

AASL 2013 Annual Conference Report submitted by Barret Havens

A Tribe

Whenever I mention my connection to the Association of Architecture School Librarians to those outside the profession, it elicits from them gasps of amazement that such a narrow niche of specialization exists. Some, in a state of disbelief, even wait for the punchline to some lame joke. Like, "I just flew back from the Association of Architecture School Librarians Conference... and boy are my arms tired!" (Rimshot!) What would be harder still, for those outside of our niche--even academic librarians of broader focus--to grasp, is how essential this network is to what we do, and how much the members of AASL rely on each other for inspiration and information.

At the Annual Conference in San Francisco, I witnessed AASL members greeting each other like old friends. And while attending The Art Libraries Society of North America Conference in Pasadena this week, I observed that AASL members tended to gravitate towards each other during breaks and social events and to sit together during sessions. It occurred to me that this group is so cohesive that it might be more accurately described as a tribe than as a professional organization.

Connections & Opportunities

Despite my status as a relatively new member, I was welcomed warmly at the AASL Annual Conference. It was great to reconnect with some of my long-term mentors and former supervisors from my UT Austin days and to meet AASL listserv "pen pals" in person. In order to make the most of the conference I had forged some connections in advance; though many members of the committee had never met me in person, they had already provided me with opportunities to get involved. I had contributed an article to AASL's ACSA News column, had served as the Annual Conference Webmaster, and had helped organize a discussion panel on architectural publishing on which I was also to participate as a panelist.

During the conference I had the good fortune to be offered further opportunities. After a serendipitous brainstorming session with Barbara Opar on the bus while en route to UC Berkeley, she invited me to collaborate with her on future directions for the AASL ACSA News column. After discussions with Architecture_MPS (a new, peer-reviewed architecture journal and online platform for scholarly discourse) editor Graham Cairns during and after the panel discussion, I was contacted by an editor of Architecture_MPS about the possibility of serving on the journal's advisory board. Enthusiastically, I accepted.

Exchange

The informal nature of the conference encouraged the exchange of ideas among AASL members above and beyond what I have witnessed at other professional conferences. Much of the content involved updates from presenters regarding innovative programs and practices at their institutions. Issues and challenges for architecture librarians was another prominent theme. Key take-aways and "notes to self" inspired by the conference include:

- In my quest to increase digital access to architectural publications and images I am not alone! The key is to keep the conversation rolling. Along those lines, I have contacted JSTOR about the need for a more robust, singular architecture collection for libraries such as mine that do not have the funds to subscribe to all of the JSTOR collections (among which the architecture journals are scattered). I hope to hear from them soon.
- Looking to enhance students' understanding of the differences between scholarly resources and popular/trade sources? Have them rate a variety of architectural publications by placing them on a "continuum of reliability."
- If you are looking to engage your students and provide them with new ways to explore buildings in real time using augmented reality, there's an app for that.
- Market the library by displaying book jackets around campus!
- Approach professors of studio courses about the potential role of embedding a librarian (me!) in studio.
- Turn more library spaces into exhibits of student work (we have a glass hallway that would be perfect).
- Ask design students to help shape a master plan for our future library redesign.
- Offer "guided research" sessions for senior thesis prep. classes.
- Incorporate, into information literacy instruction sessions/courses, video snippets of architects emphasizing the role of information in the design process from sources such as the SCI-Arc media archive.
- Schedule a "field trip" for architecture students to a firm library for a tour like the one AASL members had at Gensler in San Francisco.
- raise question in class: "is neutrality of architectural information sources always preferable to bias?" For instance, critiques from established architectural critics.

Exploration

Another unique aspect of the conference which fostered the exchange of ideas were the numerous opportunities to explore the art and architecture of the Bay Area as a group. While meandering through the UC Berkeley Campus or shuffling through the streets of downtown Oakland on the art deco tour, for instance, AASL member struck up conversations that were inspired by the conference presentations and discussed plans for future collaborations and the upcoming 2014 conference in Miami.

During these outings I learned that:

William Stout books in Oakland is loaded with outstanding, out-of-print architecture and art titles that you won't find anywhere else.

Oakland has a legit downtown! And it is loaded with outstanding examples of art deco architecture.

The UC Berkeley campus is an architectural exhibit unto itself, incorporating elements and buildings from a variety of styles including Beaux-Arts, Brutalism, and Classical. My personal favorite was the rustic faculty lodge, which resembled a Viking mead-hall.

Materials from the Gensler architecture library are not attached to the library space. They are spread throughout the firm. A primary role of the architecture firm librarian is negotiating with vendors of architectural materials and providing samples of only the finest to the firm.

City Lights Bookstore is still going strong in the age of online booksellers.

Lasting Impressions

If I were to boil my conference experience down to one overarching theme, it would be “zeal.” In their dedication to their duties and their love of their subject specialization, architecture librarians are zealous almost to the point of fanaticism. So zealous, in fact, that on the bus on the way home from the reception at William Stout Books on the final eve of the conference, it occurred to me that, if plied with a bit more wine and if given release from their duties at their respective campuses, many of the conference members might be in favor of remaining on the bus for an extended tour of architectural libraries and sites across the U.S. A slightly nerdier version of “Magical Mystery Tour,” if you will.

But alas, the bus was under contract for only an evening. Flying out from SFO the next morning, I reflected that, from a strictly self-interested standpoint, I had accomplished the objectives I had outlined for attending the conference: to find potential collaborators and mentors. But I also discovered a tribe, of which I am now honored to consider myself a part.