

# From Tension to Balance: Designing a New Library Building for Effat University

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**Abstract:** *Effat University is a private non-profit university for women founded in 1999 in Saudi Arabia. Maximum enrollment should reach 3,300 fulltime students within a few years. The Effat University Library holds 25,000 physical items, provides access to extensive digital content, and library staff members participate actively in campus-wide information literacy efforts. A new Cultural Center, housing the library and a new museum, is expected to open by fall of 2014. The design of the new Center was subject to the tension between the traditional idea of library as print book storage versus the ideal future world of the virtual, non-embodied digital library. The Center is to house and feature collections of lasting value in addition to learning resources that support active programs of study. The design team strove to find a balance between the desire for openness toward the community and accepted local social norms. This paper describes the process followed to design the new Center. It's not clear whether the library as a centralized entity will survive on campus, but the design team believes that this Center will serve the immediate needs of the institution and expand the impact of the library in non-traditional ways.*

**Keywords:** *New library design, academic libraries, Saudi Arabia, Effat University, Effat Cultural Center & Library.*

## Introduction

Effat University was founded in 1999 by the late Queen Effat, who led the development of educational opportunities for women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Today, Effat University's three colleges (Humanities & Social Sciences, Business, and Engineering) offer thirteen programs, including computer engineering, architecture, entrepreneurship, psychology, and a master's degree in Islamic financial management that is unique in the Kingdom. Enrollment has grown steadily, from an initial group of 25 students to over 2,000 fulltime students registered for the fall 2012 term, and should reach the maximum of 3,300 students within a few years. As the first institution to offer engineering programs for women in Saudi Arabia, Effat University strives to prepare professionals "who retain their national identity while mastering the challenges of rapid technological development and globalization" (Jamal Al Lail, 2012).

The Effat University Library grew steadily throughout the years and now holds 25,000 items, most of which were specifically acquired to support the programs of study. The Library also provides access to extensive digital content, including dozens of high-quality academic databases (e.g., *JSTOR*, *ACM Digital Library*, *IEEE Xplore*, *ABI Inform*, *PsycArticles*, *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, *UpToDate*) and over 160,000 academic ebooks. Most importantly, library staff members lead and participate actively in campus-wide information literacy efforts. Support for library programs is strong, as the University's core values are based on the belief that reading is the first step on the road to enlightenment (*Iqraa Core Values*, 2010); thus user services librarians promote reading and offer research support and a variety of workshops to faculty and students.

## The Effat Cultural Center & Library

The library's 2012-2017 strategic plans seeks to further the university's goals, to fulfill its user service commitment, and to exceed the minimum requirements set by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) bylaws and by the National Commission for Assessment and Academic Accreditation (NCAAA). MOHE regulates the size of the collections and seating areas; the number of seats, computers, and staff members; and the quality of the spaces and collections. For example, MOHE guidelines stipulate that the library building should provide at least one square meter of space for every full time student and one seat for every five students. In 2009, the library was housed in a 900 m<sup>2</sup> building, which was adequate but about to be outgrown

by fast student growth. In fact, the campus master plan foresaw the need for a new library building capable of serving the maximum of 3,300 students, and when a donor approached the University with an offer to sponsor the construction of a new library & museum building, the university was ready to proceed.

First, library staff reviewed documents describing trends in library users and library development (e.g., Toivonen & Laskujärvi 2005; OCLC, 2006; Gibbons & Foster, 2009), including:

- Collections: The development of e-resources, their impact on collection sizes and library technology, and the relevance of a teaching collection containing few unique or rare items
- Spaces: The need for a variety of spaces, ranging from loud group-study areas to small group training rooms, to absolutely silent individual reading spaces; and the desire expressed by students and staff to have lots of natural light, a pleasant environment, flexible furniture, support for technology (e.g., power plugs, WiFi), and perhaps a "green" building
- Services: The importance of accreditation and the emphasis placed by accrediting agencies on information literacy efforts

The building program was prepared by the librarians and reviewed with assistance from the design team, which included the librarian, architecture faculty members, the head of maintenance, the academic Deans, and the University President. In 2010 the University selected JCJ Architecture (CT, USA), a firm with extensive experience designing library buildings, to develop the overall floor plan layouts for the new "Effat Library and Cultural Museum" in a way that reflects the values, mission, and goals of the University. The JCJ team worked on site with the design team, students, and engineering contractors to refine the space requirements and to develop the library & museum layouts. A local engineering firm then developed detailed building plans, and construction started in late 2011. The Center is expected to be ready by 2014. It will house a museum and adjacent storage and conservation areas, a gallery area, library stacks in a silent reading area, a seminar room, a quiet research area, small group study rooms, prayer area, and a large reading and study area with a café and access to a palm garden.

The process for designing the new Center followed the usual steps and can be described as collaborative, as input was sought at all levels. However, along the path from initial idea to final layouts, the question in the back of everyone's mind was: what is the long-term purpose of libraries, and of this particular library? Three main sets of issues or sources of tension were identified:

- Print/Digital Library: the library as a place to store print books vs. the virtual, non-embodied digital library
- Inside/Outreach: onsite services vs. reaching out and working with users where they are
- Library/Museum: Academic library as support for programs of study vs. a library/museum featuring cultural collections of lasting value and of interest to a wider community.

Although libraries everywhere must grapple with these issues, there were local considerations that the design team had to consider to find a balanced consensus.

### **The Hybrid (Print/Digital) Library**

The team recognized that the design of the new Center would be subject to the tension between the idea of a traditional library as a place to store print books and the promise of a fully digital library. It would take years and massive financial resources to grow the relatively small print collection to the size of collections amassed over decades and even centuries at older universities. Fortunately, journal databases and ebook sources are readily available, making it possible to "leapfrog the print collection era" (Tedd & Large, p.14.) In early 2010, librarians began working with faculty in evaluating program-specific databases and ebooks. Kindle readers were acquired and made available for loan with user-selected content, and Electronic Book Library (EBL) and DawsonEra subscriptions made it possible to acquire urgently needed books on the same day. Initially only a handful of faculty members responded, but interest in ebooks is steadily growing. Librarians identified the top three user concerns regarding all-digital collections:

- Not all course references can be found or used online easily
- eTextbooks are favored by only a small percentage of faculty members
- Student preferences are mixed: some demand print, others wish to use ebooks

In the short to medium term, the library will continue to acquire some content of lasting value in print format, but whenever available, users will be encouraged to try the eversion of any new titles they suggest for purchase.

In this context, how much shelving space should be made available in the new building? The minimum size of the print collection mandated by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is 10 titles per student. Given that the expected maximum number of full time students is around 3,300 enough shelving for at least 33,000 titles (i.e., about 40,000 volumes) should be provided. Recently, the NCAAA recommended that the collection should grow to about 50,000 volumes within five to ten years. Clearly, this still represents a small collection, but given the growth in digital publishing, the team agreed that providing shelving space for up to 60,000 volumes should be plenty for the long term. In fact, the physical collection will stop growing as usage goes digital. For this reason, the shelving area can be repurposed: it is enclosed by a glass wall, thus creating a completely silent area that will be used for reading or individual study (Figure 2.) Should the print book collection shrink in the future, shelves can easily be removed and the additional space used for seating or repurposed with glass partitions to create small-group study rooms. Fiction, new acquisitions and light reading will be placed near soft seating on the ground floor, with the rest of the collection located upstairs.

In terms of space for users, MOHE requires one square meter per student and one seat for every five students. Recognizing that this is a minimal requirement, the decision was made to provide closer to two square meters per student, with a total of 5,880 sqm for up to 800 seats. The library should be a place for students to come together, therefore a range of seating area "flavors" will be offered:

- loud group-study and casual reading area next to the café, on the ground floor (600 sqm)
- training or group meeting rooms also near the café (100 sqm)
- outside seating in the palm garden
- the staircase joining the ground and first floors is envisioned as an inviting, social meeting space, with steps wide enough for students to meet and perhaps linger and interact informally
- small group-study rooms and a quieter reading area (300 sqm) are located on the first (upper) floor
- shelves/silent room are also on the first floor (700 sqm)
- prayer room is next to the shelves/silent room upstairs.

In general, the ground floor is envisioned to be friendly toward noise, food, interaction, whereas the first floor should be quieter and more conducive to individual study. At the time of this writing, JCJ Architecture is expected to start designing interiors that are engaging and tech-savvy.

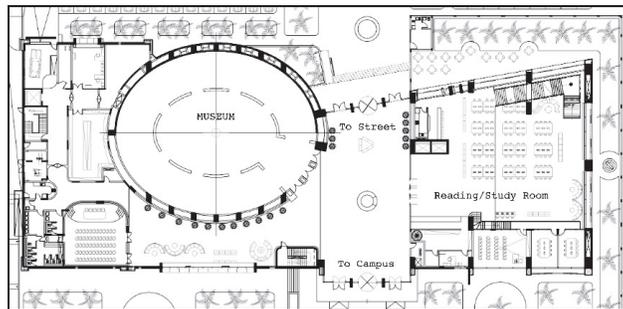


Figure 1. Effat Cultural Center & Library, ground floor

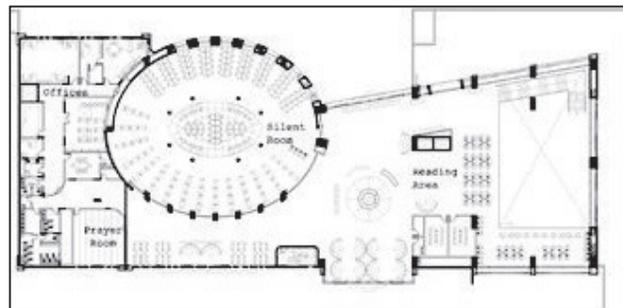


Figure 2. Effat Cultural Center & Library, first floor

## **Inside/Outreach and Information Literacy**

Instead of waiting for students and faculty to come to the library, the library's services should be integrated into the university's life, sharing in its activities and objectives. Librarians routinely have taught students how to use the library's OPAC, how to find books on the shelves, and how to search a journal database. But the User Services Librarians ("USLs") are making an effort to move beyond the library walls by:

- Switching from a collection-centric view (i.e., how to use the local collections, how to find a specific book on the shelves) to an information-literacy view, proactively guiding students toward information literacy skills and working with the Provost and faculty members to integrate info-lit elements into the curricula, at all levels.
- Creating video tutorials that students can consult at any time to learn the basics of information searching on their own and providing online services (e.g., VPN for remote database use, email-based reference, online book renewals)
- Spearheading the introduction of teaching-by-dialogue workshops in collaboration with the Center of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Independent Learning Center.

As a result of these activities, USLs spend half of their time engaged in teaching activities, so much so that the University is committed to keeping the ratio of one USL for every 500 students. This means that besides a well-placed help desk (ground floor) and a reference desk (first floor), more spaces will be setup to provide one-on-one sessions for individual faculty members and hands-on training for groups of 4 to 20 students. Instead of building computer labs with fixed PC-like boxes and seating in rows, the idea is to move toward flexible spaces that allow workshop participants to use either the equipment (tablets?) provided by the library or their own devices to connect to the WiFi network. Of course, enough power plugs will be provided, as that was one of the main concerns expressed by students during focus group discussions. For larger groups, the auditorium provides space for up to 65 participants and is envisioned to be equipped with moveable furniture that can be rearranged easily from lecture-style setup to small discussion groups, as required. Still, it would be impossible to have sufficient training rooms and equipment in the library to serve the needs of all, and so it's important to note that USLs are working closely together with faculty members and will be conducting many sessions in classrooms and labs around campus, as well as in the future Student Services building adjacent to the library.

With most content going digital, one future scenario had USLs assigned to specific programs and thus, having offices located in the corresponding colleges. On the other hand, it might also be the case that they would consult with users mostly via remote devices, and thus could be located anywhere - even off campus. For the short and medium term, the expectation is that USLs will still be based in the library building, and thus, their offices and service desks will be in this building.

## **The Library/Museum in the Local Context**

The current collections focus on supporting the programs of study. There are very few rare books or irreplaceable items in the collections. But in addition to the library, the new building will house a museum and a gallery. While the library already exists and fulfills a known function in support of the University's academic programs, the addition of a museum will position Effat University as a keeper of important cultural items and create the potential to engage with the Jeddah community in new ways:

- The conservation workshop will be staffed by expert curators, who will be able to share their knowledge of collection preservation and item repair with other Jeddah libraries and with the community at large.
- Library expertise will develop toward digitization of cultural items (books, works of art) in conjunction with faculty from the computer science and engineering programs.
- The gallery space located just outside the museum, will serve to display new creative works by students, faculty, and invited artists, whose efforts will be documented via digital portfolios & video interviews by library staff.

The museum, gallery area, and conference room will be open to the public, and all spaces and entrances had to be designed in a way that accommodates the social expectations for this women's campus while allowing for intellectual interaction. For example, if a museum function is scheduled at night or during the weekend, outside guests will enter from the main street entrance, while the campus entrance is secured. Also, the museum/gallery and conference hall areas can remain open while the library is closed.

In the longer term, when teaching collections are fully digital, the museum's content will still be unique and hopefully relevant for the university's teaching and community service purposes.

## Final Considerations

Digitization, user preferences, outreach, and the addition of collections of lasting value were the main drivers in the design of the Effat Cultural Center & Library. Although it's not clear whether the library as a centralized entity will survive on the campus, the design team believes that this Center will serve the immediate needs of the institution and expand the reach of the library mission in non-traditional ways. The new emphasis on information literacy and the addition of a museum and gallery spaces re-focuses the mission of the library, from being the keeper of textbooks and other learning resources to becoming an active learning space where cultural heritage is honored and students are encouraged to learn how to find and use information critically, work together, and display their creative works.

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