The Planning Process for Berry Library, Dartmouth College

Initial Needs Assessment Leading to the New Library Plan:

The design of the Berry Library is the outcome of a long, careful process of deliberation and decision-making, a continuous narrative from initial idea through design.

Dartmouth’s library facility for humanities and social sciences, Baker Library, was designed in the 1920s at a time when “information retrieval” essentially consisted of a paper card catalog organized as a guide to stacks of books. Thus Baker was built around its stacks to efficiently serve this physical concept of a library. The Dartmouth Library built its reputation for service on this design.

Since Baker was designed, the nature of a library has changed significantly. Access to all collections of information-- books, magazines, newspapers, image banks, databases-- is through electronics in the form of online catalogs, online databases, CD-ROM’s, and the like. Book stacks are only one of several resources, both on and off campus, that is accessed through the library building.

The new electronic interfaces have vastly increased each individual’s ability to do useful research-- searching for and organizing vast amounts of information quickly and easily. The basic tools of contemporary academic work-- from interlibrary loan, to stack searches, to literature surveys and the assembling of bibliographies-- are now made possible by these electronic means.

Because of these developments, libraries and computer services on advanced college and university campuses have tended to merge into a single Information Service linked to all parts of the campus and vital to library staff providing direct services to faculty and students. The smooth functioning of this Information Service is now essential to the functioning of any contemporary institution of higher learning.

Because Baker was built in a time before these developments, it seriously restricts the smooth functioning of Dartmouth’s Information Service. College officials feel that as time passes and the “information age” develops at a rapid pace, these physical restrictions will become increasingly costly, so that without changes the libraries will be forced to offer inferior services at increasingly inflated expense.
If library facilities are not expanded, Dartmouth’s librarians believe that access to all kinds of information, from books to databases, will become more awkward and time-consuming for the users. Eventually, service will decline to the point where it is no longer acceptable to the campus community.

What is needed to supplement Baker is a new kind of library space: a flexible, open service core which provides access to all the kinds of information available today and which can change and adjust as the nature of information develops in the future.

Planning Process for Berry Library:

The planning for Berry Library began with a specific goal in mind: to determine how the Dartmouth Library system can best meet the future needs of the campus while maintaining its present high standards for personal service to students, faculty and staff.

The Task Force on the Library of the 21st Century was assembled in 1993 with representatives from all parts of the campus, under the chairmanship of Dartmouth Professor of Classics William C. Scott.

The Task Force’s report, which appeared in 1995, set out the chief design goals for the new building. Among these were:

The planning for Berry Library and the renovations of Baker Library must be carried out in coordination, so that the completed facility acts as the physical and intellectual crossroads of the Dartmouth campus.

Space within Berry and Baker must be designed with maximum flexibility to permit easy adjustments to emerging information technology as well as changes in staff organization.

Resources for information technology should be spread throughout the building and made available to all users, along with staff and facilities designed to teach how to use existing technologies and how to develop new uses for them.

The libraries must include spaces for various types of study, learning, research, and intellectual exchange, both formal and informal, as well as enhanced staff work space.

Each step of the planning and design process for Berry Library has been undertaken with appropriate review and approvals by trustees, campus and town officials, and input from representative review committees.