ARCHITECTURE VIEW: TWO DISPARATE VIEWS OF A LIBRARY'S AIM
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Two Disparate Views of a Library's Aim

The New York Times / Ken Laffal

The Sterling Memorial Library at Yale— "the result of a love affair with the past"

Post-modernism is not the only development turning established cultural and architectural traditions upside down. Definitions of art and function are being revised almost everywhere, even in such strongholds of tradition as libraries, long considered the predictable anchors to the bedrock of the civilized world.

Take Clarkson College, for example, in Potsdam, N. Y., a town in the northern reaches of the state where fall foliage might seem more of an attraction than advanced technology. Clarkson, however, is a school that specializes in science, technology and management, a trinity to give one pause. The college is currently celebrating the construction of a $4-million replacement for its library called an Education Resources Center. This building is filled with computers and videotape decks designed to make books and conventional libraries obsolete.

At the same time, Yale University has been celebrating the 50th anniversary of Sterling Memorial Library, a building not only loaded with traditional examples of the printed word, but designed to look like a 14th-century Gothic church. In honoring the art and artifacts of the past, the library's devotees point out that the anachronistic facility still works extremely well.

Any similarity between the Sterling Library and the Clarkson Center — beyond the fact that they are both educational buildings devoted to the storage and dissemination of knowledge — would be rejected even if it existed. One might call this a cultural communications gap.

"Books can be too slow," Clarkson's president explains, on the clear assumption that instant information is more desirable than the wisdom of the ages. "Education is basically an information transfer process," says the director of the Center, on leave from General Electric, in what may be the reductive oversimplification of the century. "The aim of education is to have people educate themselves."

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I have not seen this self-service library of tomorrow devoted to data-retrieval rather than holistic humanity, but I assume that stylistically it is also a model of the future that its designers envision. I do know Sterling, a building that is obviously the result of a love affair with the past. Its architect, James Gamble Rogers, was as eclectic in his tastes as the library is in its collections; both operated on the assumption that all of art and human endeavor were their legitimate domain, a not-uncommon state of the educated mind before the discovery of the irrelevance of history.

To architects of the modernist movement in the 1920's Sterling was a sham and Rogers was reprehensible; this was education masquerading as ecclesiology, with a steel-framed bookstack hiding behind a veneer of Gothic stonework. To more tolerant observers, the medieval details and soaring spaces were beautiful and impressive and notably successful for their purpose. Today, it is no longer necessary to disdain Rogers's complex and contradictory building. And even in this age of microcircuitry, the printed book, as a publisher recently observed, has turned out to be a remarkably cheap and practical way of storing and retrieving knowledge.

Lurking behind the architectural rejection and reassessment of Sterling Library that has taken place over a 50-year period, and underlying the concept of Clarkson's Education Resources Center, is something that might be called the Technological Fallacy. Architects of the early modern movement were conspiciously seduced by it; one has difficulty now imagining the excitement engendered by the 20th-century technological and structural advances that ruptured the traditional limitations of building design.

Since the early years of this century were also a time of social optimism, the Technological Fallacy led directly and naturally to visions of a Utopia of Ultimate Efficiency. But the more efficient environment and the better and more beautiful world that technology was to produce never materialized. That is why a good deal of modern architecture is currently in such bad repute.

The fault, of course, lies not in the impossible dream, or in the architect's inability to deliver it; this kind of failure grows out of unreal, naive, or arrogant expectations. From prestressed concrete to electronic miniaturization, the new technologies were, and are, superb in context. No one is knocking progress for libraries. Whether they choose to clothe themselves in the styles of the future or the past, computerization of resources is a vital need. Behind the oppressively retardataire facade of the new Library of Congress building, for example, there are batteries of computers, and every research collection that can afford to do so is rushing to commit its catalogues to tape. The computer's infinite capacity for information storage, comprehensiveness and speed, and the useful world of interlibrary exchange that it opens, makes it the greatest thing to happen to books since Gutenberg.

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However, the problem of the Technological Fallacy remains. It is the common one of mistaking the medium for the message. It is Clarkson's extension of the Technological Fallacy to define education as information transfer that is so disturbing, and that tells so much about a society increasingly devoted to quantitative computations rather than to qualitative analysis. In this kind of education, there are no great minds, only great computers. I suspect that the Education Resources Center may not be great architecture, either.

Clarkson's administration is quoted as believing that machines are all that will eventually be necessary to provide that Utopia of Ultimate Efficiency, self-education, a process that will take place wherever there is a computer with the answers. The implicit assumption is that this is some kind of educational ideal. Members of Clarkson's faculty, dismissed as "skeptics" by the college's president, are not so sure. Clarkson students already make their oral presentations to television cameras, rather than to a professorial company of culturally and intellectually diverse, often skeptical and sometimes inspirational, critics and scholars. It is the creative abrasions and constant challenges — the disturbing processes of thought — that are the essence of education.

The objective of education resists even the most sophisticated programming: it is the application of intelligence, inquiry and sensibility to the development of informed and caring responses to the achievements and dilemmas of the world. Even if Clarkson's Education Resources Center is a computer cathedral, I don't think I want to see it. ■