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Campus, collections, and the student: a spatial ontology of the university library

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a framework for understanding the evolving spatial ontology of the contemporary university library. We conceptualise the library in three overlapping ways. First, as a material anchor of campus life and a metonym for the university's identity; second, as a site where the fixity of collections intersects with the mobility of students, knowledge, and digital infrastructures; and third, as a spatial manifestation of how universities now reimagine the learner as flexible, networked, and socially embedded. Drawing on interviews with library professionals and spatial ethnography at twelve universities in Australia and internationally, we demonstrate how libraries have shifted from repositories of physical collections to hybrid environments that blend scholarly tradition with new forms of conviviality, collaboration, wellbeing, and digital support. Through these lenses, the article argues that the university library is not a peripheral or residual space but an essential – yet often overlooked and under-theorised – site where the competing imperatives of scholarly tradition, market responsiveness, and managerial control are actively negotiated across both physical and digital terrain. We show how the library's spatial reorganisation mirrors and amplifies sector-wide shifts: from teaching- to learning-centred models, from fixed collections to platform-mediated flows, and from solitary scholarship to collaborative, multi-modal learning environments. By tracing these transformations, the article positions the library as both a metonym for the university itself and as a spatial nexus where tradition, innovation, and the changing logics of higher education intersect.

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1. Introduction

The university campus is a typology repeated in identifiable forms across institutions worldwide. A visitor, greeted by a signboard or campus map, would typically expect to encounter a familiar assemblage: faculty buildings, specialist research centres, and an array of 'central' buildings: the Chancellery, a student centre, cultural and sporting facilities, and one or more libraries. Many of these spaces – the central lawn, the quadrangle, the student union – have claimed to embody the 'heart' of university life. But it is the library that most enduringly occupies this symbolic role. 'The heart of the campus' is a recurring metaphor in both scholarly literature (Carlson, 2022; Freeman, 2005; Stoffle,

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1981; Walker & Smith, 2013) and in library workers' reflections on their role. As Carlson (2022: 5) notes, the phrase reflects both the physical prominence of libraries and their 'traditional role in managing the intellectual output of academe.'

Research on the changing spatiality of academic libraries has focused on two key areas. First, scholars have examined how e-resources, open-access policies, and technologies such as VR and 3D printing have reshaped conceptions of the library. These shifts have spurred renewed investment in library architecture, student-centred design, and experimental learning spaces – with cafés, galleries, and multimedia studios now interspersed among study areas and shelves (Atkinson, 2021; Carlson, 2022; Dale et al., 2012; Lynch, 1995; Matthews & Walton, 2012). Yet this reinvestment has unfolded amid operational budget cuts, centralised governance, and ongoing debates about the library's role in the 'digital' university (Robins and Webster, 2002; Willetts, 2017), and the wider pressures of neoliberal reform (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Broader library scholarship likewise shows how libraries must constantly rearticulate their relevance, as their historical function in preserving and circulating knowledge is no longer assured in the digital era (Leorke & Wyatt, 2018; Mattern, 2014; Palfrey, 2015).

Second, changes to university learning environments have further altered libraries' spatial function. The shift from teaching- to learning-centred pedagogies has driven the rise of the 'learning commons' (Bennett, 2005, 2011) and a proliferation of informal, flexible study spaces across campus (Jamieson, 2009; Matthews et al., 2011). In the process, libraries have been rediscovered as 'resource-rich environments,' but their distinctiveness is increasingly blurred as the entire campus itself is reframed as a 'learning landscape' (Cox, 2018: 1077; Goad et al., 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated these shifts, intensifying long-standing uncertainties about the future of physical campuses and in-person learning (Lewi & Logan, 2022; Wong, 2024). Amidst these fluctuating conceptions of the library, library professionals have responded through initiatives focused on decolonising collections (Crilly & Everitt, 2024; Edwards, 2019), co-designing spaces with students (Decker, 2020), employing user experience (UX) methods to better understand needs and preferences (Aksu Dunya & De Groote, 2019; May & Swabey, 2015), and increasingly positioning libraries as sites for supporting student mental health and wellbeing (Hill & Cox, 2024; Suresh, et al., 2025).

Library and information science research has richly documented how digitalisation and shifting pedagogies are transforming academic libraries. But this work largely centres on operational, technological, and user experience concerns. In contrast, higher education studies increasingly focuses on campus architecture, estate planning, and university-city relations, tracing the material impacts of neoliberal governance and institutional restructuring (Addie, 2017; Hajrasouliha, 2017; Hebbert, 2018; McNeill et al., 2022). Yet the library remains curiously marginal in this higher education literature, despite its symbolic significance and material prominence within the university. This article addresses that gap. Rather than treating libraries as nostalgic infrastructures or fixed institutional assets, we approach them as dynamic, contested sites where the spatial, institutional, and epistemic contradictions of contemporary higher education are made visible and negotiated. Using a spatial and institutional lens, we argue that libraries offer a rich 'condensation site' through which universities' evolving priorities around knowledge, governance, and identity are staged and contested.

Our analysis draws on 23 semi-structured interviews with library staff across 12 universities (10 in Australia, 2 overseas), conducted between 2023–24, alongside site visits, campus tours, and analysis of institutional strategy documents, masterplans, and promotional materials. Interviews lasted between 30–75 minutes and were recorded and transcribed using a professional human transcription service, then analysed thematically, with an initial coding framework developed from the first set of interviews and subsequently refined through iterative engagement with the full dataset.¹ Key themes – including the symbolic function of the library, tensions around collection management, and the spatial domestication of learning environments – emerged through this process and were triangulated against observations from site visits and institutional documents. The research forms part of a larger project, 'The University and the City,' examining how the spatial transformation of universities reflects broader shifts in governance, funding, and pedagogy under neoliberal reform.

Through this frame, we read libraries as spatial metonyms for the university itself – that is, as sites that both stand in for and materially embody the institution’s core mission, and where tensions between tradition and innovation, materiality and digitalisation, and autonomy and managerial control are not simply reflected, but actively negotiated.

In what follows, we trace how changing learner identities, spatial transformations, digital systems, and governance challenges are reshaping the university library. The article proceeds in three parts. Section 2 examines the symbolic role of the library through the recurring ‘heart of the campus’ metaphor. Section 3 explores the material and operational reconfiguration of collections and library space. Section 4 turns to shifting imaginaries of the student and their impact on library design and function. Together, these readings show how the library functions as critical terrain for unpacking broader transformations in university life, institutional identity, and the pedagogical landscape.

2. ‘The heart of the campus’

To get to the Spanish Room one had to pass through the Douce Library, the home of treasures beyond price [...] that shone like jewels in the golden light of the room [...] It was in these beautiful surroundings that, with too little, I fear, of positive reading, and with much undisciplined wandering from shelf to shelf and subject to subject, there yet sank into me the sense of history, and of that vast ocean of the recorded past from which the generations rise and into which they fall back. (Mary Ward’s account of the Bodleian Library, quoted in Sutherland, 1988: 175-176).

The metaphor of the library as the ‘heart of the campus’ is deeply embedded in both academic discourse and library workers’ own understandings of their institutional role. Across our interviews, library staff invoked this metaphor reflexively, but with conviction: ‘we’re the heart of the campus’ (University Librarian, outer suburban campus); ‘the library’s at the heart of the university’ (Manager, inner urban campus); ‘we’re the heart of the university – not just heart and soul, but also geographically’ (Director, outer suburban campus). The phrase is also common in university marketing and strategic planning, and materialises physically in campus signage and masterplans. At Griffith University’s Nathan campus in Brisbane, the library sits within a precinct literally called ‘Campus Heart.’ At Macquarie University in Sydney, the library’s forecourt is designated the ‘symbolic centre of learning’ – a space intended to ‘represent the learning culture of the University’ (Macquarie University, 2014: 104).

Students similarly affirm the library’s centrality in their accounts of campus life (Cox, 2018; May & Swabey, 2015; Western Sydney University, 2023), and it often becomes a symbolic focal point during moments of campus contestation. At the University of Sydney, student marches frequently begin at Fisher Library and move towards the Chancellery – a spatial performance that stages a procession from the collective centre of intellectual life to the administrative seat of power.² Similarly, when rumours circulated that Tampere University in Finland planned to close or relocate its main library, students occupied the building, displaying banners that read: ‘We demand space for thinking, we demand space for study’ (Visiirilehti, 2022).³

The library’s positioning as the geographical and intellectual ‘heart’ of the campus is traceable to early modern campus planning, notably Thomas Jefferson’s design for the University of Virginia. As Haar (2010: xxi–xxiv) recounts, Jefferson’s masterplan placed the library – rather than a church, as was more common at the time – at the visual centre of the campus, deliberately ‘facing out toward the Virginia hills, symbolizing the continent that the students would cultivate’ – a gesture, we would add, that also hints at universities’ complicity in settler-colonial projects (McNeill et al., 2022). But this symbolic role also has even deeper roots in the library’s ancient origins. The Library of Alexandria, as der Weduwen and Pettegree (2021: 20–21) note, functioned less as a static archive than as a scholarly academy, where competing editions and scholarly commentaries forged intellectual authority. This deep, long-standing association with scholarship, knowledge production, and intellectual ambition lends powerful and enduring gravitas to the ‘library as heart’ metaphor (Demas, 2005).

The persistence and prominence of this metaphor is not merely rhetorical. It also participates in the broader symbolic economy through which universities construct a coherent institutional identity. As others have noted, spatial design and metaphor play a crucial role in staging the university as a unified, mission-driven entity – particularly under conditions of managerial fragmentation and marketisation (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; Musselin 2006; Temple, 2008; Wong, 2024). At the same time, for library professionals, invoking this metaphor serves important strategic work: it claims institutional centrality amid pressures towards marginalisation, positions libraries as essential rather than auxiliary infrastructure, and provides a counter-narrative to framings that emphasise cost-containment or service reduction. By drawing on deep cultural associations between libraries and scholarly legitimacy, library professionals mobilise historical gravitas to secure contemporary relevance. Yet the metaphor's very repetition – its appearance across interviews, marketing materials, and campus planning documents – points to an underlying tension: the need to continually assert this centrality also implies that this position is no longer assumed.

Spatially, the metaphor also has resonances with other figurations that cast socio-spatial entities as an 'assemblage' of distinct but intermixed parts, such as the city as a 'body' or 'machine' (Amin & Thrift, 2002). If we similarly approach the university as body or machine, libraries occupy a vital position not just geographically and symbolically, but also within its organisational structures and functional powers. If the Chancellery serves as the administrative brain and the student union building as the locus of democratic agency, then the library is the university's circulatory system: it organises, preserves, and disseminates knowledge. The library, then, is more than a sum of its parts – not merely a building or a service, but a layered infrastructure (Mattern, 2014) encompassing physical collections, curated archives, digital platforms, and multiple embodied and distributed services. In this sense, the library acts as a metonym for the university itself: not a simple part standing for a whole, but a site synonymous with the institution's core intellectual project. As one interviewee told us, 'researchers can't research without us. Teachers can't teach without us. Students can't learn without us. So we are a core part of the academic program' (Director, outer suburban campus).

Across our case studies, the operational and spatial centrality of libraries was materially reflected in the development priorities of campus planning and design. At nearly every campus, the main library building had been newly constructed, extensively refurbished, or targeted for major redevelopment within the past 15 years. At Macquarie University, for example, the old Brutalist library – a fortress-like structure with a repetitive block façade – was replaced by a new seven-storey building by Francis-Jones Morehen Thorp (FJMT; now renamed fjstudio) in 2011. The new building, renamed in 2025 to Waranara Library – meaning 'to seek' in the language of the local Dharug people – features floor-to-ceiling glass walls, open atrium walkways, outdoor seating, and an internal garden, aiming to dissolve the boundaries between library, campus, and landscape. In contrast to the former building's defensive posture, the new library literally reaches outwards, extending an invitation to both the university community and the public beyond (see Figure 1).

This design ethos reflects broader shifts in library architecture globally. Across campuses, new and refurbished libraries now incorporate collaborative zones, gallery spaces, event venues, sensory rooms for neurodiverse students, and immersive technologies like VR labs. In this respect, university libraries are following a trajectory already taken by public libraries, increasingly reconceptualised as community hubs and civic anchors within urban revitalisation and redevelopment strategies (see Leorke & Wyatt, 2018; Mattern, 2007; Mickiewicz, 2016).

These parallels are not incidental. University master planning now regularly draws on urban design principles of porosity, mixed-use functionality, and integration with surrounding neighbourhoods (Haar, 2010; Hebbert, 2018; Way, 2016). In an era of declining public funding and heightened competition, universities seek to activate their 'development periphery' by embedding themselves in the urban fabric through innovation precincts, cultural partnerships, and publicly accessible infrastructure (Addie, 2017; Baldwin, 2021; Goddard & Vallance, 2013). Hebbert (2018: 894) describes the goal as 'making the boundary between the university and the city at least porous, at best non-existent' – a vision echoed by Sasaki Associates' adage that 'in a healthy knowledge society



Figure 1. Macquarie University's Waranara Library building. Photo by Paul Wright, used with permission.

the university becomes the city and the city becomes the university.' University libraries increasingly embody this ethos. Beyond architectural transparency, many now host public exhibitions, author talks, high school outreach programs, and even co-location arrangements with public libraries. As one University Librarian explained: 'We have to do something to attract the public, and it has to be something different from what [public libraries] are offering. I see the library as the heart of the university and the way to pull the community back to the campus.'

Yet this reinvestment in libraries and recognition of their symbolic role is unfolding unevenly across the sector. At prestigious urban campuses, flagship library developments signal a commitment to public engagement and knowledge infrastructure. But at rural, regional, and satellite campuses, library redevelopments were frequently delayed, suspended, or inconsistently funded. And across our cases, even where major capital investments had been secured, operational budgets remained flat or declined, and libraries' strategic influence within university governance continued to weaken. Numerous managers spoke of bureaucratic centralisation, resource constraints, and a growing sense of institutional 'invisibility'. One interviewee recounted how long-discussed plans to create a graduate-only space in their library had languished because,

I don't really know, because the university is so big, how something like this gets operationalised across so many different areas [...] The various proposals will involve spaces that will involve multiple stakeholders, whether that's faculty or professional staff. And then what mechanisms are in place to lead those projects? I have no idea [...] I just see the complications time and again, levels of power and powerlessness in a university.

There were occasional counterpoints to this narrative – instances where libraries secured greater strategic autonomy or independent budget lines. But overall, a consistent pattern emerged: even as libraries were materially and symbolically positioned at the heart of campus, their operational influence was increasingly constrained. This change goes hand in hand with the rise of new public management (NPM), which, as Berkovich and Wasserman (2019) observe, has reshaped librarians' professional identity – eroding strategic autonomy while intensifying demands for alignment with institutional metrics and managerial expectations. Yet as they also emphasise, library

workers' responses to NPM are not uniform or passive. These logics are often internalised, negotiated, or strategically repurposed in ways that reflect enduring professional values and local institutional contexts. Rather than straightforward compliance, workers may selectively adopt managerial languages or refract them through practices of care, experimentation, and student-centred design – including efforts to address student wellbeing, diversify collections, or reconfigure space in response to new pedagogical needs.

In this context, academic libraries function simultaneously as sites of institutional aspiration and operational constraint. Much like public libraries within 'smart city' agendas (Leorke & Wyatt, 2018), they increasingly serve as promotional façades through which universities stage their contemporary identity to publics. The library remains symbolically indispensable – the 'heart' that legitimates the university's mission – even as the structures and resources required to sustain that centrality are continually undermined. This paradox shapes the material and epistemic transformations we examine in the sections that follow.

3. Beyond the collection: libraries as knowledge space

A typical 'library' in a newly founded university or college was often little more than a few shelves or cupboards of books, with some reading space. Gradually, however, departments and faculties also began to develop book collections, sometimes associated with a particular professor [...] In almost every case, borrowing was permitted, albeit with considerable restrictions. Despite the fact that these were lending libraries, however, reading and reference space continued to be provided, not least to provide study space for students. (Feather, 2012: 28).

These tensions around the library's place within universities' operation and governance come at a time when the *place* of the library is itself undergoing substantial change. Across the sites we studied, interviewees described a profound reconfiguration of collections, services, and spaces: shrinking physical holdings, expanded study areas, and the proliferation of digital platforms and subscriptions. These developments mark a broader epistemic shift – from a model grounded in the fixity and materiality of the collection to one premised on digital circulation, dematerialisation, and flow. This is not just technological change but a fundamental ontological transition: from a spatial logic of containment and accumulation to one of circulation, fluidity, and responsiveness.

Historically, university libraries' design has been driven by the imperatives of collection management. As Freeman (2005) notes, although many university library buildings featured eye-catching exteriors, their interiors were designed primarily for efficient storage and protection of materials. Feather (2012: 30) similarly describes the traditional library interior as 'little more than a box divided into floors,' with shelving dominating floor plans and collection growth dictating spatial arrangements. Space and collections were deeply entwined: library workers were tasked with balancing the preservation of ever-growing holdings against the need for accessibility and study space (Childs et al., 2012). Managing this balance has preoccupied librarians for centuries, from the chained bookshelves of medieval libraries to the sprawling card catalogues of the modern era (see Feather, 2012; Mattern, 2016).

Since the 1990s, however, this spatial logic has been upended. The rise of the internet, digital databases, and perpetual connectivity has fundamentally altered the relationship between collections and space. Physical borrowing has declined, while digital subscriptions and platforms have expanded dramatically. Across our case studies, interviewees estimated that 80–95% of collections budgets now go to digital content, with physical borrowing declining by an average of 20% per year – albeit unevenly across institutions. Rather than struggling to accommodate growing collections, library workers increasingly face the opposite challenge: repurposing surplus space left by their retreat. Some universities, such as the University of Strathclyde, responded by reducing their libraries' overall footprint in anticipation of a predominantly remote user base (see Childs et al., 2012). More commonly, though, library workers have actively reconfigured shelving areas into study zones, collaborative spaces, and amenities – strategically reorienting from the fixity of collections to the flexible flows of digital knowledge and student activity.

This reorganisation of library space materially inscribes new tensions between *fixity* and *flow*. Physical books – once central to the circulation of knowledge – are increasingly stationary, removed from visibility and use within the academic environment. At several institutions, including Macquarie University and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), print collections have been relocated to automated storage and retrieval systems, with only high-use items retained on open shelves (see [Figure 2](#)). Elsewhere, most physical holdings have been moved off-site. These changes mark a transition from the library as a space of open, serendipitous browsing to one of efficient, on-demand access.

Library workers have navigated this transition in divergent ways. Some ‘digital-first’ institutions have embraced the shift decisively, with library managers making strategic decisions to abandon traditional collecting practices altogether. As one Deputy University Librarian at an outer-suburban campus remarked, ‘I take the view that if it’s not important enough to keep on campus, it’s not important enough to keep.’ Another noted, ‘We describe ourselves as a working academic library. If something comes in, something’s got to go out – *we’re not going to be a traditional collecting institutional library*’ (University Librarian, outer suburban campus; our emphasis). In contrast, other libraries have developed increasingly sophisticated data-driven approaches to justify retaining physical materials. One Collections Manager at a suburban campus described how libraries in Hong Kong had deployed RFID tracking systems not just for circulation management, but to generate granular data on physical item usage: tracking how long patrons held specific books and which items left shelves versus remaining unused, effectively building an evidence base to demonstrate that ‘these books didn’t sit on the shelves gathering dust. They were actually utilised and used and read.’ Such data-driven decision-making reflects librarians’ strategic efforts to justify collection investments through quantifiable metrics of use, even as the broader trend moves decisively toward digital provision.

Where books’ physical presence is highlighted, we often found them reconstituted into decorative elements. At Deakin University’s Waurin Ponds Library, deselected books have been glued together into a ‘book staircase’ – an Instagram-friendly installation, rather than a functioning collection (see [Figure 3](#)). Similarly, at UTS’s Reading Room, deselected volumes line the higher shelves with their spines facing inward for aesthetic effect, active as atmospheric markers of ‘library-ness,’ rather than active, usable scholarly resources (see [Figure 4](#)). Books, in this context, operate less as conduits of knowledge than as ambient anchors, sustaining the sensory and symbolic identity of the library. Their presence helps preserve the library’s distinctive atmosphere: welcoming yet serious, familiar yet scholarly.

This spatial reconfiguration of the collection has temporal parallels as well. Even as collections dematerialise, demand for physical library spaces has intensified, impacting the temporal rhythms and flows of library space. Students increasingly seek environments that offer reliable access to infrastructure – air-conditioning, Wi-Fi, power, and quiet – rather than to collections themselves. Many libraries have also expanded to 24/7 access models, reflecting the ingrained expectation that learning should be available anytime, anywhere. As one Deputy University Librarian at an outer-suburban university observed:

People are actually coming in and staying more rather than going in and out between classes. We’re seeing a lot of people coming in, sitting down and maybe doing their lectures online because they’re making use of the facilities – the air-con, the power, the Wi-Fi, things that cost money at home – and the quieter spaces or the group study spaces.

The contraction of physical collections has coincided, paradoxically, with an intensification of the library’s spatial role. Knowledge, once physically indexed through shelves and catalogues, now circulates invisibly through digital platforms and networked systems. Yet this dematerialisation has heightened the demand for fixed, tangible environments in which study, collaboration, and learning can be grounded (McCullough, 2004). No longer primarily mediating collections, libraries increasingly serve as infrastructural anchors for hybrid academic life.



Figure 2. Waranara Library's automated retrieval system. Photo by Paul Wright, used with permission.

Managing the physical collection within this context remains fraught. Many libraries we examined had recently undertaken major 'weeding' projects – systematic efforts to deselect and remove low-use materials – sometimes provoking tensions with academic staff. Faculty members expressed strong attachments to the material collection, lamenting the erosion of 'serendipitous browsing'

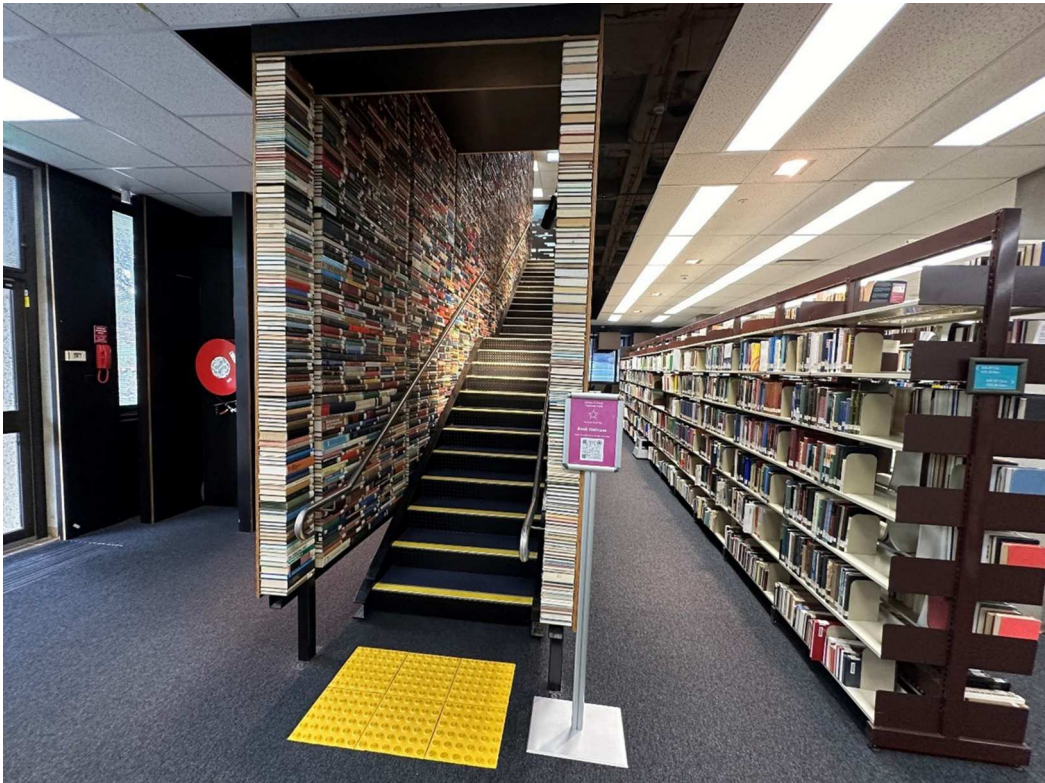


Figure 3. The ‘book staircase’ at Deakin’s Wurn Ponds Library in outer Geelong. Author photo.

(Antell and Engel 2007) and voicing concerns about its impact on teaching and research. As one Manager of Library Services and Spaces at a rural campus explained: ‘Faculties always typically get quite upset [...] whilst students are like, “Just give us a seat, that’s what we want,” so we are always navigating that tension.’

Questions of what knowledge gets retained, removed, and prioritised were also central to discussions around decolonising collections and foregrounding First Nations voices within institutional knowledge systems which have long marginalised or misrepresented them. Across our case studies, we observed a spectrum of approaches to this work, ranging from symbolic gestures to more substantive interventions. Some libraries had incorporated Indigenous artwork, reconciliation statements, and culturally appropriate room naming into their spaces. Others were implementing ‘reparative description’ practices: changing cataloguing terms, adding cultural warnings to problematic materials, and creating dedicated search facets for works by and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Luke & Mizota, 2024). One librarian described acquiring 70,000 electronic titles from Indigenous presses to strengthen their collection, while another outlined plans for retrospective cataloguing to flag culturally sensitive materials. However, these initiatives were often more aspirational than operational. Many remained ‘on the horizon’ – discussed, planned for, but not yet implemented – or took primarily rhetorical and representational forms rather than constituting fundamental rethinking of collection practices. As one Collections Manager at a rural campus reflected when discussing plans to review Indigenous metadata: ‘We haven’t scoped it [...] But I think we can dip our toes in the water perhaps [and] engage with some Indigenous community to help us to know what’s culturally sensitive, because I might *think* I know, but I don’t know.’

These dynamics reveal the multiple, sometimes competing visions of what the library should be and what knowledge it should prioritise. Faculty members seek a repository of scholarly materials

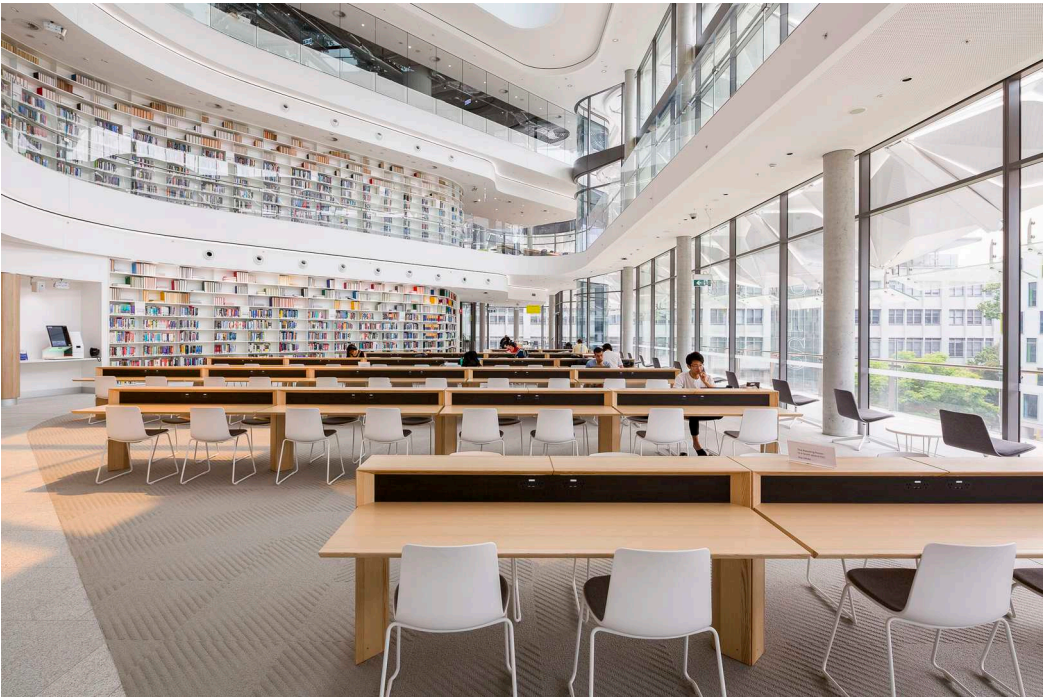


Figure 4. UTS's Reading Room, designed by fjmtstudio and opened 2019. Photo by Andy Roberts photographer, used with permission.

enabling serendipitous discovery; students demand reliable physical space with adequate seating and infrastructure; decolonisation efforts call for a fundamental rethinking of whose voices and perspectives are centred within institutional knowledge systems. Library workers find themselves navigating between these demands while managing practical constraints of space, budget, and institutional capacity. While we observed different responses across institutions – some embracing digital-first approaches, others developing data-driven justifications for physical retention, still others foregrounding decolonisation as a guiding principle – these represent different manifestations of a common underlying logic: the need to continually rearticulate the library's relevance under conditions where its traditional functions can no longer be taken for granted.

The transformation of the collection, then, reshapes not only what the library holds, but what it materially enables: the spatial and temporal conditions under which knowledge is encountered, studied, and shared. As collections dematerialise, the fixed structures they once anchored – shelves, catalogues, browsing paths – give way to more fluid arrangements of movement, study, and digital access. Yet paradoxically, the more knowledge circulates beyond the library's walls, the more its physical spaces are called upon to provide stability. Libraries must now simultaneously uphold an infrastructure for hybrid and mobile learning, while continuing to meet embodied demands for quiet, focus, and contemplative space. This evolving interplay between fixity and flow, material presence and epistemic politics, lies at the heart of how libraries are being reimagined within the pedagogical and institutional transformations reshaping higher education.

4. Re-imagining the scholar: the changing embodiments of learning

The idea of the academic 'scholar' is deeply linked to understanding about what it means to 'learn' in the university campus setting. Major fields of disciplinary knowledge in the university continue to be viewed as the creation of individual academics contributing separately to the advancement of knowledge through largely private

activity [...] this very particular notion of 'learning' views the student undertaking similarly individualistic, quiet study [...] The university campus has been consciously shaped as a physical setting to enable this personal and often passive form of learning. (Jamieson, 2012: 142).

The transformation of the library's physical collection – from an active infrastructure of knowledge circulation to a largely symbolic backdrop – is inseparable from broader shifts in how universities conceptualise the learner. As Jamieson (2012) observes, students have long been envisaged through the paradigm of the individual scholar anchored to a fixed desk, engaged in solitary reading and contemplation. This model is mirrored in campus planning, with libraries and study spaces designed to support private, linear intellectual work. Yet this paradigm is now being reconfigured in line with broader transformations in how universities define learning and learner subjectivity. In place of the solitary scholar, universities now promote a model of the agile, collaborative, and networked learner – one who is self-managing, socially embedded, and flexible across physical and digital domains (Barnett, 2011; Komljenovic 2021). This shift is not merely pedagogical but institutional, reshaping how space, infrastructure, and student experience are designed and governed. The library, once a place of quiet intellectual accumulation and inculcation, now becomes a hybrid environment – simultaneously a workspace, commons, sanctuary, and social hub – in which learning is rendered increasingly inseparable from broader questions of wellbeing, sociability, and student life.

This reimagining of the learner is spatially materialised through the proliferation of flexible, informal, and hybrid environments across campus. In libraries, collaborative work zones, VR labs, sensory rooms, lounges, and cafés now sit alongside – and sometimes replace – traditional reading rooms and reference desks. Dedicated spaces for LGBTIQ+, First Nations, and neurodiverse students further extend the library's remit beyond academic support into the domains of identity, belonging, and social wellbeing. These new configurations blur the traditional boundaries between study, leisure, and community life, transforming the library into a dynamic 'knowledge space' where students are encouraged to construct meaning collectively, rather than absorb it passively.

The 'domestication' of library space is a central feature of this transition. By domestication, we refer to the deliberate reconfiguration of academic environments to resemble informal, everyday social spaces – the café, the lounge, the living room – rather than the hierarchical, authoritative settings of the lecture hall or faculty office. This shift aims to create more egalitarian, welcoming environments that signal comfort and belonging rather than institutional formality. As Bennett (2005) argues, to foster communal learning practices, academic environments must move away from reinforcing hierarchies of authority and towards more egalitarian, everyday spaces. The library is the ideal setting for this shift to be made material and concrete, because 'it is the one place where all the academic practices of the campus are brought together, making it one of the best places for students to grasp both the integrity of knowledge and the idea of knowing as a collective ongoing practice' (Bennett, 2005: 19).

This domestication is perhaps most evident in the widespread adoption – explicit or otherwise – of the 'third place' ethos. Originally used by Oldenburg (1989) to describe informal gathering places between home and work, third places offer accessibility, conviviality, and a sense of community. Although Oldenburg excluded libraries from his original definition of the third place, contemporary public and academic libraries alike have embraced this concept as a way of articulating their evolving role (see Aabø et al., 2010; Bilandzic and Foth 2013; Wyatt & Leorke, 2024). At Queensland University of Technology's Kelvin Grove Library, for instance, the renovation of its five-storey building into a vibrant 'meeting place' exemplifies this shift. Bright colours, sink-in lounge furniture, playful wayfinding, and dispersed service desks dissolve traditional boundaries between staff and students, study and sociality (see Figures 5 and 6). As one librarian explained:

You'll see pinks and oranges at the first couple of levels [...] encouraging people to collaborate, be noisy. Librarians aren't going to come and shush you. But as you go up the floors, the colours get quieter, so then we'll have greens and blues. We're trying to [signal], as you go up, you're getting quieter. And then as you come back down, you can chat.



Figure 5. Interior of QUT's Kelvin Grove Library by Peddle Thorp Architects and James Cubitt Architects, opened 2012. Photo by Roger D'Souza Photography, used with permission.

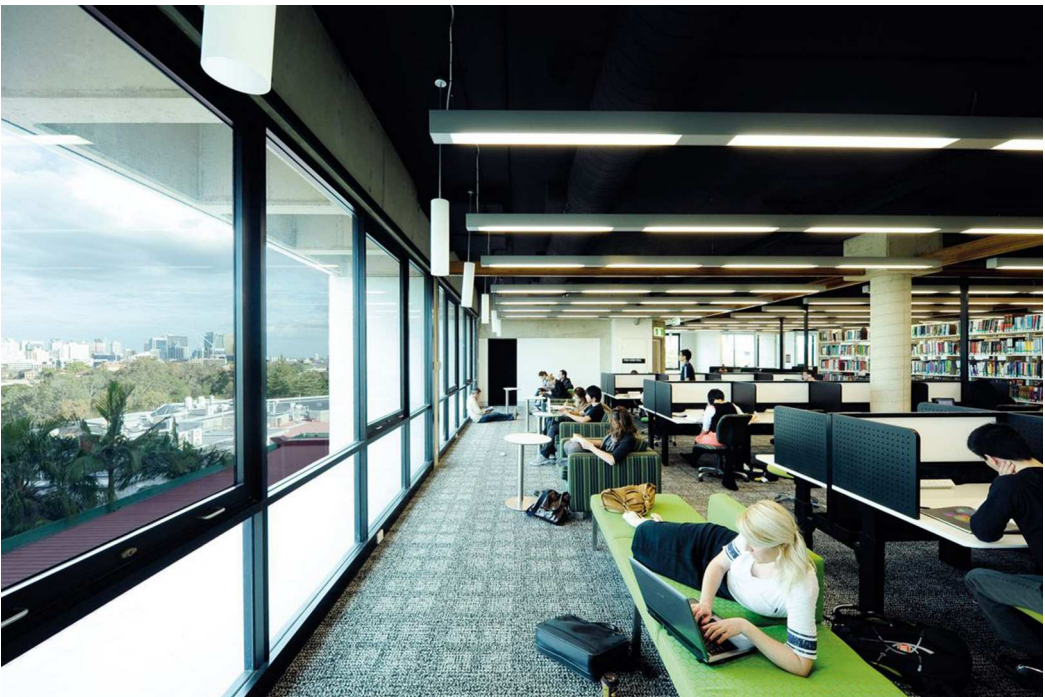


Figure 6. High transparent windows at QUT's Kelvin Grove Library visually reconnect the building with its urban surrounds. Photo by Roger D'Souza Photography, used with permission.

This graduated zoning subtly choreographs behavioural expectations while sustaining an ethos of openness and conviviality. Expansive city views, central stairways, and transparent façades further embed the library within its urban setting, collapsing the old inward-facing model of the academic enclave.

This third place ethos extends beyond aesthetics to encompass new forms of care and support for student wellbeing. Library professionals increasingly position their spaces as sites for addressing what many described as a crisis in student mental health, particularly following COVID-19. One outer-suburban library manager who had recently moved from public to academic libraries described their strategic vision:

I'm really interested in understanding how we can best support our young people coming into studies, particularly post-COVID, where they may not have had some of the foundational experiences that previous cohorts have had, and how that impacts on their studies and just getting by in life in general [...] I would like to see some programming that supports our students in terms of addressing social isolation [...] Can they be here reading a novel? Can they be here doing a puzzle and being with friends? I think that if we are really looking at the library being a third space, we want people to feel like they don't need to always be purposeful in their studies in our spaces.

The library's domestication also extends beyond physical space into the digital infrastructures that now mediate learning. Academic libraries are undergoing a kind of 'digital domestication', as they become increasingly integrated into learning management systems. As one librarian at an outer-suburban campus observed, the library is now 'invisible' to many students – its content accessed through embedded course readings and digital platforms rather than through dedicated library portals. Although this integration is far from seamless (as any teaching academic can attest), it advances a vision of frictionless academic support that can inadvertently marginalise the library's institutional presence. One Deputy University Librarian remarked, 'students access our services all the time, but might never realise they're using library content.' Library services persist, but in ghostly form – folded into the ambient digital infrastructure of academic life. This hiddenness mirrors the library's spatial transformation into a hybrid, convivial space: both digitally and materially, it is increasingly figured less as a sovereign domain of knowledge than as a kind of ambient support system.

This digital embedding extends beyond internal systems. Libraries are now enmeshed within broader platform economies, where third-party services mediate access, learning, and creative production. Initiatives such as Adobe's 'Creative Campus' programme integrate commercial tools into library environments, further blurring distinctions between academic support, corporate branding, and platform capitalism. Within these arrangements, libraries no longer function solely as gateways to knowledge, but as nodes in expansive ecosystems of digital labour, subscription economies, and branded service provision (see Smith, 2025).

These changes in spatial and digital identity spill into wider campus planning strategies. As Goad et al. (2023) have noted, learning has been increasingly displaced into a proliferating network of 'informal study zones': flexible classrooms, student hubs, cafés, and open-plan study spaces. Monash University's Learning and Teaching Building, for instance, dissolves boundaries between formal and informal environments, integrating amphitheatres, collaborative areas, and gathering spaces within a single open structure. At RMIT, former lecture theatres have been literally gutted and refashioned into colour-themed collaborative zones, 'signalling a turn away from hierarchical pedagogical space. In this spatial economy, libraries must strike a balance between flexibility and distinctiveness. As one manager at an inner-urban university noted, when a library's entire physical collection was relocated to upper floors, students began treating the space like a food court – 'because it doesn't look like' a library. Another interviewee stated, 'in some buildings, if you didn't have the signage you wouldn't know it's a library.' Ironically, it is the physical presence of books – rapidly receding, rarely consulted, perpetually weeded – that now distinguishes the library from other campus study spaces. The dilution of the library's distinctiveness is not simply aesthetic. It is a material symptom of the university's broader reorientation towards market-driven design logics.

Recast as convivial, student-friendly, and frictionless, libraries risk becoming interchangeable with co-working spaces or branded lounges. As visual cues of scholarly gravity recede, the library's epistemic authority – its function as a site of critical inquiry and knowledge production – risks quiet erosion.

The shift toward flexible, student-centred environments produces governance complexities as well as spatial ones. As libraries become multipurpose zones – blending social, academic, and affective functions – expectations around conduct, care, and spatial purpose change. These governance challenges are especially acute in the management of hybrid and domesticated library spaces. Extended hours, unstaffed zones, and overlapping use of spaces raise difficult questions around safety, accessibility, and institutional responsibility. Several interviewees described managing after-hours risks, responding to harassment and homelessness, and mitigating the tensions between openness and control – often without increases in staffing, training, or resources. One Manager at an outer suburban campus told us they'd considered offering 24/7 unstaffed spaces, but 'at this stage we feel like the value is in staffed spaces because of the safety aspects to that.'

The reimagining of students as flexible, mobile, and networked further complicates this landscape. Libraries are now expected to accommodate academic, emotional, and social needs within architectures optimised for movement and engagement. Yet even as universities champion agility and hybridity, the infrastructures that enable these forms of learning – libraries foremost among them – remain precarious, shaped by austerity, managerial abstraction, and fragmented responsibility. At the same time, the domestication of library space risks eroding the conditions required for deep learning and critical reflection. The shift toward sociability and comfort may promote inclusion and wellbeing, but it can also displace the contemplative modes of study traditionally associated with the library. While students value flexible and comfortable environments, they also articulate ongoing desires for spaces marked by quiet, seriousness, and intellectual focus (Cox, 2018). Balancing these competing imperatives – openness and discipline, sociability and concentration – has become an intensifying challenge for library planners and managers.

In this evolving context, libraries remain central nodes in the university's knowledge infrastructure, but their epistemic and political roles are increasingly unstable. They are at once sites of flow and fixity, conviviality and contemplation, corporate service provision and scholarly tradition – literally embodying the contradictions that Barnett (2011) describes between the university's traditional purposes and its current market-facing roles. Libraries materialise competing imperatives: to democratise access while consolidating managerial control, and to cultivate intellectual seriousness while remaining agile and profitable amid declining public funding for the tertiary sector (Grossberg, 2018; Komljenovic 2021; Marginson, 2011; Williamson, 2018). Meanwhile, as noted above, library workers' responses to these logics are rarely passive, but complex, negotiated, and strategic (Berkovich and Wasserman, 2019). These transformations in library space and learner identity are not parallel trends but mutually constitutive processes, each reflecting – and helping enact – the university's broader restructuring. The library more than ever serves as a spatial metonym for the university itself, offering a critical lens onto how its conflicting imperatives are being negotiated on the ground.

5. Conclusion

This article has situated libraries within the broader spatial and institutional transformations reshaping the university. By examining the library as a site where these tensions are materialised and negotiated, we reveal wider dynamics between tradition and innovation, infrastructure and flow, autonomy and managerialism. Libraries are not passive recipients of change, but active terrains where library professionals strategically navigate contradictions – evoking the 'heart' metaphor to reassert their value, pursuing decolonisation and wellbeing initiatives, and balancing flexibility with intellectual seriousness under conditions of constrained resources. Through three interconnected lenses – the symbolic 'heart' metaphor, the material reconfiguration from collections to

commons, and the reimagining of students from solitary scholars to networked learners – we have shown how libraries function as spatial metonyms for broader institutional change.

This approach makes several contributions to higher education scholarship. First, it demonstrates that libraries are not peripheral to institutional transformation but central sites where competing visions of the university are materially enacted. While library and information sciences literature has documented operational changes, and higher education studies has examined campus planning amidst institutional change, libraries remain underexamined in analyses of neoliberal reform. Second, our analysis reveals how spatial transformation operates as a key mechanism through which universities enact pedagogical and governance shifts – the domestication of space, dematerialisation of collections, and proliferation of flexible zones are material expressions of how universities now understand learning and position students. Third, by attending to library professionals' articulation of their responses to these changing dynamics, we show how neoliberal restructuring is negotiated on the ground through strategic appropriation and resistance, revealing the complex ways professional values persist under austerity.

The fate of the library is, in multiple ways, emblematic of the contemporary university itself, caught between scholarly tradition and market-driven innovation. Yet this is not a story of inevitable decline. Instead, it reveals ongoing contestation over what knowledge matters, whose voices are centred, and what purposes universities should serve. Recognising the library's role as both a metonym and a site of contestation sharpens our understanding of how universities actively reshape themselves through spatial and epistemic reconfigurations. It invites us to see the university not simply as a collection of buildings or a network of services, but as a contested, dynamic, and symbolically charged spatial project – one in which the future of libraries, and of the university more broadly, remain deeply and inextricably intertwined.

Notes

1. Interviewees were also offered the opportunity to review their transcripts and remove/clarify statements if they wished. To protect our interviewees' anonymity so that they could speak freely, we refer to the interviewee by their broad title – which ranged from Branch Manager to Director/University Librarian – and the type of campus they worked at, e.g. 'inner urban,' 'outer suburban,' 'rural'. Reflecting this article's focus on institutional planning and spatial governance, our sample primarily comprises library managers and directors; given this focus the voices of frontline library workers are present but less represented in our dataset.
2. Our thanks to Seth Dias, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Sydney, for this observation and for pointing us to documentary evidence of these marches.
3. Banner text translated from the Finnish; thanks to Elina Koskinen for clarifying this translation.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

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