Build It and S/He Will Come: A Reflection on Five Years in a Purpose-Built Special Collections Space

The Special Collections of The Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library at Yale University have existed in their current state only since the fall of 2008, when the physically separate components of the Arts Library moved into a renovated space that bridges two conjoined buildings, Paul Rudolph Hall1 and the new Loria Center, both projects by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates. The Arts Library itself was only ten years old at that point, formed from the Art+Architecture Library, the Drama Library, the Classics Library, the Arts of the Book Collection, and the Visual Resources Collection. These smaller units banded together in the late 1990s to provide librarian services directly to all constituents, as some units were previously serviced by high-level support staff only. Along with the merger came creation of a Special Collections Librarian position to oversee the variety of rare and unique materials in the Arts of the Book Collection and the Art+Architecture and Drama libraries. The new unit of Arts Library Special Collections (ALSC) had significant potential for teaching and research but lacked appropriate facilities. Also to its detriment, the materials were located in four library spaces. Five years after the move to a purpose-built space, the department is thriving and is an example of what can be achieved when special collections receive appropriate facilities and administrative support to develop active instruction and exhibition programs.

Background
Renovation of the Art+Architecture Library had been planned for over a decade before the creation of the Arts Library as an administrative entity. Difficulties in the planning process, including changing architects and multiple restarts of the design process, created serendipitous timing that allowed the creation of a space for Arts Library Special Collections within the footprint of the renovated library. Although this space was not originally planned for the renovated building, it has since become a star attraction. In fact, the development of the Special Collections

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1. Paul Rudolph Hall was renamed after the renovation; it was originally named the Art+Architecture building and opened in 1963.
instruction and exhibition programs has been a key factor in building the identity of the newly named Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library.

Two major changes for Special Collections in the new facility were an upgraded exhibition area and the creation of a separate classroom inside the department’s security perimeter. Previously, the Arts of the Book (AOB) Collection housed at Sterling Memorial Library functioned as the default reading room for Arts Library Special Collections. The AOB reading room had four historic exhibit cases, which created two major problems. Visitors could only see the exhibits during reading room hours and had to check their belongings to enter. Many people were not willing to go through the trouble to do so, and thus the only audience reached was one that was already interested in Special Collections. There was no chance of catching the attention of unsuspecting students or other library visitors. The other problem involved the exhibit cases themselves, which were the originals from when the building opened in 1931. Undoubtedly the readership of this journal understands the problems of mounting exhibitions in outdated cases, so I won’t elaborate.

Creation of the William H. Wright Special Collections Exhibit Area in the lower level of the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library solved these problems. The architects designed classic box-shaped cases with front-opening glass panels that offer ease of access for installation and a wide variety of materials to be displayed. Improved lighting controls allow exhibits to be on display longer to coincide better with the academic term. Three exhibits per year (instead of four) also allow staff to spend more time on each exhibition, thus increasing their quality. The location of the new exhibit cases just off the main atrium of the Arts Library, but not inside the Special Collections security perimeter, permits access to the exhibit area seven days a week and until 11:00 p.m. on many days during the academic year. A timer controls the lighting. While the lighting is only on during business hours Monday through Saturday, the objects are still easily visible with ambient light at other times. We can no longer track the number of visitors in the exhibit area, but staff reports and inquiries at the library’s main service desk indicate that visitation has increased. In fact, the exhibit program has worked exactly as we had hoped: bringing people into Special Collections to follow up on materials seen on display. In addition to individual researchers over the past five years, in spring 2012 two professors requested class sessions based on materials they had seen in exhibitions; these sessions have been repeated and are scheduled again for future academic years. Details are shared in the Instruction Program section of this article.

The decision to include a separate classroom inside the ALSC space was difficult. While the statistics of the new instruction program in the Arts of the Book Collection showed growth, it was a leap of faith for Yale Library Administration to dedicate valuable space in the new facility to a program not yet fully developed
or proven. Articles on special collections and teaching supported our desire of a classroom dedicated to special collections materials. Since the whole Yale Library system was moving toward heavy reliance on the university’s off-site Library Shelving Facility, we chose to forgo additional storage on site in favor of the classroom. The new building would allow (or force, depending on your point of view) us to reeducate our readers about policy and procedure. We introduced and promoted the concept of asking for off-site materials in advance.

It was another sign of faith to place the exhibit area in a prominent location on the lower level of the new library space. While the numbers for use in the previous Arts of the Book Collection space in Sterling Memorial Library showed steady increases in both readers and instruction, the growth was average. Additionally, there was no clear way to track the number of people using the new exhibition facilities, so the importance of this program was based on the overall Yale University Library mission of outreach to Yale and other communities.

**Exhibition Program**

The primary objective of the exhibition program is to showcase our collections and draw in readers. To this end, the first few exhibits in the new space focused on the merging of collections to form the ALSC. Those familiar with the noncirculating aspect of special collections certainly understand the significance of such a merger, but we felt it was important to underscore this new proximity for our readers. The “Collections in Conversation” series is the formal rendering of this idea. In this series, two exhibitions directly addressed how materials from Arts of the Book, Drama, and Art+Architecture can be used together. The first, “Collections in Conversation: Drama and Theater,” used a general theme to allow us to showcase the breadth and depth of the collections, including materials from each of the three formerly separate collections. While we now have only one location code visible in the OPAC, we have retained the old location codes behind the scenes to have a historical record of where the materials formerly resided. In 2011, “Structure Explored: Architectural Themes in the Book Arts” was a more focused show on the idea of architecture expressed in the book arts. Another version of the “Collections in Conversation” series is in the planning stages and will explore theater and drama in the book arts.

Because of the change in scheduling that allows exhibits to coincide with the two semesters and summer recess, we are more proactive about collaboration with other campus colleagues. For instance, we partnered with one of our constituents, the Yale

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2. The volume 13, no. 2 (1999) issue of *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* was especially helpful with an article by Susan M. Allen addressing reaching the undergraduate audience, and Michèle Valerie Cloonan and Sidney E. Berger presenting concerns and future directions for special collections in general. These comments reflect (or rather predict) the programming that we have tried to instill in Arts Library Special Collections.
University Art Gallery (YUAG), to host “Embodied at the Library: Special Collections Related to the Exhibition ‘Embodied: Black Identities in American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery’” in spring 2011. The “Embodied” exhibition at the YUAG was a student-curated project that explored the complicated issue of identity as expressed through visual art, with a focus on how ideas of identity have “mapped meanings onto African American bodies throughout history.” Drawing from the collections at the YUAG, students selected artworks in a range of media to “prompt the viewer and reader to question the category of ‘African American art.’” The Arts Library exhibition included works of art in book format by some of the artists in “Embodied” and works created by book artists related to the issues explored in the YUAG exhibition.

The “Embodied” exhibition and the fall 2011 exhibition, “The Book as Memorial: Book Artists Respond to and Remember 9/11,” prompted two professors to contact ALSC to set up class sessions. Robert Stepto came to see artists’ books from the “Embodied” show for his course “American Artists and the African American Book.” Laura Wexler brought students from her course “Graphic Memoir” to see materials from “The Book as Memorial” and also worked with me to develop an expanded list of materials to use in the classroom. As of this writing, the Wexler class has run three times and the Stepto class twice; both professors have expressed interest in repeating the sessions when they teach their respective courses again. Additionally, both professors are from the American Studies Department, not a constituency we expected to use the Arts Library. To have our theory that the exhibition program would increase interaction with Yale students and faculty validated in this significant manner has been very gratifying.

Current collaborations include an exhibition by a guest curator from the Office of the University Printer about Yale’s first University Printer, Carl Rollins, whose papers are held by ALSC. “Withal the Craft: The Life and Work of Carl Purington Rollins” opened in April 2013—in time to excite interest in the Lohmann Prize in Student Printing, held each spring. Sponsored by the Office of the University Printer and held in Arts Library Special Collections, with winning entries becoming part of the Yale Student Printing Archive, this annual event celebrates excellence in undergraduate printing, both analog and digital. The exhibition is also well timed to highlight Rollins’s role as founder of the library’s Bibliographical Press, a hands-on historic printing facility that Yale will revitalize for demonstrations in fall 2013.

These examples illustrate how ALSC interacts with the on-campus community, which it is our primary mission to support. Other collaborative exhibitions in the last five years have engaged audiences in the history of publishing, Baltic studies, Judaic stud-

ies, and authorship and ownership in bookplates, to name a few. While the basic premise of a library exhibition is to showcase the collections, ALSC strives to use exhibitions as an opportunity to target new audiences and to pursue cross-library and cross-campus collaborations. By networking outside the arts, ALSC is actively using the popular academic focus of “visual literacy” and “material culture” to draw attention to our holdings, increase use statistics, and ultimately show the importance and popularity of collections that had been relegated to dusty closets for multiple decades.

**Instruction Program**

The ALSC instruction program is young. While the Arts of the Book Collection has an exhibition history stretching back to its founding in 1967, there was no instruction program, formal or informal, in the past for any component of Arts Library Special Collections. Beginning in FY2004, we started a more formal approach, including keeping statistics on the classes held in the Arts of the Book Collection reading room. Library literature helped inspire the program. In the last decade, our instruction program has grown over 900 percent, with most of the growth occurring after the move to the new facility in summer 2008. Statistics are kept on the number of classes, including orientation sessions, and the number of people attending. We limit the number of people in the classroom to fifteen due to seating capacity. Professors with larger classes conduct multiple shorter sessions to accommodate all of their students; we count this as one event with a separate count for total attendance. The graphs below show the growth of the number of people in the ALSC classroom (see figure 1) and the number of sessions per year.

![Number of Participants by Fiscal Year](image)

**FIGURE 1.** Number of Participants in Instruction Program by Fiscal Year

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While there was a slight drop in instruction sessions and number of participants from FY2012 to FY2013, the level has not dropped below any previous years. I believe this is an indication that we have thoroughly reached our primary market and use is leveling off. We do not have the staff for a renewed outreach effort to advertise the ALSC instruction program. However, we are actively engaging our primary constituencies to maintain our current use levels.

Other observations from these statistics include that, in FY2011, for the first time, the number of people using the classroom (501) exceeded the number of people using the reading room (455). This trend continued in FY2012 and 2013, even with a dip in use of the classroom this past fiscal year. The dip is a reflection on the success of the instruction program in attracting professors to use the ALSC classroom for multiple sessions in one semester; the classes that followed this method in FY2012 did not follow the same model or did not run in FY2013, thus returning usage to just above the level of FY2011. At first glance, the statistics for reading room use give a negative impression with a downward trend (see figure 3). When analyzed with knowledge of behind-the-scenes operations, I believe they show a steady use of the facilities even through the many changes that have occurred in the last decade. For instance, the higher numbers from FY2005 through FY2008 reflect viewing of AOB Collection exhibitions. As the exhibition cases were inside the reading room, those visitors were counted as reading room visitors. The lowest numbers in FY2007 and FY2008 reflect the reduced outreach efforts and periods of closure necessary to prepare the collections for the move in summer 2008. Since we use the same staff for public and technical services (not to mention that the reading room was also used for processing since we did not have a separate staff area in the old configuration), there was no option but to reduce efforts toward public service. The dip from FY2011 to FY2012 reflects a change in the method of counting from transactional to patron-based to align with other special collections on campus at Yale. Since this change in methodology, our patron-based count...
has climbed close to the previous transactional count for the first two years in the new space, thus showing overall growth. Despite the statistical anomalies, the use of the ALSC reading room has hovered in the same range, which is interesting in comparison to the growth of use of the ALSC classroom. The near steady use of the new reading room reflects a desire of Arts Library constituents to take advantage of the improved facilities for consulting special collections materials. I feel that the explosive growth of the instruction program statistics reflects fulfillment of need for a previously inadequate service: instruction that leverages rare and unique materials in the arts at a university with an international reputation for supporting the arts.

The instruction program has become more sophisticated as demand has risen, or perhaps the breadth in instructional offerings has driven the growth in use. Originally, instruction was based almost exclusively on the role of the Arts of the Book Collection as the repository for the Master of Fine Art theses for the Graphic Design and Photography graduate programs at the Yale School of Art. Professors regularly bring their students to see theses from previous years and discuss what has been done and what should be done for a culminating graduate school project. The professors sought little or no input from the librarians, but this didn’t stop them from taking the opportunity to promote ALSC collections to a classroom full of students. Eventually, the professors began to inquire about other possibilities.

Our collection of artists’ books has been the base on which the instruction program has grown. Contrary to my expectations, I have found that artists’ books are used most extensively by the non–arts-area courses; arts-area courses tend to use archival collections more frequently. Scholars outside the arts tend to view artists’ books as an extreme on the spectrum of communication methods. They can be employed in teaching to illustrate a point by showing an unusual case. In this sense,
the selection of artists’ books for these classes is based on the subject matter and, by extension, on the course curriculum. Professors desiring a visual approach to the history of printing and/or the book require a less specialized approach to material selection, although we try to work with each professor to develop a selection of materials appropriate to their learning goals.

The professors who have chosen to expand the number of sessions they hold in the Arts Library provide further evidence of the success of the ALSC instruction program. Two examples show how ALSC has become an integral component of a course: “Art of the Printed Word” (AOPW) college seminar taught by Richard Rose and “Studies in Visual Biography” freshman seminar taught by Jessica Helfand.

“Art of the Printed Word” College Seminar
College seminars are a way to introduce experimental courses into the system at a centuries-old institution. Hosted by a residential college, the courses offer credit but have no departmental affiliation. Often, the courses are tied to current events and do not repeat. However, a seminar centered on letterpress printing has been a regular offering as a college seminar for over 30 years. The current professor, Richard Rose, has been teaching “Art of the Printed Word” since 2004.

When I first started working with Professor Rose, he brought the class for a requisite visit to the Arts of the Book Collection, which holds the Yale Student Printing Archive containing, among other things, examples of class projects from various iterations of this course. Over the years, Professor Rose and I have worked together to develop two sessions using ALSC materials and to host two guest lectures. In the course of multiple visits over fifteen weeks, our staff develop a rapport with the students that facilitates our interaction with them when they return to do individual research at the end of the semester. Not only are the students better at communicating what they wish to research, but they are already familiar with ALSC policy and procedure and thus are better at planning enough time into their schedules and are more respectful of the staff and the work that is being done to support them.

“Studies in Visual Biography” Freshman Seminar
The same is true of students who attend the “Studies in Visual Biography” freshman seminar: their period of intensive research at the end of the semester runs significantly more smoothly because of their comfort with the library collections, space, and policies introduced over the semester. The Freshman Seminar program at Yale is a few years old and introduces new students to the seminar style of teaching, which they usually don’t experience until their junior year. Like with the AOPW seminar, I encourage the professor to think of the ALSC classroom as a space that can be leveraged in ways beyond simply looking at library materials.
What began as a one-time session to see artists’ books has turned into multisession interaction where students also hear guest speakers, critique their weekly visual projects, and see library materials closely aligned with the course’s weekly focus.

Encouraging professors to use our space in ways other than “just” to look at library materials has led to students logging more time in the library overall. More time in our space breeds familiarity for these students as early as possible in their college careers. Librarians know that getting the students into the space is often the hardest part of outreach. A one-time visit because of a course requirement is helpful; but if the professor chooses to have class in the library more than once, it is a real endorsement. Additionally, students have the opportunity to see the relevance of library materials to a host of topics across their course syllabus. Sessions may be less overwhelming because the librarian is not covering all relevant material in one fast-paced show and tell.

Other aspects of the ALSC instruction program include our orientation sessions, instructional exercises, and classroom policy. Over the last five years, ALSC has worked closely with Arts Library colleagues who oversee the circulating and reference collections to develop orientation sessions that show how a subject can be searched across all types of collections and how the various types of materials complement each other. Using the Yale Bookplate Collection, Special Collections Librarian Molly Dotson has designed a visual literacy exercise whereby students learn how to examine and discuss visual works as primary sources and also how to relate these artifacts to standard, text-based sources. This exercise has run twice with great success to graduate-level and undergraduate-level courses in the School of Art. In addition, as the Arts Library is open to the public, we interpret this policy as applying to our classroom as well. ALSC hosts classes from local area schools that do not have extensive libraries, such as the Hartford School of Art and Quinnipiac University.

As our instruction program continues to develop, I have found that one of the simplest tactics has been the most effective: maintaining our own list of materials used in a specific class session. Some professors are creatures of habit and wish to see the same materials each year, although not all of them maintain precise lists of these materials. Providing the list of materials serves several functions: it ensures that we have an accurate list of citations when it comes time to gather the materials and thus saves staff time; it shows the professor the library’s engagement; and it allows for effective succession planning or simply substitution should a professor request a class on short notice. In fact, I am often pleased when a professor requests a class that I have taught several times on a date when I will be out of the office. This allows an opportunity for newer staff members to provide the same excellent service and reinforce that our service is from the library as a whole, not just from one staff member.
When a professor contacts ALSC to set up a class session based on a previous year, we provide the list and suggest new materials to add and others to remove. This strategy allows the professor to work primarily with familiar materials while also introducing him or her and the students to new materials. This is especially important in the world of artists’ books where the library collects very recent materials. Students expect to see old things in the library, especially in special collections; when we present materials made in that very year, the surprise and subsequent active engagement are obvious.

ALSC has also made changes over the last few years due to the new reality of a slower economy. With reduced budgets, much of our purchasing is now done to complement current research of professors and their courses. This is an excellent reason to maintain regular communication and entice professors into conversations about building library collections. Also, many professors are regular library instruction clients, but we have contact with them only once per year. Engaging them throughout the year about their upcoming courses keeps the material fresh and helps manage staff time by mitigating last-minute requests. Developing strategies that serve dual purposes, like supporting outreach while promoting effective time management, is essential to maintaining a robust instruction program with a small staff.

Concluding Thoughts
Nothing in this article is extraordinary in and of itself. In fact, all of what is happening at Arts Library Special Collections at Yale University occurs at multiple special collections across the country. What is extraordinary are the circumstances that allowed for these activities to be tracked closely in a “clean slate” environment of a new facility when many libraries were reducing their programming, budgets, and often the size of their staff. With a staff of two librarians, one library services assistant, and up to three student workers, Arts Library Special Collections is a small department. Yet we have been able to leverage these assets, amply supported by a space that allows us to operate effectively, to make ALSC a significant contributor to the Yale University Library mission to increase use of primary sources in teaching, learning, and research.

While the strategies described in this article are not uncommon, they are effective. The difficulty lies in implementing them simultaneously and consistently across staffing changes and when other demands (such as technical services) are placed on the time of staff members. The basis of many of these ideas came from my interaction with the special collections community through this journal, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) Preconference (in particular the 2009 workshop “Beyond Show and Tell: Teaching Strategies for Special Collections Professionals”) and the Ex-libris email list, as well as more informal communication with colleagues. Thank you for the wealth of great ideas over the last decade, and thank you for allowing me to share how Arts Library Special Collections has implemented them.