# Say What? Library Design Speaks

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The design of the Library of Congress's Jefferson Building is a paean to authoritative knowledge. Classical columns and sculpted marble staircases lead to aristocratic halls beneath ceiling-engraved memorials to great writers and thinkers, not to mention the influential publishers whose printing marks decorate the upstairs balcony. Elegantly-appointed reading rooms, all scrolled woodwork and polished tables, await the pursuer of knowledge.

Surely this is user-conscious design at its finest? What stony-hearted patron could resist the awe-inspiring magnificence of the nation's most sumptuous library?

Yet patrons are resisting in droves. The Jefferson Building's patron areas are severely underused, and I was told the last time I visited that foot traffic is decreasing, although reference transactions by phone and email are thriving. At the same time, Flickr[1], Amazon[2], LibraryThing[3], and other design-conscious web properties attract information- and entertainment-hungry users by the hundreds of thousands.

Clearly "design" is not enough. The Jefferson Building is a marvel of design, yet librarians must work ceaselessly to bring patrons through its doors. Why? In part, at least, because the building's design proclaims "I am to be admired, not used." Library patrons have no place in this design; its stately immensity actively discourages them from embracing, enjoying, and engaging with the library's space and services. Patrons both actual and potential feel like mere tourists, tiptoeing around with their hands tucked in and their voices hushed lest their unworthy presence sully the greatness around them.

Every design decision conveys a *message*, intentionally or not, that governs how people interact with the designed object or service. In good design, the design communicates the message attractively and usefully to its recipients, and the message encourages them to think and do what the organization would like them to. Either message or design can go off the rails. Sometimes, as with the Jefferson Building, fully intentional messages conveyed perfectly by the design turn out not to be as useful or attractive as was hoped. Alternately, haphazard or thoughtless design decisions can unintentionally convey unattractive or unproductive messages.

What design messages do popular Internet sites convey that attract and keep users?

*The way you think matters.* Tagging and its aggregated cousin folksonomy, though not without pitfalls, let users draw on their own experiences and mental models to organize their information worlds. When we argue endlessly about uncontrolled vocabularies, the tyranny of the masses, and the privacy concerns surrounding public hosted services, we miss an insight: offering users control and a sense of mastery, letting them carve out their own information landscapes individually and in groups, is a profoundly courteous and inviting design choice.

*The way you feel matters.* LiveJournal lets people describe their mood on each post. Amazon welcomes opinions on its wares, even heated opinions. People feel as well as think. Smart Internet properties that design ways for people to express what they feel, even in as simple a fashion as Digg's[4] thumbs-down "bury [this link]" function, keep them coming back.

Good design appeals openly to emotion, as well. Google's April Fool's Day pranks[5] and cute "doodles"[6] for holidays and famous birthdays endear the company to its users. Consider also the development of bookmarking services. The cleverly-named del.icio.us[7] started out as a boring, squarish, tone-deaf design that only a hard-core geek could love. After its takeover by Yahoo! its horrid browser-default serif font departed in favor of friendly sans-serif Verdana, and subtle shading and font-size tricks increased its visual friendliness without detracting from its simplicity. A similar service, ma.gnolia[8], despite being late to the party made inroads on the userbase with a prettier, friendlier look.

*The world is at your fingertips.* Without question, this is a false assertion more often than not. The huge numbers of search results touted on a Google results page, for example, are a loose estimate at best; Google cuts off the results it will actually display relatively rapidly. Even so, the single search box and the McDonald's-like "billions of web pages searched!" message figure prominently in Google's design because they create a tantalizing illusion of totality. Would anyone believe "it's all on the Internet" if design choices at Google did not make that claim subtly but repeatedly?

*We are like you.* It is absolutely no accident that the lead developers and businesspeople at many hot Internet properties were the sites' first makers and users. Nor is it surprising that many of these sites design into their services some form of open communication between users and service-owners, be it through user forums, official or

unofficial weblogs, or chatrooms. These services even design error messsages to emphasize the humanity behind the technology: the shrugging plumber at Bloglines[9] alleviates the sting of service downtime with plain-folks humor, and Flickr's anthropomorphized servers "get a massage" when they are out of service[10].

What messages are conveyed by the design of most library services?

*We are not you. We are not even* like *you. And you have to think the way we do.* From the jargon on signs in our buildings to the unexplained options in our OPACs, libraries are indelibly stamped with librarian-think. To some extent, this is a historical artifact. Internet properties have a fairly blank slate to work with; user expectations of the still-young Web are fluid, easy to alter, easy to inject novelty into. Modern libraries are the product of centuries of development, so when we design library services, for good or ill we are conditioned by a considerable weight of history and constrained by legacy designs.

Libraries, as the visual elements of the Jefferson Building make manifest, have heretofore been designed around their materials, and secondarily the librarians who protect and organize those materials. Patron control and convenience have been an afterthought at best, not least because patrons have rarely had direct access to underlying structures of the library such as the stacks or the MARC data underlying library catalogues. In addition, our skills and training distance us from our untrained users, which leads us to design for ourselves, just as software programmers notoriously design software for their own convenience rather than ours. The result is patrons who defect to other information sources that respect and augment their thought processes.

*Information is scattered and in disarray, requiring much effort to unearth.* Our print stacks overcame this impression long ago; the basic principles of collocation and classification give our patrons many fruitful browsing experiences. Why, then, are our online collections and services so chopped-up, so buried, so bewildering?

A good deal of this problem can be laid at the feet of vendors: vendors who insist on slapping their patron-opaque branding all over everything, vendors who refuse to participate in metasearch and link-resolving initiatives or offer APIs that let us create patron-friendly interfaces into their data, vendors who lock up libraries' own catalogue records so tight that we cannot create patron-friendly interactive services even when we want to.

We are not, however, guiltless. When our website designs pile link on disconnected

link like a yarn-basket that the kittens have played in, our patrons naturally come to believe that the information we offer is just as tangled and disorganized. When our OPACs and journal-search services are designed only to canvass our own holdings, and are too stupid to analyze patron queries to point patrons in the right direction, patrons are not to blame for believing we do not have what they seek.

*Information-seeking is regimented, joyless, and lonely.* When was the last time we told a patron "Well, there's several ways to go about this"? When was the last time a patron said that using an OPAC was fun? How many database search interfaces are designed to encourage patrons to play around with search options? What library services are designed to enable easy sharing of finds with a patron's social world? Yet play and experimentation are a key way human beings learn, the lone-wolf researcher is not by any means typical, and most work can be accomplished in different ways according to the skills and preferences of the worker. When the design of our services isolates, frustrates, and bores our patrons, naturally they see us only as a last desperate resort.

The design of much information-literacy training falls into this trap, too. The mere idea that one must be *trained* to use library services intimidates some patrons, distancing them from the library. Other patrons who (however falsely) feel confident about their usual information behaviors find our insistence on training condescending or even controlling. Still others, intimidated by the inconsistency and complexity of our building and service designs, imprint too closely to the specific keystrokes and floor-plans we teach them, leaving them helpless in the face of change. This does not mean that we should give up teaching people about information-seeking. It does mean that we need to design our training with patron preconceptions and experiences in mind. It also means that we need to weave play and fearless experimentation into the fabric of our training sessions.

These design flaws and mistaken messages are hard to overcome, both for systems librarians trying to develop better-designed systems and for public-service librarians trying to help patrons navigate existing systems. The first step to resolving the problems is recognizing them. The second and more difficult step is refusing to defend them. Tradition, authority, "the vendor does it this way," none of these excuse bad design or repellent messages.

Fortunately, some librarians and library allies are working on services whose design

communicates the same messages that users of hot web properties find so attractive.

The Ann Arbor Public Library's website design[11], with its clean layout, clear navigation, and low-key color scheme, sends an immediate message of helpful reassurance. Even better, the events weblog on the front page invites patrons to add their feelings and their knowledge to the site via comments – of which one post (about a gaming tournament) garnered 78! Nor is AADL the only library to join the so-called "biblioblogosphere." Library and librarian weblogs humanize and demystify the profession to our patrons and our funders; by design, they invite patron interest and engagement.

Casey Bisson's WPopac[12], which filters the library catalogue through weblogging software, immediately adds patron power to the design of the traditional OPAC. Need to keep or share the record for a book? Just copy the URL. (After all, the obvious reason everyone links to Amazon as a surrogate for book metadata is that Amazon had reliable, persistent URLs long ago and OPACs did not.) Patron comments on records? Any number of attractive visual designs? Right there. WPopac offers users power over information retention and sharing, and an opportunity to share their opinions. Whether these suffice to revitalize the OPAC remains to be seen, but certainly the design sends patrons an inviting message.

Link-resolving, in which servers pass citation information about in URLs so that an appropriate digital copy of an article can be supplied to the patron, cuts through the thicket of database interfaces that separate patrons from articles they want. Until recently, link-resolvers only worked from within database interfaces. Now, however, pieces of the infrastructure are moving onto the larger web, empowering librarians, bloggers, and enthusiasts to create article links that "just work" for any web surfer affiliated with a library with link-resolving software. Although many details remain to be worked out, design progress on such pieces as OpenURL[13], COinS[14], and unAPI[15] bids fair to smash the barriers between our resources and our patrons, sending a clear message that we have our data universe under control.

An especially elegant barrier-smasher is an upcoming tool called Scholar for Firefox[16] from George Mason University's Center for History and New Media. This plugin for the open-source Firefox browser automatically captures and stores metadata from many OPAC and database pages, as well as allowing easy cut-and-paste from pages the plugin does not yet understand. Captured citations can be sorted, annotated,

searched, browsed, and shared with others. Loosely modeled after the design of popular music applications, Scholar for Firefox makes citation management a joy instead of a chore.

The University of Pennsylvania's PennTags social-bookmarking service[17] inserts the library into patrons' personal link-caches. Librarians designed information-literacy training right into the service with a light, student-friendly tone, taking advantage of an eminently teachable moment. "All right, we're librarians," says the service's tagging-tips page[18]. "We can't resist pointing out that we've organized a lot of information over the past few thousand years, so we have opinions about this kind of thing." Even the cute tagged shorebirds at page-top communicate humor and humanity to patrons.

Design isn't about glitz and glamor. Design communicates our values, our services, our beliefs, and our abilities to our patrons. Though we cannot always control the design of the services we offer, we can at least ensure that the designs we do control convey the same sincere, friendly, and inviting messages that the designs of popular websites do.

[1] http://www.flickr.com/

[2] http://www.amazon.com/

[3] http://www.librarything.com/

[4] http://www.digg.com/

[5] For example, Google PigeonRank: http://www.google.com/technology/pigeonrank.html

[6] http://www.google.com/intl/en/holidaylogos.html

[7] http://del.icio.us/

[8] http://ma.gnolia.com/

[9] http://www.bloglines.com/

[10] Captured at http://flickr.ishavingamassage.com/

[11] http://www.aadl.org/

[12] http://www.plymouth.edu/library/opac/

[13] Apps, Ann, and Ross MacIntyre. "Why OpenURL?" *D-Lib* 12:5 (May 2006), available at http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may06/apps/05apps.html. Last visited August 21, 2006.

[14] http://ocoins.info/

[15] http://unapi.info/

[16] http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/firefoxscholar/

[17] http://tags.library.upenn.edu/

[18] http://tags.library.upenn.edu/help/using_projects