Watch this Space

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Gary S. Lawrence, of the University of California Library Studies and Research Division, has written in relation to library storage problems:

The principal problem is economic. If libraries had enough money to build the new facilities they need, there would be no books and articles and conferences on alternatives to new construction — there would be no 'space problem'. It follows that if the problem is primarily economic, the decisions we make in coping with the problem, and the justifications for those decisions, should be based on (although not limited to) economic considerations.¹

This economic premise underpins the study undertaken by Richard A. Stayner and Valerie R. Richardson (hereafter Stayner) which was funded by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (hereafter CTEC) under its Evaluative Studies grant scheme. Congratulations in the first instance should go to both authors for the actual completion of the project, given the comments aroused by the long delays involved in the Inter-Library Loan study also funded by the CTEC through an Evaluative Studies grant. It is sad, however, that the actual printing of the report was so delayed in the early part of 1983 that its findings and analyses were not able to form a significant part of the discussions resulting from the CTEC visitations to tertiary institutions during that period.

It should be recalled that the Universities Council section of the CTEC Report for the 1982-84 triennium contained the following remarks:

Space problems have led several universities to transfer material to off-site storage areas. In view of the shortage of substantial capital funds necessary for major library extensions, three universities have sought funds to construct less expensive library storage facilities. Universities maintain however that off-site storage is an additional drain on recurrent funds because considerable costs are involved in selection, transportation, storage and maintaining accessibility. The development of microforms and the installation of compactus shelving, while helping to alleviate the problem in some areas, are not at this stage seen by libraries as long term solutions. It is in this context that the Commission is funding a study of alternative storage strategies for libraries under its Evaluative Studies Program. The results of this study will be of interest to all universities and may provide some direction for the future.²

With the announcement by the Federal Department of Education and Youth Affairs of the funding guidelines for 1984 there is clearly not going to be any short term switch of emphasis on the fairly (perhaps unfairly!) rigid clampdown on capital expenditure for universities.³ If this continues into the 1985-87 triennium then the problems for libraries and their collections will intensify, particularly if no additional funds are made available for effective stock relegation, i.e. in terms of staffing and catalogue control. In that case the Stayner study will more than ever be one of the relevant documents to refer to for the assessment of options.

In this context, however, one should note the word of caution expressed by Professor Jean Whyte in her preface:

We think that it would be inappropriate for this kind of report to present a summary of recommendations because this study does not try to solve the space problems of any of the three libraries mentioned above; still less does it attempt to solve the space problems of all Australian university libraries. We hope that it does set out what those problems are, what choices librarians have as they attempt to solve them, and what the costs of those choices are likely to be.

She continues, however, to qualify these costs:

Throughout the report we have warned that while the costs that we emphasize are those that can be quantified and therefore measured, we are well aware of the existence of other costs which are questions of value and therefore not easily measured.⁴

Therein many would say lies the rub!

The 'three libraries mentioned above', from which much data are derived are those of the Universities of Sydney and Queensland and Monash itself. The comments above by Jean


² For example see Universities Council section of CTEC Report for 1982-84 triennium.

³ For example see Universities Council section of CTEC Report for 1982-84 triennium.

⁴ For example see Universities Council section of CTEC Report for 1982-84 triennium.
Whyte are echoed in the Chapter Eight “Summary & Conclusions” which indicates that the solution to the space problem is inextricably linked to the solution of many other problems of resource allocation in the individual tertiary institution as well as the national scene.

There is much in the Stayner study that will prove valuable to librarians other than in tertiary institutions, but it would be fair to state that its context is primarily that of higher education and the lack of capital funding in that sector, where nearly all the funding derives from the Federal Government through the CTEC. Other sectors such as TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and public libraries have been able to proceed with libraries subject to the priorities ascertained by their individual or collective, e.g. State, financial masters. This different pattern of capital expenditure is certainly reflected in Warwick Dunstan's latest ALJ survey of library buildings for 1980 and 1981.

Chapter One of the Stayner study sets the scene with “The Nature of the Space Problem in University Libraries”. The comment is made ‘In 1981 submissions to the Universities Council included requests for library extensions by thirteen universities totalling $22 million. These cannot be regarded as frivolous requests since they were accorded high priority by the sponsoring institutions in a climate of economic restraint’. Looking at some of the library submissions by universities for the 1985-87 triennium, remembering that 1982-84 were bleak years for library building funding, then quite a few more universities regard their libraries as being their number one priority for capital funding. This is clearly not based on any general philanthropic feelings towards libraries by university administrators who clearly have a multitude of demands to include in their building shopping list.

It is perhaps relevant to note here that in the United Kingdom, even as the real reduction in funds to all universities has occurred, an ongoing programme of major library building has taken place on a fairly regular annual basis. Thus at the end of June 1983 the new library building at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne was officially opened at a cost at contract building stage of £4.15 million with additional furniture and shelving of £1.5 million. The building has a gross floor area of 10161m², usable floor area of 8164m² and a book volume stack for 700,000 volumes. The major library building work at Durham University is nearing completion, major extensions to York and Glasgow University libraries have been approved and a new building has recently been announced for Queen Mary College, London.

These buildings indicate that in the eyes of the British funding agencies no ‘technological fix’ yet exists for the library space problem. The literature would seem to confirm this, although the danger clearly exists and proponents of the ‘electronic journal’ concept, such as Professor F.W. Lancaster, have caused havoc on more than one North American campus re building plans in 1983 when catching the ear of the relevant administrator!

Stayner clearly recognised the nature of this problem and commissioned a report on emerging technologies in the library and information field which forms the basis of part of Chapter Seven. The interested reader would need to refer to the whole which is a relatively straightforward statement of the state of the art as of mid-1982. Stayner’s final conclusion is uncertain as to when the electronic revolution will actually take place and one would agree with Maurice Line, who has recently stated that ‘electronic miracles do not necessarily produce economic miracles . . . the immediate future will be more or less a continuation of the present, with no easy or cheap solutions to the economic problems facing libraries.

The Stayner study does not provide the answers to the library space problems, nor did we expect it to do so. This, however, should be clearly recognised, particularly by those who don’t read it! It is basically a carefully defined analysis of ‘four possible options to the space problem’ namely:

1. An extension to the existing library, of relatively conventional design, offering open access to materials, with storage densities comparable to the existing accommodation, and with sufficient reader seating to allow use of the extended collection. We call this primary storage, or the ‘new building’ option.

2. A secondary storage facility, owned and operated by a single institution, housing materials at higher density than in the primary collection, with closed access, few
creature comforts’, but at a standard of environmental control for library materials as good as in the primary collection. We call this the ‘own secondary store’ option.

3. A shared (co-operative) secondary storage facility with similar physical attributes to 2, for the use of several institutions — the ‘cooperative storage’ option.

4. No new building of any sort. New material would be accommodated by a combination of: substitution of microform and other condensed form materials for paper; reductions in reader or staff space; discard of materials; increases in shelving density; and more reliance on the holdings of other libraries through the interlibrary loan system, telefacsimile, and the like. This is the ‘no new building’ option.9

These four options are then considered by applying standard mathematical techniques to assess comparative net present value of costs. Stayner correctly indicates that these can only compare ‘a small number of deliberately chosen options’ and then only costing what is quantifiable. The ‘grey areas’ of library user activity are left well alone. These parameters should be well understood because they qualify the expectations of the reader. What we are basically presented with is:

1) A cogent and sensible analysis of the literature on the topic to about mid-1982 which contains much of practical value to the uninitiated in this area, e.g. on weeding criteria, shelving techniques and secondary storage facilities.

2) Costing models for the four options listed above, which each institution can use for their own purposes, providing they can input the relevant data (and the Stayner study reminds us how woeful libraries can be in their collection of such data on an individual basis, let alone a comparative one). This data will then allow “better” decisions to be made, bearing in mind the caveats to be recognised in the final costings for each option, i.e. that arise in the local circumstances and the unquantifiable elements.

The tables included in the chapters for each option will prove particularly useful and while one can quibble with minor details within them, e.g. on shelving density, the overall approach, within its relatively basic parameters, is sound. Stayner writes: ‘The solution in each institution must be based largely on local characteristics’.10 Whether this will ‘provide some direction for the future’ in a collective sense for the CTEC is debatable! At least it takes the debate a step further for those who read it.

This second reference to ‘those who read it’, is to reaffirm that the volume while not easy reading does repay careful scrutiny. At times the argument is tight and occasionally cryptic, and the mixture of text and tables does not allow quick browsing. Perhaps this latter was symbolic in the light of Jean Whyte’s comments on ‘browsing, serendipity and academic research’ in her preface!

The issues outlined by Stayner will not go away. He, for the sake of the study, assumes a relatively constant intake of material for the next fifteen years. While book purchasing has probably declined in real terms, e.g. with devaluation, book intake is hopefully not going to drop so dramatically as to solve the problem of space by itself. Stayner notes the possible substitution of the printed word by other forms of information storage, in particular by microforms and also the disintegration that will occur in the twenty-first century of much of the books and serials currently existing in our libraries. Conservation continues to be our belief but rarely our practice! The ‘self-destructing library’ may yet be the eventual outcome!

What impact will the Stayner study have? Clearly it will be read by all interested librarians but probably by far fewer administrators. If librarians initially blanch at the mixture of text and tables, what then the busy administrator? At the time of writing there is no indication of its impact on the CTEC and indeed one wonders what they can do if the Government provides no significant increase in capital funding for universities.

Clearly whether we like it or not most libraries are going to have to face, for a longish period of time, the storage of books other than in their existing buildings. Given that it seems unlikely that additional staffing will be provided to properly relegate and store material, ad
hoc solutions will have to take place on each individual campus or regional grouping with the consequent political ramifications.

The issues that arise from this call for coordinated approaches, e.g. if permanent discard is to occur can it be allowed to be done in the present piecemeal fashion? The present reviewers still wonder if some of the outlets for the National Library's fairly considerable discard programme should have been as they have been. Thus a liquidation auction market business in an industrial suburb of the ACT proved to be a temporary NLA bibliophilic treasure house which enriched the collections of a number of historians in the ACT. One recognises however the difficulties in staffing and administrative terms in getting the right books to the right libraries in the right location in a short time.

More and more one comes back to the fact that the most effective remedy for the use of diminishing resources is that more effective regional and national coordination will have to take place. The stresses and strains exemplified in the Australian Bibliographic Network reveal the problems when all involved are trying to undertake laudable tasks with not really enough resources. ALIC, the Australian Libraries Information Council, offers one national forum for action but it, too, could hardly be said to be lavishly funded and certainly at the time of writing has no effective 'pump priming' resources. Stayner correctly concludes

The overwhelming impression to emerge from this study is of the inter-relatedness of all library problems and services . . . if resource sharing is to play an effective role in library service then we need to develop national information policies which take into account all the costs and all the benefits of such policies. 11

Resource sharing must be approached with some caution. Again, Maurice Line: a popular remedy for local insufficiency is 'resource-sharing' which appears to have taken over as the Most Desirable Trend; it somehow sounds a bit better than cooperation, as it seems to imply some measure of planning. However, resource-sharing does not extend the resources available unless there is a cooperative acquisitions system, and it has yet to be shown that the costs and problems of operating such a system are justified by the results. In fact, what happens when the funds of libraries become tighter and tighter is that their acquisitions tend to become more and more similar as they concentrate more on the core materials so that total national availability declines. 12

It is to be hoped that the Stayner study will not be allowed to gather dust in some collective intellectual warehouse!

Perhaps it should be pursued in a national setting, by say CAUL (the Committee of Australian University Librarians) and the AVCC (the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee) — once the guidelines for the 1985-87 triennium have been announced in early 1984. Significant issues like the use of recurrent funding, at whatever short term disarray, for capital funding may be preferable in a long term economic context. Buildings before books would then be a temporary motto. Given the importance of libraries of tertiary institutions in the national bibliographical context then the decisions of those institutions with regard to their collections will necessarily affect the overall Australian library and information scene.

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REFERENCES
4. R. Stayner, iv.
11. Ibid., p. 126.