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# At San Francisco State Library, a Robot Will Be Happy to Find That Book for You

By ANDY WRIGHT

San Francisco State University has been renovating and expanding its library since 2008, and now the overhauled building is finally finished and partly open to students. But some who enter its newly pristine doors may notice something lacking: books.

In a move that has thrilled some university employees and horrified others, only 25 percent of the collection of more than a million books and other materials will be available for browsing.

San Francisco State is not alone; experts say there is a national trend toward digitizing university libraries.

Deborah Masters, the university librarian, described the old structure as a “rabbits’ warren” in need of an update. The new arrangement emphasizes open space, with more computers, multimedia stations, group study areas and a cafe.

The books on display will be high-demand volumes, recently published titles and those recommended by various departments. The rest will remain in five storage units rising three stories high. Books are retrieved by a robotic arm activated by an electronic prompt. Retrieval time is supposed to be 5 to 10 minutes.

While the university has trumpeted the innovations, Peter Orner, a creative writing professor and novelist, dislikes them. “There’s a trend now where books are being stored in big vats and they aren’t available for us to touch and see,” he said.

Ms. Masters said she understood his skepticism, but disagreed. “Most of the concerns center around the issues of browsing stacks physically, of serendipity and discovery,” Ms. Masters said. “I don’t want to lose that either, but you need to be able to transfer that experience to the online environment.”

Maxine Chernoff, chairwoman of the creative writing department, mourned the trade-off. “I’m not saying there shouldn’t be a mechanized library,” she said, “it’s that the percentages are so low for the other type of opportunity.”

The move to organize libraries this way is becoming more common. More than a dozen universities, including at least five in California, have installed the systems, according to the manufacturer. The system can allow colleges to store more books; for instance, San Francisco State plans to bring volumes once held off-site back to campus.

“More libraries are doing this because people are really looking for group interactive space,” said Joyce Ogburn, president of the Association of College and Research Libraries.

Sonoma State University installed its automatic retrieval system 12 years ago. At first, there were concerns over the lack of shelves (55 percent of the collection is browsable), but now, said Barbara Butler, the university’s library dean, students and faculty members love it.

“Sometimes I overhear students on campus showing their family around,” Ms. Butler said, “and they say, ‘We have this fabulous robot in the library.’ ”

But for Mr. Orner, the robot is not enough. “I wouldn’t be a writer if, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, I didn’t wander the open stacks,” he said. “I would argue strongly that the Internet is not a substitute for a college library.”

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