

History of the rise and progress of the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library at Yale University

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This article casts a wide net over the key events, people, locations and collections that shaped the development of the Arts Library at Yale University, beginning with its inception as a humble departmental collection. While the physical spaces that have housed the library have undergone tumultuous changes over the years, the collections themselves have evolved in ways both unique to Yale and universal to the field of librarianship. In autumn 2008, the library was re-christened the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library and it is now housed within the renovated Paul Rudolph Hall and the newly constructed addition, the Jeffrey H. Loria Center for the History of Art.

John H. Lahr, a former editor of the *Yale daily news*, once wrote, 'Anything can happen in the art library and, in time, it usually does'.¹ Military occupation, fire, cocaine, space suits, robbery and car crashes all play a part in the colorful 140-year history of the Arts Library at Yale. The early years of the Yale University Arts Library are inextricably tied to the development of Art, Architecture and Drama as academic disciplines. The Yale School of Fine Arts was formally established between 1864 and 1866, and was given a physical home upon the opening of Street Hall in 1869. According to one archived report, 'A modest collection of books must have existed even before 1873 when the accession book was begun with W. Dunlap's *History of the rise and progress of the arts of design*, New York, 1834.'² As for the other departments, Architecture was first taught in 1908, officially adopted as part of the arts curriculum in 1915, and established as a department within the School of Fine Arts one year later. Together, they became known as the School of Art and Architecture, which achieved status as a fully graduate professional school in 1959. Yale split the two departments in 1969, establishing each with its own faculty and dean, and it wasn't long before Architecture was made a separate school in 1972. The Department of Drama was founded in 1924,

functioning as part of the School of Art and Architecture until becoming a discrete professional program, the Yale School of Drama, in 1955.

The first Art Librarian was George Albert Thompson, BFA 1898, who served from 1892 to 1900. For the next quarter century John Ireland Howe Downes, BFA 1898, held the title of Art Librarian and incorporated responsibilities for slides and photographs into his traditional duties. Downes was also a painter, and a noted early historian of American art. During his tenure in 1917, a separate Architecture Library was established across High Street in the basement of Weir Hall.

At this early stage, the Art Library was housed in a room in Street Hall. Soon the newly constructed Sterling Memorial Library began providing shelf space for smaller, more text-based, and lesser-used materials – a practice which continues to this day. One of the few surviving documents of this period is a letter to Dean Everett Meeks from the winter of 1936, light-heartedly recounting a student-organized 'Midyear Recess Dance' which resulted in a \$52 surplus donated to the Library of the School of Fine Arts. Unfortunately, further narrative and anecdotal evidence of the Arts Library's early development remains scant for the decade of the Great Depression.

Growing pains

The United States' involvement in World War II initiated one of the healthiest recorded phases in the library's evolution. During the 1942-43 school year, Yale was asked to let the Army take up residence in most of Old Campus. Specifically, the Navy occupied Street Hall. This forced the main art collection to move across High Street to Weir Hall and merge with the architecture materials. Thus, the Art Library became the Art and Architecture Library for the first time. Librarian Lydia Wentworth noted, 'There are innumerable advantages in having the art and architectural books housed in one building.' Ultimately, the arrangement facilitated cross-disciplinary study as well as greater cohesion of practice for the staff.



An early incarnation of the art book collection in Street Hall.

Yale Manuscripts and Archives.

Ballooning enrollments after the end of the war brought students to the library in double the numbers of the previous year. A shortage of textbooks had students lined up at the doors at 8:30 in the morning, a build-up that caused librarians to ask faculty to limit lengthy reading assignments. To accommodate this growth spurt, hours were extended, extra staff was hired, and duplicate books were sold to help offset the costs, but lack of space for the collection was an increasing problem. Talk of a move to the sculpture wing of the old art gallery had already begun and an inter-departmental committee formed to discuss the idea of eventually creating a new building that would include the library.

The boom and subsequent demands of the postwar years gradually diminished, and the move to the old sculpture gallery came in 1953. This necessitated an extreme bout of weeding that dropped the core collection from 17,750 to 12,855, in which the non-core books were sent to the main library (Sterling) or sold as duplicates. The short-lived idea was to streamline the core into a tightly-defined 'working collection' for undergraduates while graduate students, especially in Art History, would use Sterling. However, considering the varied uses for the materials, the librarians soon found this policy impossible to maintain.

It is important to note that this era also saw attempts to reorganize the cataloging and shelving system to promote ease of searching and increased use. As Arts Library veteran Charles Summa

confirms, 'A very common question is, "Where can I go to find books on [a particular artist]?"'. To address this, one experiment resulted in the 'J18' scheme ('NJ18' when Yale converted to Library of Congress Classification around 1970) by which all work of a single artist or architect, regardless of divergent media, resided in the same place. This resulted in greater 'browse-ability', so that a patron interested in Picasso could merely walk straight to the artist's alphabetical place in the J18 'P' section and find *Picasso and the age of iron* on the same shelf as *Picasso: linoleum cuts*. The drawback of such a system is that it diminishes the depth of media-based subject areas by

locating volumes based on *who* created rather than *what* was created. Regardless, the NJ18 designation persists to this day as Yale's unique innovation in art and architecture classification.

The Rudolph era

Paul Rudolph became Chair of Architecture at Yale in 1958, a move that would significantly affect the fate of the Art and Architecture Library for decades to come. At age 40 and with his career on a steep ascent, Rudolph was joining academia for the first time as a professional. He proclaimed, 'I became an educator at Yale. . . because I believe that action has



Paul Rudolph Hall (left) and The Jeffrey Loria Center for the History of Art (right), 2008. The Haas Family Arts Library is located on the first floor of both buildings. Photo: Richard Barnes.

indeed outstripped theory and that it is the unique task and responsibility of a great university such as Yale to study, not only that which is known, but far more important, to pierce the unknown.⁴ Rudolph soon engaged himself in several Yale and New Haven projects, including Yale's Married Students' Housing, New Haven's elegant Temple Street Parking Garage, and Crawford Manor, a high-rise apartment complex.

Rudolph also accepted the task of designing a new Art and Architecture building for Yale, which held the creation of a new library in abeyance. Despite the inadequacy of the old sculpture gallery's working library, the push for a new space met with certain challenges. For one, a shifting budget forced the library out of the plan at various early stages. In preliminary drafts, when included at all, its placement alternated between the basement and ground floor. Also, by most accounts Rudolph was against the inclusion of the library in his building. He believed that a library should retain a feeling of intimacy, which perhaps was at odds with his grand vision.⁵

Rudolph settled on a design for the building that was based on the shape, seen from above, of an 'overlapping pinwheel'. This was inspired by his idea that building's 'role in the cityscape is to turn [the] corner',⁶ which is an odd expression of agency for the finished work, with its monstrous, imposing

and static mass of walls and the impossibility of seeing the pinwheel shape from the ground. The building opened in 1963 to polarized opinions – lauded by those who were free to do so either intellectually or recreationally, and loathed by those who needed to actually use it. It is a building that challenges and even delights the mind without providing necessary comfort, and therefore, it should be given a measured, holistic analysis. Deifying Rudolph for his achievement does injustice to the two generations who suffered behind its walls. Yet to entirely dismiss his building for its lack of function denies the *explorability* that made it a sculptural playground for adults. Rudolph left Yale in 1965, but he must have learned much about himself during his tenure as Architecture Chair. By 1967, in stark rebuke of his earlier theory-over-action manifesto, he reflected, 'I like to build, and though I think we need teachers and scholars and nonbuilding architects – theorists – I am not one of them.'⁷

Fire!

In the early morning of June 14, 1969 a massive fire ripped through the Art and Architecture building. When the blaze was finally put out, the fourth through the seventh floors were in ruins, totaling \$900,000 in damage. The source of the fire was a

topic of much debate. In the weeks leading up to the fire, controversy had enveloped the joint Architecture and City Planning Departments that stemmed from a botched attempt at implementing an Affirmative Action admissions plan for the following year. In addition, but unrelated to this, a flyer had recently been distributed with these ominous comments, ‘Why has Yale not gone up in smoke? See the A and A building. See every building. See them soon.’⁸ Combining these circumstances with the timing of the fire, the unusual speed of the blaze and similarly charged turbulence on campuses all over the country, it’s easy to see why many people, including the fire department, suspected arson. However, by the end of July arson had been ruled out. The admissions controversy proved unrelated, and it was determined that the intent of the fliers, though provocatively worded, had been to address communication breakdowns between students, faculty and staff in order to stave off such unrest. The cause of the fire was ultimately never discovered.

As for the Arts Library, workers were able to protect the first floor from water leakages and other immediate threats caused by the disaster. In the end only 25 books were destroyed, and the library was back in working condition by the fall. Unfortunately, records stored on the third floor that were to contribute to the Yale School of Arts 100-year anniversary were lost.⁹ Paul Rudolph later likened the burning of his building to the death of a child,¹⁰ and despite its eventual recovery from the fire, a long, slow decline set in for the ‘A and A’ building and the Arts Library.

Safety last

It is hard not to be moved when one hears stories attesting to Rudolph’s ‘safety last’ design approach. Robert Kaufmann, Library Director from 1971-74, was one person who literally carried the scars of the building living up to its Brutalist construction. ‘You could lose your shirt and half your skin if you brushed too close to the walls. For a number of years I had a scar on my arm where I lost a shirt sleeve and part of my skin.’¹¹ He was referring to the infamous, rough-hewn ‘corduroy’ concrete walls, hand-hammered by workers for maximum texture. Kaufmann’s problems with the building were far more serious than that, however. The ceilings had been sprayed with asbestos insulation of a type that Rudolph preferred, according to Kaufmann, ‘because it looked like clouds’. Unfortunately, this also meant it was constantly raining carcinogenic dust. ‘We would come in the morning and there was this grit on the table. That was the asbestos. We were all breathing that.’ While walking outside one weekend, Kaufmann caught a protruding tree branch in his eye – painful enough to imagine, but the next day at work asbestos fibers fell into the scratch in his eye, where they remained for the rest of his life. Kaufmann estimated the injury required 20 to 30 visits to Yale New Haven Hospital, which included 10,000 photographs, a failed attempt to implant a lens, and even a scraping. ‘God, that was something. They brought cocaine in a vial with two armed guards and put a drop in my eye. This little vial was worth \$50,000 on the street it was such pure stuff. They put it in my eye, but they had very little time to work. [The drug] numbed it, but not for very long. [After these visits] I would just get up out of the chair and be a total wreck, and come back to work.’

The asbestos problem prevented Kaufmann from being able to enter the building any more. He conducted business from the Slide and Photograph Collection in Street Hall until his resignation on January 1, 1975. That summer, tests of the building confirmed that an evacuation was imminent due to the health hazard the insulation posed. Before the move asbestos dust needed to be cleaned off each book, and during the week of October 12, 1974 – the middle of the semester – the collection was transferred to the Cross-Campus Library (now Bass Library). Where just days before students and staff had used the A and A building freely, now it was taken



The Arts Library atrium decorated with Robert Haas’ photographs and Eero Saarinen’s womb chairs. Textured concrete wall in the foreground.

Photo: Jesse Vestermark.

over by asbestos removers in space suits. As for the collection, it would remain at Cross-Campus for over a year while the building was cleaned and the library was renovated, eventually resulting in more shelf space, better lighting and restored ventilation and insulation.

Collections expand, technology advances

Amidst all the drama of the physical space, it would be easy to lose sight of the collection growing in new and exciting ways. For example, the dawn of the 1980s saw a boom in photography materials to complement the medium's rise to prominence as a fine art form worthy of academic study. Though the School of Art's Photography Department was established in 1965, the library's collection had grown slowly at first. 'Now, it's one of our biggest collections,' says Charles Summa. 'It's heavily used and it's used in different ways, for instance, the drama people use it for source material.'¹²

Technological advances in the A and A library kept up the vital flow of creative inspiration and scholarly research. Behind the staff desks, manual typewriters gave way to a single, shared electrical model and eventually to the first personal computer. Charles Summa remembers, 'It only did word processing. It was huge, five and a half feet tall [when standing] on a big, metal, rollable desk. They felt it needed its own furniture. That PC was quite a revolution, because one of the first things I used it for was to make an updatable list of periodicals. Before that, we had a periodical tree.' Indeed, it's enlightening to read A and A Librarian Nancy Lambert's annual reports from the time, exalting a Xerox Memorywriter with 16K memory that saved 'a great deal of time in correcting correspondence, reports, bibliographies, etc.' and the editing features provided by the two new self-correcting IBM Wheelwriter 6 typewriters which 'have done a great deal for staff morale and efficiency'.¹³ Upon hearing this, Summa dryly adds, 'You can picture the depths of morale if something like that had such an effect'.

The wilderness years

Even though issues with the building began shortly after its opening, reports from the 1980s through the mid-1990s are rife with librarians' pleas for expansion. Patrons, librarians and staff continued to struggle with the dissipation of shelf space,

inadequate study space, especially for graduates, and lackluster environmental conditions. Even though the architect had provided for the eventual installation of air conditioning, the original ductwork was savaged by the fire. Thus, the building was never air conditioned, and humidity and heat control were equally problematic. Temperatures within the library ranged from 55 degrees in the winter to 95 in the summer. Nancy Lambert was a passionate advocate for either a new or expanded library space. It must have been a true challenge working inside a building so revered from a distance and so despised from inside. But another staff veteran, Beverly Lett, believes that the adversity of the building's interior was compensated for in other ways: 'My job is to enable scholars to become scholars, and that's the part that I'm proud of and really enjoy doing. Because we were in such a challenging space, the library staff really went out of their way to make visitors feel welcome'.¹⁴

Meanwhile, some visitors were making themselves a little too welcome – and many of them weren't even human. 'Open windows and fans brought in dirt, auto exhaust fumes, feathers, cats, and pigeons'.¹⁵ In the early 1970s, architecture students built a multi-level hotel for stray cats in the back courtyard. In May 1987, the library was robbed of cash and keys, though the thief was believed to be someone with access to the door key. On December 20, 1987, at the York and Chapel intersection two cars collided, sending one of the vehicles smashing into the corner window that allows visitors an otherwise lovely view up Chapel Street. The librarians cleared up the broken glass themselves until carpenters came to seal the breach.

The digital revolution and special collections

The more recent digitization and networked availability of the Visual Resources Collection has been an integral addition to the library's collection. The resource began as the Slides and Photographs Collection, originally part of the School of Fine Arts and merged with the library in 1955. While it is more common today for image collections to be integrated into the library, it took foresight for Yale to do so early on. The merger especially makes sense now considering that, despite problems with the quality of some of the slides and photographs, an institutional collection is an aggregate of past and present faculty selection, and may also include

images that record objects and structures no longer extant or no longer in situ.

The move toward digitization in the past decade wasn't always easy or quick, since the push for such a change originally came less from those using the images than from those providing and organizing them. But around 2005 a sea change occurred in the level of demand by faculty, spurred by curiosity, peer pressure, student demand and the popularity of user-friendly presentation software such as PowerPoint.

Katherine Haskins is a former Arts Library Director as well as serving as Project Director for Integrated Digital Image Resources (IDIR). The IDIR project completed digitizing 130,000 of the university's slides, contributing to a total availability at the time this article was written of over 250,000 digital images in the Visual Resources Collection. Additionally, Haskins was responsible for Yale's acquisition of the externally-created, 32,000-image Saskia Digital Archive. And as for the remaining physical media, the project staff archived over 500,000 slides and photographs as a major legacy collection at Yale. The IDIR project was another crucial step in removing the boundaries, conceptual and physical, which may once have separated the worlds of images, information, technology and

education. Blurring such distinctions binds the library further to its constituents, as Haskins succinctly states: 'What we did with IDIR very much relates to [the work done in] Rudolph and Loria [and] instantiates so much about where teaching and learning are going to go.'¹⁶

The Arts Library's special collections have made impressive strides as well. Color theorist, consultant and author Faber Birren had donated his collection of books on color to the library back in 1971, and his contributions continued throughout the years even beyond his passing in 1988. The Faber Birren Collection of Books on Color contains volumes from the past 500 years of color study, and is represented with a sumptuous website.¹⁷ In addition, current Assistant Director of Special Collections, Jae Jennifer Rossman, has made improvements to the accessibility of the holdings at the Arts of The Book Collection, which comprises artists' books, type specimens, bookplates, and various other collections related to design and book printing. She established consistent hours, a seemingly small but crucial change considering the heightened access expectations of today's generation of library users. Rossman also supervised increased intellectual control over archival collections, meaning that valuable data that assist users in finding material have been made available in paper and digital form where before it had been locked in the head of the curator.

Renovation and redemption

During the 1989-90 school year, faculty members of the School of Art, School of Architecture and History of Art came together on a committee to plan a library space that would synthesize their representative collections, including Visual Resources, Drama and Arts of the Book. The Classics Library, which was brought into the administrative fold of the Arts Library in 1994, is the sole division to remain physically outside the new site. In the spring of 1996, a plan was approved and attention directed towards the redesign effort. Still, it would be nearly another decade before an architectural firm was settled on for the monumental task of remodeling the School of Architecture and the Arts Library, as well as creating a whole new adjacent building for the Department of the History of Art.

The architect of the redesign and new building, the late Charles Gwathmey, studied at Yale under Paul Rudolph from 1959 to 1962. As his style developed, Gwathmey gained a strong reputation as a follower of Le Corbusier-style modernism, and



Haas Family Arts Library reading room.

Photo: Jesse Vestermark.

from the late 1960s to the early 1970s he was part of the 'New York Five' group of architects who were honored with a 1969 MoMA exhibit. In 1971, he partnered with Charles Siegel to form Gwathmey/Siegel and Associates. Decades later and after several years of planning and a challenging selection process, Gwathmey's firm was chosen to renovate his former professor's building as well as design the Jeffrey Loria Center for the History of Art. In honor of Rudolph's resilient structure, the older building has been renamed Paul Rudolph Hall. In defense of Rudolph's original vision, Katherine Haskins reminds us, 'If you go walk around the Rudolph building, there is more there now that was there at the beginning than has been changed'. Over the course of 50 years, Helen Chillman served Yale as Arts Librarian, Director of the Slide and Photograph Collection and Visual Resources Librarian until her retirement in 2010. From her perspective, she adds, '[Rudolph Hall] has been restored very well, but it's been restored better than it ever was'.¹⁸

Within Rudolph Hall and the Jeffrey Loria Center, the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library of today may seem as if it has little in common with the small collection of the 1860s. Over the course of its evolution the library has survived a maelstrom of change – cultural, physical, institutional and technological. But whether today's resources are found online or inside the buildings themselves, the rise and progress of the Haas Family Arts Library continues, unabated.

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