

# That Strange Hissing Sound

By Lisa Singh

The sign reads, "We Proudly Brew Starbucks."

Enter Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Va., and the first thing you must do is dismiss those old notions of bookish reverence: scholars bent over dusty pages, the hush of quiet reading, the scratching sound of notes being taken and, all around, stacks of imposing and inviting books, walling out the busy world and making little sanctums for reflection, discovery and concentrated thinking. "The studious silence of the library," James Joyce once sang. "Tranquil brightness."

Forget it.

These days libraries are taking their cue from Barnes & Noble—mixing books with the hissing espresso machine and all that it implies. "The idea of the library as being a sanctified place is more in the mind than in the fact," says Maurice Freedman, president of the American Library Association. "The stereotype of the old maid with the bun saying 'sssh' is something librarians have been trying to destroy for decades upon decades."

Usage reflects this change, too. "Patrons" are now "users" or, more to the point, "customers." Libraries, Mr. Freedman says, "want to give the best service possible . . . and if service in the year 2002 means coffee bars and different attitudes towards food and drink in the library, so be it."

Here in Richmond, right at the library's entrance, there is a brand-new café, promising a "welcoming experience." For months, the library had undergone a major renovation, with millions of dollars in state funds devoted to sprinklers, fire-safety systems and the like. But nothing sparked more interest than the prospect of a coffee bar at the library.

True, the student commons is a stone's throw away, so no one was suffering from famine or a desert of coffeeness. But it turns out that Virginia Commonwealth's library really, really needed a coffee bar. John Ulmschneider, the library's executive director, declared that a café was a great way to "enhance the academic experience."

In a spirit of enthusiasm matched only by that of ancient scholars flocking to the library at Alexandria, university officials held a taste test to find the best coffee. Starbucks won. The staff also held a café-naming contest. Five hundred campus enthusiasts, mostly students but also some faculty members, submitted entries—undoubtedly more people than have checked out Gibbon, Tolstoy or Francis Parkman in the past

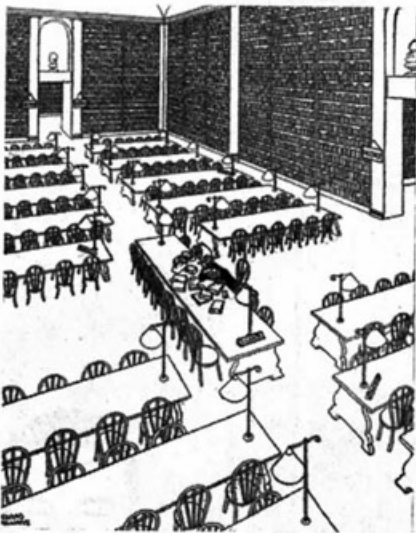
five years. The winning name—courtesy of a library faculty member—was Java 901. (The number refers to the address.)

Naturally, the café's spillover effect is noticeable, for there is no longer, as there was even this past year, a ban on food and drink inside the library. That would no doubt run counter to "enhancing the academic experience." And of course it's not just VCU's library where these changes are taking place.

Locally, the University of Richmond's

## It's the espresso machine. In the library.

library promises something similar soon. Its Web site explains: "A café à la the Starbucks in many Barnes & Noble stores would provide a place for students and faculty to interact informally outside the classroom in proximity to the information sources and services that their



But it's all so quiet, so . . . studious! Where is the Starbucks café?

conversations might lead them to consult." What would Joyce make of that?

The library at the University of North Texas offers Starbucks, too. (Its Web site calls the arrangement "Better Than Borders.") So do the libraries at the University of Tennessee, the University of Pittsburgh and Auburn. The University of Maryland plans to install a Starbucks at its library next year. Mount Holyoke College, in Massachusetts, had a Starbucks in the library a couple of years back, but students protested. Too distracting? No. They wanted a "local, fairly traded vendor." And public libraries have climbed on the Starbucks bandwagon as well, from Oregon's Multnomah County Library to the Ferguson Library in Stamford, Conn.

What accounts for this new look? In recent years, many libraries—especially university libraries—have seen a drop in

their door counts and circulation numbers, mostly, it seems, because of computers. "The burgeoning use of electronic databases has sent the buzz of library activity onto the Internet," reports the Chronicle of Higher Education. "The shift leaves many librarians and scholars wondering and worrying about the future of what has traditionally been the social and intellectual heart of campus."

So amenities are offered as an enticement. As such things go, coffee is not the

worst of them; nor is it incompatible with bookish pursuits. As Balzac wrote, coffee "gives us the capacity to engage a little longer in the exercise of our intellects." Historians estimate that in the 19th century there were scores of libraries attached to American coffeehouses. For a fee, one could read books, magazines and newspapers at most of them, while socializing with fellow subscribers.

But these days, the Starbucks effect goes beyond mental stimulation. It is, so to speak, a way of life, suggesting leisure rather than study and entertainment rather than work. It is in the general culture, whether there is a Starbucks nearby or not. One librarian I know says that she spends most of her time these days telling patrons to pull up their pants, put on some shoes and stop cracking gum, in between signing them up to use the computers, in front of which they often idle the hours away on Yahoo chat or even, occasionally, some porn site.

In many ways, you can sympathize with the attempt of library administrators to make their buildings "relevant"—especially to the young. It is probably a losing proposition, but you can understand the logic. Little wonder that so many look to Barnes & Noble—and Starbucks—for inspiration.

But what a cost! It sounds corny to say, but for anyone who values books a library is a holy place, and like commerce in a church, a Starbucks in a library borders on sacrilege. For others, happily for them, it borders on Borders.

I recently spoke to Jeff Bulla, an architect who is designing a new public library for Allen, Texas, a town just north of Dallas. "We're borrowing from retail concepts," he says. "It's no secret that library communities have taken notice of the great success of the mega bookstores and not only librarians but architects as well are certainly interested in what is prompting their success."

Mr. Bulla brags about the library, to be situated in the downtown district. One room will be devoted to teens. "That's their space," he says. "There won't even be book stacks."

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