

Past Space Design and Uses

As background for this proposal, we examined a few documents related to the construction, uses, and furnishing of space since the Phase one of the Library was completed in 1924-26. The Main Library has been granted “Local” significance in the National Register of Historic Places, for its Architectural, and Community Planning and Development significance.¹ The interior elements of the Marshall Gallery are passingly described in the National Register Filing Document that the University submitted in 2000 (page 6). Excepting the addition of acoustic tiles and furniture, the space has not been altered since the time of construction.

The Marshall Gallery has long served as an introduction to the Main Library building, with a formal aesthetic that reflects the time it was built. The space speaks to some elements of the University’s history through a prominent set of oil paintings depicting the first six presidents of the University.² The formal aesthetic and the sparse furnishings do little to reveal the collections, services, and expertise available to Library visitors. The Gallery tends to function primarily as a pass-through space to other locations in the building, if not actively hiding activity in the core areas of the building.

In March 2021, focus groups were conducted as part of the Main/Undergraduate Library integration. As part of those focus groups participants were asked to describe the ways in which the two spaces differ and encouraged to consider the “vibe.” Students consistently commented on the unwelcoming nature of the Marshall Gallery, specifically commenting on the “echoiness” of the space which discourages social interaction and encourages students to retrieve materials and leave as soon as possible. Lack of comfortable seating and adequate signage were underscored as ways in which the Library and Marshall Gallery create an unwelcoming environment.

¹ Department of the Interior. National Park Service. (3/2/1934 -). *Illinois MPS Library-University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*. File Unit: National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks Program Records: Illinois, 1964 - 2013, 2013.
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/28890735>

² The history and provenance of the six oil paintings are described in Muriel Schienman’s PhD thesis, but unmentioned in her book. In the thesis, she notes that numerous paintings of campus leaders were commissioned from UI Art Department Faculty, including this series, and that generally the portraits came in either as gifts or through university funds, wryly noting that “[t]he belief that they can preserve history, that they are appropriate tokens of esteem, that they can encourage and inspire no longer prevails.” Muriel Scheinman, “Art Collecting at the University of Illinois: A History and Catalogue,” Thesis Ph.D.--University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign., 1981, vol 1, p. 157.

Re-visioning a Marshall Gallery for the Present and Future

We envision the Marshall Gallery as a welcoming, active space that signals the rich collections and expertise available in the building, and provides a landing point for students, faculty, and visitors to get oriented to the building. The message that the space implicitly conveys with its current furnishings stands in stark visual contrast to the University and Library values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and welcoming; goals that complement our role as stewards of information, records, and recorded knowledge. The current design aesthetic exclusively reflects the dominant culture of the time it was constructed, with commensurate implications of exclusivity and the Library in the role of gatekeeper and protector of authoritative knowledge. While the Library represents the shared human values of intellect, reason, and wisdom, these are just one element of our service mission to campus. As a majestic entrance to the heart of campus, the gallery should serve as a welcoming space to all users, which recognizes the diversity of the campus and the local community, while acknowledging the intellectual heritage of the University in general and the Library in particular, as a place of knowledge discovery and exchange

The space has significant potential to be a showcase for what the Main Library has to offer, orienting visitors to the building through clear, accessible wayfinding tools and signage, and helping visitors quickly identify key features of the building, such as specialized collections, study spaces, service points, and restrooms. The open spaces in the Gallery also present opportunities to build community with users through pop-up collections and exhibits, and programming supporting the teaching and research mission of the Library and the University.

Proposed Updates:

- **Make the space more inclusive** of University and Library history, and reflective of the diversity of our campus population.
 - Replace the oil paintings with banners and artwork that reflects both what the Main Library has to offer now, as well as the history and diversity of the Library, campus and community
- **Improve wayfinding and marketing for Main Library services and spaces**
 - Involve Library units to collaboratively design artwork or graphics that promote their units
 - Increase physical signage indicating the units, collections, and features of the building in multiple languages
 - Introduce interactive, accessible digital signage, which reveals additional details about collections and features in the building
- **Increase the amount and types of use of the space**
 - Provide more and brighter lighting
 - Add a mix of hard and soft seating, including accessible furniture, to create formal and informal meeting spaces for visitors

- Provide sufficient power and infrastructure for tabling events to promote Library collections and services, as well as campus partner services aligned with Library teaching, research, and student success goals
- Consider options for coffee or beverage service to help students and faculty planning for long hours in the building

Next Steps

- We propose an implementation team be charged by Library administration to investigate options for updating the space, in consultation with other units in the building and with feedback from Library users
- In addition to considering the updates noted above, the implementation team should devise a longer-term management plan for the space, including identifying a unit or team to manage, book, and keep the space updated to meet day-to-day needs
- Finally, the implementation team should consider how strategic decisions about the space will be collaboratively discussed over the next 3-5 years, through a mechanism such as a longer-term advisory group with representatives from Main Library units

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