

The Seminary Co-op Documentary Project: Capturing the Bookstore's Distinctive Character and History

In 2012, after 51 years in its cherished home in the basement of the Chicago Theological Seminary, the Seminary Co-op Bookstore moved to newly redesigned first-floor space at 5751 South Woodlawn Avenue.

The Co-op's closely watched move marked a pivotal and bittersweet moment in the life of what is widely regarded as one of the greatest bookstores in the academic world. The Co-op in its historic incarnation embodied—both in the layout of its space and what filled it—the life of the mind and the ethos of its neighbor, the University of Chicago. The importance of the Co-op in the history of the University and of the greater Chicago and intellectual community warranted a significant documentary project to record its members, spaces, and staff before it began the next phase of its life.

The physical space of the bookstore grew naturally and organically over 51 years, a process that likely could not be replicated by force or design. Its distinct architecture and spatial layout, complete with the idiosyncrasies of low ceilings, winding pathways, countless pipes and even mechanical bellows, deserved to be photographed and preserved for historical purposes.

Created and directed by Jasmine Kwong and Megan E. Doherty, the Seminary Co-op Documentary Project seeks to produce a digital and historical archive of the Co-op—through images, audio recordings, and written submissions—and to capture a sense of its life, meaning, and importance.

As the project developed, it has increasingly grown into a joint community effort between the co-directors and the Co-op's neighbors. It has also attracted support from a group of generous sponsors including the Seminary Co-op Bookstore, University of Chicago Communications, Jack Spicer, the Hyde Park Historical Society, and the Southside Preservation Action Fund.

The project's photographic images capture the contrasts between the old and new bookstore spaces. The project is also recording the history of the people who have loved, wandered, shopped in and worked at the Co-op over its long life. These people have stories, memories, reflections and anecdotes to share about their relationship to the Co-op, what it means to them, and why this bookstore is truly unique and important—not just for Chicago, but also for the global literary and intellectual community. This portion of the project's archive supplements its photographic counterpart with the human voices: oral history-style vignettes that are captured either by written submission or audio interview.

This exhibition presents selections from the photographic, audio, and written material brought together by the project, representing and expressing in narrative form the collective experience of what the Co-op is: What is the life of the Co-op? What is its emotional register? How and why is it important and unique?