Project Overview

This project was done as part of the thesis studio in the Rise School of Architecture. In a typical design studio the professor comes to class on day one armed with a meticulously constructed brief that outlines the objectives of the semester ahead. In thesis, however, the burden of defining the conceptual contours of the project rests on each individual student. While this freedom is in many ways daunting, it is far more exhilarating to be granted the opportunity to contribute something original to the theoretical base upon which your profession operates.

*Commons Knowledge* is a typological investigation of the library, specifically examining how the digitization of information informs design. The agency of the book, which has historically been the protagonist of library design, has been radically transformed by the migration to the electronic. In turn, it is necessity to reexamine the space in which we store, access, present, and produce information. This library is imagined as an environment that enhances access to materials available online, while also providing opportunities for access to unique materials that cannot be digitized. It acknowledges that current patrons are using libraries to rapidly reconstitute information and, although the majority of the materials they produce will ultimately exist in the realm of the electronic, the building itself celebrates those rare objects, whether existing or yet to be created, that stand against the tide of the virtual.

Fondren

Not surprisingly, this project gave me a greater appreciation for the library and its resources than anything I’ve worked on previously. It was a pleasure to analyze the development of the library historically and reflect on its evolving organizational diagram. It has been revealing to realize the myriad cataloguing strategies that have confounded librarians for centuries (including the present day). It’s also been fascinating to listen to the internal struggles of the library community in their attempts to grope for a way forward in the uncertain future of the digital age.

While my research took me to many high profile libraries and equally important small branches, Fondren was my base of operations. Just a few hundred paces from my desk in Anderson Hall, Fondren was invaluable to this project both for its research material and for its bodily presence. The building itself has been physically imprinted by various changes of last half-century, and the traces left (even changes planned but never executed) are important clues that have helped define my understanding of library culture.

I’ll include just two quick vignettes that have colored my thinking. One, a kind of blunder, is the white marble countertop on the southern side of the circulation core on the first floor. During the recent renovation this element was planned to be an email-checking terminal for students on-the-go and represents a well intentioned, yet ultimately misguided, attempt to anticipate the direction technology has headed. The second, an act of brilliance, is the sixth floor. Several of my studio mates and I would often take advantage of this penthouse for grad students and, although often well occupied, was always serene. It seemed to affirm something that Sara Lowman communicated to me early on in this process: library usage can often depend on how light and clean a space is.
Books
While the building itself was wonderfully informative, architects often need to study other people’s buildings. The Brown Fine Arts Library was an absolutely indispensable resource. Many noteworthy architects have library designs in their stable of projects, and it was my duty in survey these buildings both in representation (plan, section, elevation, renderings, photographs, etc) and also through what the architect, critic, or historian had written about the project. Though the architects themselves were familiar to me, many of the projects were relatively obscure. I am happy to report that, with very few exceptions, the little-known projects I was able to find references to either online or by catalogue searches were to be located in the third floor stacks. This was a tremendous advantage to my research.

Periodicals
While serving in a similar capacity to books, the periodical collection in the Brown Fine Arts Library I felt deserves its proper recognition. While over the years I’ve grown to appreciate the breadth of the collection, the research undertaken for this project gave me an increased degree of appreciation by forcing me to dig a little deeper. For example, one of the key pieces of data for this project was an article by a Japanese architect in a Spanish architecture journal from the 1980s. While I found only a portion of the article online, I was pleasantly surprised to find Fondren had a copy of the original journal, which provided me some otherwise unattainable images (at reproducible quality) and valuable information.

Rare Materials
As you can observe from the supplemental project description, my building design had a significant rare materials component. In trying to wrap my mind around the realities of creating and maintaining a large archive, it was extremely informative to have one on hand for study and observation. I was especially tantalized by two things I learned about the archive. First, that the standard organizational logic that applies to the rest of the library undergoes a strange mutation to accommodate the peculiar nature of the things stored. Second, the actual collection of rare materials relies heavily on the discretion of the archivist.

People
Of the many unique ways I was able to glean knowledge from the library, none proved more helpful than the library staff. Although I benefited from the aid of several individuals, I’d like to quickly focus on two. Sara Lowman was generous enough to submit to an interview focusing on the present and future condition of the library. Also, I’d like to acknowledge Melissa Kean, who explained to me the mechanics of the rare materials collection and offered support as the project matured.