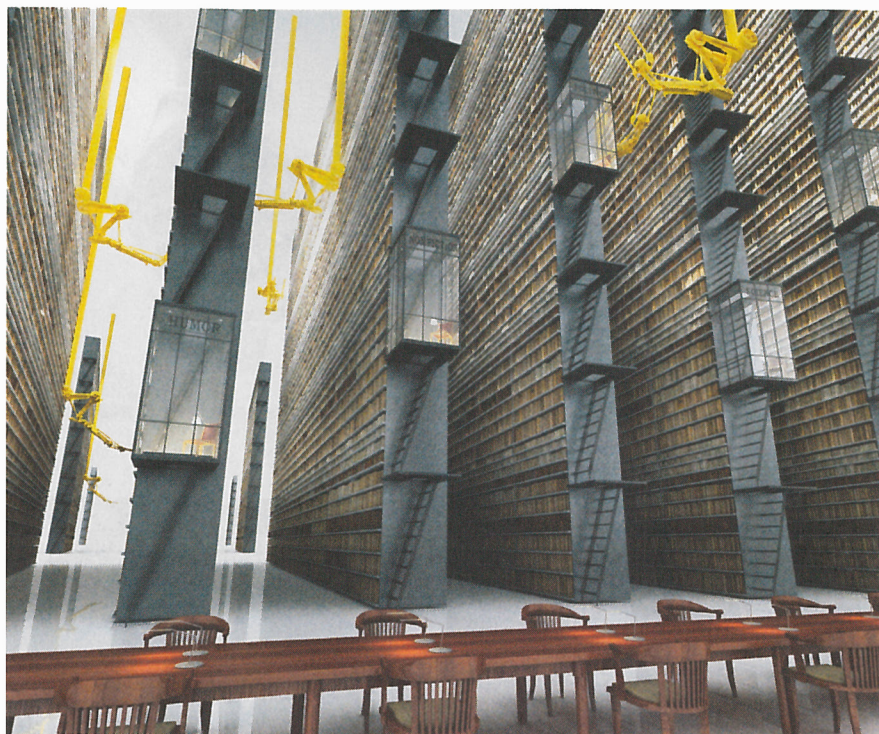


Tome Depot

This big-box design for the Amazon age bridges the gap between physical and digital bookselling.

In this column, the architecture and design firm Rockwell Group suggests a design solution for something that doesn't yet exist in the world but should.

BY DAVID ROCKWELL



Bookselling is one of those businesses that has radically changed over the past decade. With online retailers like Amazon selling both physical and digital books, major bookstores have nearly been eliminated. Barnes & Noble is sputtering along; in the first quarter of this year, its revenues were down from the same period a year prior, although its earnings (before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) improved to \$30 million. In April, Rizzoli closed its legendary Midtown Manhattan store, though it plans to open one next year in the NoMad neighborhood. And Borders, well, that's an old story at this point—the company went bankrupt and shut down in 2011.

Just a few independent meccas, like the Strand in New York (just around the corner from the firm's office), Powell's Books in Portland, and the Tattered Cover in Denver, still remain. In general, I've noticed physical books have become rarer. It now seems harder to get your hands on them. In music, there's kind of a parallel situation: Most songs are downloaded digitally, so vinyl has become more prized.

In considering the design of a bookstore that's reflective of our times, I referenced an image of an Amazon warehouse in Phoenix, thinking we could create a bookstore that mashes up a warehouse with the traditional library. It's a fantastical combination of New York's Argosy Book Store and a Home Depot-like facility. We would create this new kind of place where visitors can hold on to the pleasure of pursuing books in a physical space. There are many arguments to be made as to why a space like this is needed today: Several studies have shown we retain more information when reading things in print, rather than on-screen. There's also the emotional appeal and tactility of a printed book and

the wonderful sense of gradually unfolding its pages, not to mention the visual aspect of exploring books in a sprawling space.

We imagine this environment would have an automated system for fulfilling online orders and retrieving books—you could order your books from an app. The setup would incorporate simple mechanical pieces with robotic arms, not dissimilar to the Yobot (manufactured by Connecticut-based company MFG Automation) that we used at Yotel's New York flagship; there, the robots sort and arrange luggage. In our design, we've inserted this oversized communal table that extends the length of the space—similar to those dining tables in the Harry Potter movies.

It's a huge, multilevel library that would take advantage of the ways books are stored now. We could imagine doing this in an Amazon warehouse. Not everything here is automated, though, because we have the stairs. Visitors could explore the place. The shelves would be arranged by subject, and on the stairs would be little glass-walled reading rooms that are piled impossibly high, almost like the stacks of boxes in the final scene of *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The books are placed on high and shallow perpendicular shelves that run down the room.

This space isn't about being cozy as much as it is about experientially being a part of the love of books and understanding that there are going to be fewer places to buy them. Combining a facility for shipping and storing books with one where you read them could revive and support the library subcultures that have begun to diminish with the rise of online shopping. Just think of all the buildings in the heartland of America—vacant movie theaters and big-box stores—that could become great places for communities to celebrate books.