

From Book Space to People Space

Using Oral History to Celebrate and Reflect on a Major Milestone Anniversary in an Academic Library

Major milestone anniversaries in libraries provide library administrators, library workers, and the wider community with rich opportunities for both celebration and reflection. In 2023, the University of Toronto Libraries celebrated the 50th anniversary of its flagship library branch, the John P. Robarts Research Library, a monumental Brutalist building that has become an iconic part of the university's identity and the city skyline. One of the initiatives undertaken to celebrate this milestone was an oral history project to interview past and current library employees and community members about their experiences, thoughts, and reflections about the library. Interviews were conducted with 30 participants, including alumni, faculty and staff, architects, and architectural specialists. The result was a primary source collection of interviews deposited at the University of Toronto Archives for future researchers interested in topics like the history of Robarts Library and the University of Toronto, the history of academic libraries and higher education, the impact of technology on libraries and research, and the history of student life, labor relations, and work at the library. The interviews also generated material for use in 50th anniversary events and programming and proved particularly valuable for the curation of a physical and online exhibition that explored the history, the challenges, and the accomplishments of the library. The oral history project provided an opportunity for the library community to reflect on major themes and drivers of change in its history.

The interviews and exhibition research surfaced a key theme: the transformation of Robarts Library from a formal, book-centered research facility to a student-centered place of learning, study, and collaboration. Interview participants discussed the evolution of priorities regarding accessibility, service philosophies, space usage, and policies, the factors that shaped this evolution and the challenges that needed to be overcome to maintain Robarts Library's role as a significant academic library focused on supporting the research, teaching, and learning needs of the University of Toronto community.

This article presents a curated dialogue, composed of excerpts from the oral history interviews. We hope to illustrate how library oral history projects can provide valuable content to libraries both for advancing operational and strategic goals like celebrating milestone anniversaries, and for staff and researchers interested in topics related to a library's history. Interview excerpts have been edited for clarity and length. A list of resources and readings used to support this project is provided in an appendix at the end of the article.

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1. How was space prioritized when Robarts was opened, and how did library services reflect those priorities?

Carole Moore (Chief Librarian Emerita, University of Toronto Libraries, 1986 to 2011): For many years the collection was seen as the number 1 priority. As many books and journals as we possibly could acquire would be the priority, and I think that reflected the faculty's feelings as well. But such things as outreach to the community and giving timely service, and not allowing backlogs to occur or huge lineups for service were definitely—were lower priorities. That was always a challenge.

Dr. Siobhan Stevenson (Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information): The first time I walked in, I thought Robarts was a pretty intimidating space—it didn't feel welcoming at all! Once you know it, you're okay to be there, but they did a good job of making it intimidating—the riot proof doors instead of having a big open door to come through, the process by the elevators with the person who sits there and you have to show your T-card.... that's like, whoa... yikes... this seems intimidating!

Eveline Houtman (Reference Librarian [retired], Robarts Library): When I was a student at U of T, I was walking along, and there was the library. I thought, "Let's go in." And in those days, the entrance was up the steps on the second floor. And I got to the top, I went in, and all I remember seeing is an expansive granite floor and escalators, and not a book in sight. I don't remember any signs, so I had no idea where to go or anything! Maybe it was between semesters when I made my trip to campus, because I remember there was nobody, just a big expansive floor and escalators, totally scary and intimidating. I got out of there and I didn't go back until my fourth year.

Terrence Correia (Supervisor [retired], Robarts Library): In the early days, you had to go up the stairs and then into the building. It was not a user-friendly building in that sense, because people with mobility challenges—it was horrible for them. The accessibility ramp was at the back, on the west side of the library school. People didn't know it was there, you know? It wasn't telling people "Come on in!"

2. How have the priorities changed over the past 50 years?

Gabriella Bravo (Head, Patron Relations and Public Affairs [retired], University of Toronto Libraries): In the late 90s and early 2000s, the student experience became a big concern for the university. The U of T ranked high in many areas, but the student experience wasn't great, and they began to try to do something about it. Better service to the students became important, and the library began to think about our own services.

Also, with all the automated and online services there was the fear that the libraries were going to disappear. And therefore, the library had to become a meeting place like an agora. We would provide a place for the students to study and to work together. We moved from a Bodleian type of a place where the first thing you see when you go to the Bodleian Library, you enter the courtyard, and there's a huge sign that says "Silence." There were international students, people from other provinces, that came from student housing conditions that perhaps were not ideal for studying. So, the library had to provide that space. For them, it became their second home. And sometimes a lot of students just went home to sleep. We created a working group and started working on improving customer service.

Debbie Green (Retired Head, Reference and Research Services, Robarts Library): At first, the Robarts librarians were famous for being scary, so there were a couple of overarching

staff development initiatives by HR to improve public service. I think there was a fair bit of resistance to those training programs. I think library staff felt that their current method of providing service was being questioned, the quality of their work was being questioned, and so there was resistance right off the bat.

Lari Langford (Head of User Services [retired], Robarts Library): In 1993, the student administrative council sponsored the relocation of the main entrance to Robarts to the first floor instead of the second floor, which was a significant development in making the library more accessible. The librarian who oversaw services for students with disabilities lobbied for improvements to library spaces like getting wheelchair-height water fountains installed, putting in height-adjustable study tables, setting up a scent-free study zone, or even getting the elevator programmed to go to the fifth floor. In the early years, you needed to take the escalator to the fourth floor and climb the stairs to the fifth.

Terrence Correia: When the first-floor entrance opened, I think the building became more user-friendly. You're not walking into this cavernous space, there's interaction and you could see things happening; the loan desk, a library card office, an information desk; and the stack entrances appeared much more user-friendly. You have staff contact when you come in right away.

Lynne Howarth (Professor Emerita, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto): In terms of architecture, the building—which seems in so many ways so inelastic—has, in fact, changed. People have worked within the library to make it a very welcoming, very usable, very amenable space for teaching, research, learning, studying, just even meeting with your friends, your colleagues, and you know, for students to have places where they can just literally go and hang out, as well as having family-friendly spaces. So, I think it has become a very different place than when it was opened. Even concrete can be elastic.

Dana Kuszelewski (Reference Specialist [retired], Gerstein Science Information Centre, University of Toronto): One of the big milestones for me was the library's shift to a student space, going from the traditional library focused on books to a library for people. Whether patrons need to use the books or not, the library is now a place for an exchange of information and exchange of thoughts and ideas. Whether it's for a research proposal, a meeting place for students... to be able to come together and have a place to sit and relax to some degree, the library is no longer just a place where someone runs around shushing everyone for making too much noise. The library has transitioned into a meeting place, into a place to come in and just relax, and meet with friends, work on projects.

Francisco Fernando-Granados (Guatemalan-born, Toronto-based professor, artist, writer, and alumnus): Robarts felt like a space that I could easily access, and I think that's really important—it's a rare space in the city where you can be without having to consume, right, because my other sort of instinct would generally be to go to a coffee shop. Robarts is a place where you can go and be, and not have to buy anything. In a city that's as expensive as Toronto, especially for students, that's a really important function.

3. What factors motivated and shaped change in the library, and what challenges were encountered?

Carole Moore: I would say the huge expansion in student enrolment. We needed to expand both the individual and group study space with appropriate equipment. The majority of students were commuters with inadequate space at home or on campus. Also, the

growth of the collections beyond the planned capacity of Robarts and in different formats. The library was built to last 50 years, but it didn't quite make it in terms of space for both books and users.

Gabriella Bravo: The early perception of the library wasn't positive, so we had to work hard to change that perception. Robarts was called "Fort Book," and services and collections were scattered on different floors which made it difficult for the users to navigate. So, one thing that we did, at the beginning of each term, we had a whole bunch of staff from every department register to welcome the students. And we would print T-shirts with nice messages—we were all wearing them!

Carole Moore: We also had complaints...things like the carpets, and the need for repairs, particularly in the washrooms. Drs. Katherine and Russell Morrison, alumni and major donors to the library, came in to support the revitalization. Katherine said, "Yes, this place is badly in need of updating, badly in need of renovating." She was convinced immediately, because she'd been one of the first occupants of Robarts when it opened and loved it at the time and remembered the way it was.

Russell wanted to invest in students. He was always saying that he didn't want to just throw money over the wall—he was investing in students. It wasn't his generosity—this was just a good investment. He recalled his own need for library study space during his university days, because he lived at home in a crowded environment. As an undergraduate he worked in a library, but he said it had creaky floors and not enough washrooms. At the event to celebrate a renovation project, he said, "There is a synergy between a chair and a student, a student and a light, a light and books, as well as other students in the room. Those synergies make the whole thing productive. If you think the productivity of students is improved by 10%, the return on investment is unbelievable." In making a case for library resources, we were often asked, "Well, what's the return on investment in a library?" I think he stated it as well as anybody could.

Alfred Cheng (Retired Chief Administrative Officer, University of Toronto Libraries): In 2000, the Arts and Sciences Student Union proposed the idea for the 24-hour overnight service. They took the initiative and went to the provost and proposed the idea. Then the provost talked to Chief Librarian Carole Moore, and then the representative from the Arts and Science student union came over. We all met, and they asked if we could open some library space overnight for studying. I developed an operational plan and budget to keep the first three floors of Robarts Library open overnight. We tested it for one year, then again for a second year. The provost provided money initially for what we required, and then everybody decided to make it permanent and part of the library's regular budget.

Lynne Howarth: About two or three years ago, I was meeting with an international colleague in the lounge area of Robarts, and this student came along. She had a backpack and there was a teddy bear sticking out of the top of the backpack. She asked if we would mind watching her stuff, and we noticed she also had a pillow and a blanket. It was right around exam time, and she said that she'd spent the night at Roberts studying! So, we looked after the teddy bear and the pillow and the blanket. I think it was definitely illustrative of the changes that had been made that Robarts was open to students 24/7 during the exam period, and if they needed to stay, they could stay, and it was a safe space.

4. *How do you see Robarts Library evolving over the next 50 years?*

Gary McCluskie (Principal Architect at Diamond Schmitt, designers of the Robarts Common addition): Part of it will be generational changes. Small renovations have taken place over the past 40–50 years, but fundamentally looking at the entire facility, it's time to renew the infrastructure. That was the focus of the recent renewal of the interior environment for student use. With projects like the Robarts Common addition, we were looking to add and improve things like lighting, data outlets, and power—these things that were not really considered in 1968 when they were originally designing Robarts.

Robarts is continuing to participate in the evolution of what is happening in the academic library community, but I think the real question is about how media is going to be used in 30 or 40 years, as more and more of the material is created or accessible digitally. Will there continue to be consideration for the role of print media in libraries? I'm sure there will be! But the library is also a social space, it's a digital access space, certainly a study space, and a space for content creation.

Dr. Siobhan Stevenson: Despite all of this change, Robarts still has an excellent collection of books, and 99.9% of the time, they're exactly where you hope to find them. One of the things I love about libraries and books is you go to a catalog, you get a record, you get a number. And then you go all the way up all those stairs, and all this everything, and through this and that, and then out of the elevator and then down, you have to look around, right? But then you find your aisle, the stack lights go on, and you find that book. That's a real buzz for me. I just think that's magic!

Conclusion

This curated dialogue describing the evolution of Robarts Library into a people-centered space is just one way to utilize interviews from an oral history project and introduce readers to the rich research and public history potential of oral history interviews. Other outputs (links in the appendix) included “Robarts Library: An Architectural Oral History” published in *Spacing*, an urban issues magazine and website. The interviews were also used to inform a physical and digital exhibition, *From Fort Book to the Heart of Campus: 50 years of Robarts Library*.

Future projects using this oral history collection will leverage the popularity of podcasts with a series highlighting other notable themes in the interviews. Soon, the interviews will be available at the University of Toronto Archives and Records Management Services, where we hope students, scholars, public historians, and university administrators will use them to support research and other projects. We hope this project and its outputs inspire other libraries to take on similar projects to highlight and preserve their institutional histories. ♪

Appendix of Project Outputs and Suggested Oral History Resources

Online Exhibition

From Fort Book to the Heart of Campus: 50 years of Robarts Library. <https://features.library.utoronto.ca/robarts50/exhibit/index.html>.

Oral History Article

Carliner, Jesse, and Tys Klumpenhower. "Robarts Library: An Architectural Oral History." Spacing. November 30, 2023. <https://spacing.ca/toronto/2023/11/30/robarts-library-an-architectural-oral-history/>.

Web Resources

"Oral History Best Practices and Resources." University of Toronto Archives and Records Management Services (UTARMS). <https://utarms.library.utoronto.ca/archives/oral-history-resources>.

Selected Readings

Boyd, Doug. "I Just Want to Listen': Oral History Archives, Orality, and Usability." In *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 117–34. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Fry, Amelia. "Reflections on Ethics." In *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, 94–114. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996.

Rakerd, Brad. "Making Oral Histories More Accessible to Persons with Hearing Loss." *The Oral History Review* 40, Issue 1 (2013): 67–74. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohr022>.

Ritchie, Donald. "Setting up an Oral History Project." *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 47–79. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Thompson, Paul, with Joanna Bornat. "The Interview." *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th Edition, 308–31. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Trainings and Workshops

Oral history training at the Science History Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: <https://www.sciencehistory.org/research/research-centers/center-for-oral-history/oral-history-training/>.

Institute for Oral History at Baylor University: <https://library.web.baylor.edu/visit/institute-oral-history/workshops>.