Empower: Association of Architecture School Librarians

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Ashley Huot

University of Manitoba Libraries

Author Notes

Ashley Huot is a Librarian at the University of Manitoba

Email: ashley.huot@umanitoba.ca

Abstract

This conference report summarizes the content and conversations of the Association of Architecture School Librarians' 2022 virtual conference titled Empower. This topic was engaged through thematic groupings of presentations including *Exploring Intersecting Modalities for Research and Instruction*, *Amplifying Historically Marginalized Voices*, and *Highlighting Collections Through Collaboration* which reflected empowerment in a myriad of ways, such as support of information organization, teaching, learning, and research.

Keywords: architecture librarianship, architecture libraries, academic libraries, library instruction, information literacy instruction, conference report, library conference, diverse collections, library programs, library collections

Introduction

I would first like to thank AASL for supporting my conference attendance through the Frances Chen Travel Award. As an early career professional settling into an architecture library role, the content and the connections made available through this conference were invaluable. The conference's theme of *Empower* was fitting not only as we struggle through a global pandemic and continue to experience the challenges of remote work and learning, but the crucial role of empowerment in supporting action-orientated responses to calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion, and mitigating barriers our communities face. Daily conference themes including *Exploring Intersecting Modalities for Research and Instruction*, *Amplifying Historically Marginalized Voices*, and *Highlighting Collections Through Collaboration* reflected empowerment in a myriad of ways, from our support of information organization, teaching, learning, and research. In a broad sense, librarians, libraries, and archives seek to empower their communities by breaking down barriers and building bridges to information access. But as information professionals, we must always be aware of the context in which our work exists; how our institutions and profession have historically and continue to uphold white supremacy, and how our dominantly accepted canons are complicit in the erasure of the built histories of marginalized populations.

Keynote speaker Gail Kennard framed the conference's content by arguing how our built environments tell the stories and histories of what we value; highlighting some of L.A's nuanced and resilient multicultural local history, including its Indigenous, Chinese, and Black communities. In several ways, this presentation was a call to action for information professionals to support the reclamation and shifting of narrative history that has been framed by colonialism, a perpetuation of false histories, as well as an intentional erasure of histories. Kennard argued that libraries and information professionals are well-positioned to expand historical narratives to better present the built environments of and designed by women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ communities, in part by seeking to look beyond academia that has limited this scope in the past

by incorporating oral histories and personal and community archives. As information professionals, empowerment often delves into tackling these complex problems as we strive towards more accurately capturing and making accessible information related to marginalized groups in the field of architecture.

Exploring Intersecting Modalities for Research and Instruction

This theme of presentations discussed how libraries and librarians support intersections in research and instruction, highlighting challenges unique to creative disciplines, and architecture in particular, while sharing practical and responsive strategies that empower those interacting with information. Flexibility, responsive approaches, and strategic collaboration that centre faculty and student needs in their instruction and learning emerged in this thematic collection of presentations. In the context of the ongoing pandemic, making the most of online learning is an ongoing challenge and these presentations offered some applicable approaches. From the perspective of librarian-taught courses at Woodbury University, Solomon Blaylock shared strategies for adapting from in-person to online instruction and engagement in information literacy by focusing on constructivist approaches that encourage peer learning and group discussion to emulate studio learning environments. Also in an online context, Tess Colwell shared an example of a librarian collaboration with Yale School of Architecture faculty to facilitate a student research project exploring expired patents, utilizing Google as a tool for fostering research skills while strengthening student connection to the library, and librarian. Continuing on the value of centering collaboration, Margaret Logas of the University of Florida's CityLab Orlando Library shared numerous avenues their institution provides to support students in succeeding in their profession. Their specialized library engages in community relationships, interactive programs, and events, and provides access to tools, software, and studio-like spaces while also prepping students for

coursework and featuring their creations, and encouraging creative problem-solving.

Finally, the ongoing challenge of capturing metrics in creative disciplines was examined

by Catherine Essinger from the perspective of the University of Houston Libraries and

their ongoing investigation and efforts in utilizing both alternative and traditional

approaches to develop a template to numerically track and rank creative outputs. These

sessions diversely reflected how libraries respond to and support the unique ways in

which creative disciplines engage in research, learning, and information creation.

Amplifying Historically Marginalized Voices

During the second conference day, presenters shared practical examples of libraries and

archives responding to the need to broaden the scope of and highlight information available by

and about groups that have been systematically marginalized and underrepresented in the

canon of academia and dominantly told histories. In a profession that continues to be

predominantly white, there is an imperative need for antiracist practice work in architecture

libraries and archives that is action-orientated and not performative; this ongoing process was

discussed in a panel moderated by David Eifler. There are several continual challenges in

researching BIPOC architectural subjects including and not limited to the intentional

under-representation and documentation of built environments connected to historically

marginalized communities and of BIPOC architects and designers. As information professionals,

there is an obvious need to advocate to publishers and information resource providers to

produce more diverse materials that meet the demand for information in these areas, in

particular works by and about BIPOC architects and built communities. Furthermore, the lack of

historical documentation may need to be addressed by focusing on the collection and

preserving of alternative sources of knowledge that may have been traditionally dismissed, such

as oral histories and community-based archives, a process that information professionals are

well-equipped to support.

As information professionals, we can support the gathering or crowdsourcing, organization, and accessibility of non-canonized information related to architecture and the built environment more broadly. Researcher Hank Morgan shared his tracking of the quantitative effects of gentrification on marginalized communities, a project which challenges and supports the correction of traditional narratives around gentrification as progress or strategic investment, becoming not only an important historical tool but one that provides usable and preserved information for future use. In a strategy for tackling the underrepresentation of extracanonical works related to the built environment, Namrata Dhore, Sofie Kusaba, and Christina Truwit of RISD's Project Archive shared their advocacy work in creating an ever-growing open access archive project that subverts architecture's dominant western canonical practices by crowdsourcing socially engaged collections, utilizing a decentralized research process, and even rethinking citation practices. Beyond projects focused on gathering information on marginalized topics, was the sharing of tools created to enhance the accessibility of available information. Jenny Davis and Dylan Rosenleib of Columbia University Library shared their development of research guides for their graduate school of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation focused on *Race and the Built Environment* to support the challenges of researching gentrification, BIPOC architects that are underrepresented in literature, and research materials and resources on inclusive preservation. As an ongoing project, the guide pulls together the library and archive resources and external resources. Discussions throughout this day engaged in the challenges of correcting traditionally upheld themes, pedagogies, and histories of information; how they're documented and organized, highlighting what is available, and seeking to fill gaps. While there is an ongoing need to continually engage in and advocate for information on BIPOC architecture topics, as well as other marginalized and underrepresented groups, considerations such as creating open access content that is more accessible and who is doing the work, and how or if they are being compensated arose.

Furthermore, the notion that antiracism must be a central ethos and mindset that exists within a discipline such as architecture librarianship, rather than something adjacent was explored.

Highlighting Collections Through Collaboration

The final conference day involved presentations engaging in how collaborative efforts can empower the communities we support through examples of collaboration within institutions, between staff and through student engagement, and across multiple institutions more broadly. New Jersey Institute of Technology's Maya Gervits and Monica Kenzie shared digital and technology-driven institutional collaborations related to the Digital Archive of Newark Architecture, the history of the Hillier College of Art and Design, and utilizing augmented reality, virtual exhibitions, and virtual meetings that connected international alumni. These initiatives fostered vital engagement and continuity during a time when everything shifted to virtual as a result of the pandemic. Alisha Rall and Ellen Urton of the Kansas State University's Weigel Library of Architecture, Planning & Design shared a multifaceted approach to creating a comprehensive outreach plan that involved collaboration between multiple staff and resources. This initiative utilized the physical re-opening of the library and their campus welcome week to embed research strategies and engagement to connect with students.

University of Michigan's Rebecca Price shared examples of projects that partner librarians with students hired for library collections-based projects; such as curating an exhibit of print publications and digitizing and cataloging a collection of photographs, allowing students to deeply research a specific historical topic from the context of their studies. Moreover, these projects deepened students' understanding and articulation of research processes by engaging them in curation, presentation, preservation, assessment, digitization, and more library-specific concepts such as cataloging and collections. While providing deep learning for the students involved, these projects also provide an opportunity for engagement in the projects after completion, contributing to library outreach.

Jessica Holada and Aimee Lind shared their co-founded cross-institutional initiative that began in 2016, the California Architecture Network, or CalArchNet; which brings together library, archive, and museum professionals across California that work with records related to California's built environment. Their collaboration has long shared strategies for and advice related to the nuances of collecting and providing engagement in California's architectural information. An already well-established forum that met twice annually, CalAchNet shifted to virtual gatherings during the pandemic, which allowed for an increase in membership and engagement, in particular more involvement with student and early-career professionals. As in several other examples shared throughout the conference, virtual collaboration strategies created during the pandemic promise to be useful going forward.

Virtual Placemaking and Wayfinding in California

Originally planned as an in-person event hosted in Los Angeles, this virtual conference achieved engagement in a sense of place and exploration of Los Angeles' built history reflective of its diversity and complexity. Alex Inshishian of Los Angeles Conservancy provided a visual tour highlighting the distinctive and varied range of Paul R. William's work in California, interspersed with guest speakers. While highly influential and significant, William's work is not represented in research and literature to the extent of his contemporaries. Following this thread of highlighting built local history, was a tour facilitated by Michael C. Oliveira of Los Angeles' One Archives at the USC Libraries, which houses the largest repository of LGBTQ+ historical materials in the world. The tour provided a visual experience of gathering sites and architectural structures located in Los Angeles that are significant to LGBTQ+ history. Kevin McMahon led a visual tour of the Southern California Institute of Architecture's iconic building with a special focus on its library and recent projects such as their ongoing efforts to diversify their collection to better represent and make searchable, marginalized groups, topics, and individuals in

architecture. Sandy Isenstadt's presentation LA After Dark: The Incandescent City, provided an illuminating examination of the history of light in Los Angeles, capturing the intricate relationships between electric light and the built environment. This visual presentation highlighted Los Angeles' unique use of light stemmed from its iconic film industry celebrations and premieres, which were adopted by commercial initiatives and holiday festivities; its neon lights, and the automobile-centric city's headlights and street lamps. While touring L.A. physically wasn't possible, these highly visual and engaging lectures provided an immersive introductory sense of L.A.'s built environment.

Conclusion

Throughout the three days, there were several opportunities for participants to connect on a personal level, share about their libraries and recent projects, discuss common challenges and experiences, and recommend resources related to presentations and discussions. The conference content overall emphasized that intentionality and collaboration can foster deeper empowerment in terms of teaching and learning related to student and researcher experience and in the organization and advocacy of the subjects and communities represented in our collections.