard and surrounding scholarly community from which to draw. Researchers and professors from around the Harvard and MIT campuses spoke in our casual, open setting to both students and Cambridge community members alike. Situated outside the university gates, Labrary's street level, easy-in, easy-out atmosphere fostered a uniquely diverse dialog.

Design for experimentation

Visitors often remarked that though Labrary didn't feel like a library, they liked the vibe. There were several reasons for this, but three in particular set Labrary apart from a traditional library in the service of our experimental mission. Labrary was a branded, raw, and widely experiential space.

BRANDED Libraries often lack resources to put toward a visual identity. This reinforces dated stereotypes and communicates a lack of "visual" and "design" literacies. LTK students Arielle Assouline-Lichten and Gabrielle Patawara designed Labrary's visual identity; they gave Labrary a voice. It was savvy, friendly, and playful, and, most important, it was recognizable.

While nobody really knew what we were, there was never a question of who--we were Labrary. The tightness of the brand contained the looseness of our exploration. (Download and remix our identity for free at librarytestkitchen.org.)

RAW Libraries tend to be high-polish, monumental environments designed to impress. They're not spaces that say "try things." Labrary, on the other hand, was no-polish. The plywood tables were left unfinished, giving them a workbench feel; the walls needed a new coat of paint. These unfinished details granted visitors permission to get their hands--and the space around them--dirty.
WIDELY EXPERIENTIAL A sign on a table at the entrance to the Labrary requested that visitors describe the future of "the library." Responses were jotted on Post-it notes and stuck to the table. If there was a theme, it was no size fits all. One Post-it read, "cones of silence," another, "cones of chaos."

Libraries pride themselves on the breadth of their collections; perhaps the same principle should be applied to the environment as well. The library could look at its spaces as collections on their own: a library with as many designers as authors.

The 4th Floor is a similarly branded, raw environment that maintains an extremely flexible and responsive nature. In many ways the 4th Floor can be framed as a stage, a dynamically reprogrammable space to accommodate the needs and wants of the community. Likewise, our design and fabrication practices follow the language of set design, populating the space with movable elements, partitions, and powerful, high-impact digital projection tools.

**Community-driven innovation**

The success and development of the 4th Floor is linked directly to strong strategic partnerships with other entities operating in Chattanooga's ecosystem of design, technology, art, and education institutions. A top-down service design process dictated solely by the library would fail; it has been clear from the beginning that to be successful the 4th Floor must harness the expertise and commitment of the community to design its own services.

The LTK seminar was founded on a similarly bottom-up belief. LTK was established to grant academic credit to those Harvard students inspired to help invent their library's future. The Labrary popped up as a beta space to test their creations with the general public.

**Looking ahead**

The library for consumption was configured to create access to information in different formats and containers. Looking ahead, the library for experimentation, curiosity, and production must provide access to new tools, experiences, and opportunities for knowledge creation and exploration. No matter what these tools and services look like in the years ahead, our interaction with them will happen in physical space—in public, side by side, and perhaps in conversation.

Beyond that, we don't need to know much more, we just need to take the leap and allocate the real estate where it can happen. As we've learned from our beta spaces, the risk of creating unprogrammed space has been rewarded with new programming and new uses of the environment that we could never have expected when we began.

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By Jeff Goldenson and Nate Hill

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