Planning for the Art Library of the Future: The Importance of Collection Analysis

by Carol S. Terry, Rhode Island School of Design

Since shelving is the largest single component occupying space in most libraries, thorough knowledge of the art library’s various collections provides a solid basis for planning new library space. Formulae and standards are useful starting points, but the library’s actual data may be more compelling to architects and administrators as the planning process goes forward. Following are the steps of collection analysis found useful through a long process of planning for new library space at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Collection Review

Collection analysis should begin with a comprehensive review to make sure that one is planning new space for collections that the library intends to keep. If the collection development policy allows, weed duplicates, older editions, out-of-scope gifts that should never have been accepted, course materials that are no longer needed, etc. Here at RISD, for example, books outside of our broad definition of art were withdrawn if they were not listed in *Books for College Libraries* and had not circulated in the previous ten years. Some art historical journals that were getting no use and that had complete runs at the Brown University Library, just a block away, were also withdrawn. Unprocessed gifts particularly were scrutinized, as was the large number of duplicates in Special Collections. Visual collections are reviewed regularly at the RISD Library, with weeding a normal part of the acquisition process.

Collection Count

The next step in collection analysis is to count and measure the collections. Most online catalogs can provide collection counts by location code for all cataloged items. It is important to remember to include those volumes that are not part of the catalog counts; in RISD’s case, that means almost 800 volumes in reference sets that are not individually bar-coded, as well the periodicals and auction catalogs. An inventory is a useful step to make sure that one has the materials recorded in the online catalog. Visual collections need to be counted by each material type: slides, clippings, mounted reproductions, posters, and postcards, as well as videotapes, videodisks, and DVDs. Formulae for volumes per linear foot should be checked against an actual sample if an actual measurement cannot be taken. Since the RISD Library interfiles thin exhibition catalogs with books, numbers turned out to be somewhat higher than the formulae provided in *Facilities Standards for Art Libraries and Visual Resources Collections.* RISD counts show sixteen volumes per linear foot for regular-sized books, eleven volumes per linear foot for oversized books, and seven volumes per linear foot for reference.

Collection Projection

Finally, based on these numbers, one can anticipate future growth and space needs. By creating a spreadsheet showing current collections by type, with item count and linear feet, one could then estimate collection size in ten-year and twenty-year periods. For planning purposes at RISD, a flat number for new acquisitions is being used, predicting steady collection growth of printed materials similar to that of the past few years, with the caveat that a major gift would seriously affect this projection. The Library will continue to collect artists’ books and other special collection materials at a slightly greater rate.

Future growth of the periodical collection, as a matter of policy, is forecast at the current rate of growth. It may be that only twenty years’ worth of periodicals would be accessible for browsing. Earlier volumes will need to be retrieved from off-site storage or at least from less accessible stack areas.

Modest growth is anticipated for the slide collection, and little or no growth in the picture collection, with more vigorous weeding of both collections to provide the needed space for new material. These collections will eventually be augmented easily with digital images, which will definitely affect future growth rates of the slide collection. The picture collection is a unique resource of almost 500,000 images, its usefulness for students and faculty residing, in part, from its format. We anticipate continuing to update and service this collection, regardless of the availability of digital images.

With collection analysis complete, art librarians can effectively present the data showing collections that differ from the norm. The percentage of oversize volumes and flat folios, as well as the myriad formats of visual collections, become very apparent in such a presentation.

Real numbers are also important for the librarian. As collections become crammed into overly small spaces, it is easy to underestimate the amount of shelving (or drawer space) that is needed for appropriate storage to ensure the best preservation practices.
This collection analysis and projection of future growth will inform a large part of the building program. A non-site-specific building program will become the foundation for all future planning for a building project and will be a key component of advocacy for new space for the library.

Notes

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