

BRAVERMAN PRIZE

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS: HOW SPACE CAN TRANSFORM THE LIBRARY AND ITS PUBLIC

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This past November, the city of Inkster in Wayne County, Michigan, passed a millage to keep its library operating (Leanna Hicks Public Library). Had this property tax not passed, Inkster would have lost its only library. In a city with a level one literacy rate of 38%¹ and unemployment rate of 16%, a library's fate is even more critical (U.S. Census Bureau 2005-2009). Community members depend on the library as a service-oriented space: Internet access, community programs, and a safe place to learn, exchange ideas, and explore the arts. A modern library's function is not to merely lend books but to be an active part of the information society. A library's purpose has long been intertwined with cultural and leisure roles, lifelong learning, and providing services such as health or career advice; recent investments in technology have further enhanced the library's role in keeping up with community demands (McMenemy xiv, xv).

Structure, design, and purpose must all intersect to serve the specific needs of a community. This essay will explore both the importance of a properly designed library, and the importance of assessing a library as a public space that can also support activism and specialized needs. This essay will focus on the benefits of maximizing library patron density by applying best practice models used in urban planning as a means for libraries to connect community members, foster activism, and offer a reprieve from the hustle of urban life or offer engagement for bored suburban youth.

Library as public space: design matters

Perhaps a good question to begin with is, "Why should library design matter?" That is, beyond a library's most obvious purpose of housing books and information materials, what can design offer? When properly utilized, a great deal. In "Planning and Design of Library Buildings,"

1. Level one literacy, or below basic reading skills indicate that a person possess only the "most simple and concrete literacy skills" but can range from non-literate in English to locating short, simple text and contextualizing it (Hauser 2005).

author Godfrey Thompson keeps in mind the psychology of the library user, concerning himself with accommodating various needs: quiet space, visual distractions, lighting, and even emphasis that all these qualities are without merit if lacking patronage (9, 99). Interestingly, Thompson approaches these topics with a lens similar to that of urban critic William Whyte, whose exacting analysis of spaces argued for freedom of choice and multi-functionality for the visitor. Much like Thompson's concern with comfort of library patrons, Whyte speaks of accessible seating as a critical component to the success of public spaces, noting in painstaking detail his guidelines on ergonomic features, such as sitting heights, psychology of people choosing seating (i.e. seating patterns of strangers sharing a bench), and the importance of choice (112-122).

An example where design has figured in impressive ways is in academic libraries, which in the past thirty years have shifted in focus from pure information service for consumers to encourage collaborative learning environments (Bailey and Tierney 5). Figuring into this equation is the increasing use of technology to help disseminate information quickly and more vastly than ever before. As a result, academic libraries have undergone drastic transformation in the past twenty years to include evolving technology and reflect the modern services they offer. There have been two major iterations of this phenomenon. In the 1990s, the term "Information Commons" was used to describe information service delivery workstations, "offering students integrated access to electronic information resources, multimedia, print resources, and services"; in essence, it provided a space where students could instantaneously access multiple resources (Bailey and Tierney 1). Yet, critics ask whether simply providing information services is enough. Scott Bennett, a Yale University Librarian Emeritus, asserts that planners ask the wrong questions in preparation for building a space. Instead of assessing "what" should be in a space, perhaps a more meaningful question might be, "what should happen in the space" (Bennett 183)? Bennett supports what are known as "Learning Commons"—a space that incorporates the features of Information Commons but also focuses on collaborative learning and hands the responsibility of information to its users. Information Commons enhance learning by providing a space and tools; Learning Commons (LC) create learning by integrating library services with non-traditional resources such as exhibitions, performances, forums, and specialized databases, and opportunities to collaborate across peer groups, faculty, and staff (Bailey and Tierney 3). A parallel situation is recent developments in educational technologies for learning, which has shifted much of its framework from user-centered design to learner-centered design to encourage students to actively engage with the teaching/learning environment (Quintana et al 271). In both cases, the infrastructure of environments have rapidly evolved to reflect the learner's needs, whether that is filling a gap in knowledge, space to collaborate with peers, or opportunity to receive aid from an expert. While learning technologies create "space" for their learners online, LC respond to learners' needs by physical design.

Good design should also support agency. City planner Kevin Lynch focuses on creating open spaces where people can be “free from many of the restraints of routine living” (405). The result is that social connections that may otherwise not occur—what Lynch describes as “unspecialized” or “unusual” may spring from and organically develop at a public nexus (405). Lynch’s concern with maintaining a public space full of potential is akin to Bennett’s proposition that space must represent potential, whether in facilitating or challenging social norms or providing alternative interactive environments. Specifically, Lynch urges public spaces to be physically accessible by a diverse population, where “recreation, meeting, and education” can take place (405).

Lynch’s design sensibility relates to frequent contact between space and people, and as such, also supports Whyte’s preference for high-density public spaces. Whyte describes the best plazas and open spaces as those that are sociable, as well as places that allow for premeditated meet-ups (4, 105). Recall the amount of detail that Whyte and Godfrey delve into something as trivial as seating options. To their credit, the authors have no strange unnatural obsession for chairs—they merely understand the importance of seating represents in allowing people to define social groupings and spatial arrangement.

Socializing in public spaces, such as libraries, is a major venue for information resources. We can examine it from two major camps. Passive engagement, as defined by the essay, “Public Space,” is described as potentially having a “relaxing” quality: “indirect or passive, because it involves looking rather than talking or doing” (Carr et al 105). In essence, passive engagement with the environment is one that does not directly impact the subject, a receiving state of mind. In contrast, active engagement involves what William Whyte calls “triangulation”—talking with others and forming social relations (Carr *et al.* 118-120; Whyte 154). Carr *et al.* describe it as “more direct” than passive engagement and stress the social component of active participation as a key difference (118-119). The assertion that active engagement is somehow “more” than passive engagement is an interesting comparison, as if the two forms are somehow evolved or premature versions of the other as opposed to separate methods of experiencing an environment. Both approaches can—and do—take place simultaneously, for individuals as well as groups use a space for a wide range of social and even anti-social purposes. The dichotomy between these behaviors, however, can be ambiguous, especially when considering that engagement is not a static quality. I will explore this later in more depth, but I first want to introduce the idea of trust in public spaces in order to make clear the behaviors of people within libraries.

Public spaces allow for a degree of anonymity even in the midst of others; although it seems implausible, urban critic Jane Jacobs argues that these brief encounters—passing strangers on the sidewalk, or observing a group of young schoolchildren hopscotch in front of their houses—are enough to develop “a web of public respect and trust” without any “private

commitments.” Without this trust, there is no responsibility for others and no aid given to those who may need it. An implicit public trust allows for safety and even public service (Jacobs 56). For libraries, the line between privacy and contact can be very important. The idea of anonymity is important in that it allows for library users to learn in a safe environment. Furthermore, anonymity may encourage people to “try out new social roles” (Lynch 405). Using LGBTQ library patrons, I want to consider how anonymity can reframe the scope of Carr et al’s idea of active or passive engagement in a space.

The LGBTQ community is unique in several ways. It is one of the remaining social justice issues that are unresolved in its relation to the government: can two same sex persons be lawfully wedded (and subsequently, the power to redefine American notions of marriage)? As a civil rights issue, the community spans across color lines, religious affiliation, and socio-economics. That is not to say the treatment of LGBTQ communities, or a minority group within a minority group, are intrinsically equal, only that its members are diverse. There is also the unique position in “coming out”—or declaring membership, either forcibly by others or by choice. It is this characteristic of learning to express an identity that libraries can play an important role. Indeed, the library has long been identified as a major resource to seek information about “what it means to declare an alternative sexual orientation or a nonmainstream [sic] sexual identity” (Buschman and Leckie 105). Gathering information about sexual identity “invites a private, anonymous encounter with the collection by people who are perceived to be at risk due to the potential stigmatization” (Buschman and Leckie 105).

Is it fair, then, to categorize patrons who wish to remain anonymous as passive engagers of a space and claim that active engagement “represents a more direct experience with a place and the people within it” (Carr et al 118)? In the case of libraries and other information centers, it may be wise to think outside normative definitions of engagement as a social force, and move its meaning toward towards self-awareness and consciousness. Engagement with a space should not be so handedly narrowed into two categories with comparative values. Rather, a subject’s encounters should be gauged on more fluid terms, so that an individual can take advantage of a wide range of experience with a space and its resources.

The library can be seen as a place where both anonymity and contact is needed and a smooth transition between the two states of being can help a community determine how to best integrate itself into a larger society. Libraries can best offer services to communities like the LGBTQ by providing a space for organic interactions. Formally institutionalized spaces, such as parks and public housing projects, Jacobs warns, forces people to share “much or nothing” at all, especially if they have no other casual meeting points (1961, 68). Physical spaces such as community rooms and unintentional comfort spots such as the nooks and crannies of bookshelves can provide a sense of anonymity without isolation. Furthermore, libraries

are able to provide another dimension for casual interaction by supplying diverse reading materials, creating support groups, and relating services to other organizations. In this way, libraries can both preserve its spatial duty as a refuge as well as its role as a social and cultural institution (Buschman and Leckie 1, 105).

Library as space for activism

As evidenced by the LGBTQ community, public spaces can come to represent more than a purely educational or social institution. Communities often use public spaces as a place to protest and conduct activism. In particular, marginalized communities may find public spaces the most economical and logical resource to create change. If the library “represent[s] the ideal that everyone within society deserves the right to access materials for their educational, cultural, and leisure benefit, regardless of their income level, political beliefs, race, creed or colour,” how can community members ensure these ideals (McMenemy xiii)? How can librarians aid community members in achieving this ideal and how can they effect structural change? Furthermore, a librarian’s social responsibility to disseminate culture and information is often influenced by his or her invested interests, resulting in a librarian that is as neutral as a journalist—an “impossible construct” (Samek 1).

First consider all the potential people that may occupy a public space like the library. Will their presence invoke the type of tension between different races and social classes that sociologist Richard Sennett finds so (optimistically) desirable (143)? Or would the space merely act as an access point that affords the communal anonymity and recognition that Jacobs describes in her Greenwich Village neighborhood (69)? Can the library space be claimed as a “turf” by a racial group, or can a diverse audience co-exist in a cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson, “The Cosmopolitan Canopy” 595; Anderson, “Streetwise”173)? All of these relations are possible, just as they are possible in public spaces everywhere.

In considering the public library as a space for social activism, the potential for discussion is infinite. We can consider its geographic and temporal accessibility to various social classes, its resources as either a reflection the community or colonial-like dictatorship of taste of the upper echelons of society, its services to its consumers, etc. Ultimately, libraries, their services, and their audience, reflect changing times. The idea of a librarian empathetically representing the needs of a community can be, unfortunately, a radical thought. The most recent American Library Association statistics in 2006 reveal that the workforce is 89% white, 4.5% African American, 3% Hispanic or Latino, 1.4% Native American, 2.7% API, while gender is 80% female and 19% male (Davis 10). How well are these librarians able to articulate the needs from the communities they serve? Are they able to bring in the materials (e.g. books, films, music) that the community wants and needs? Or do they project an ideal of what people should read or watch instead?

The modern library can also consider meta-space to be a resource in retrieving access to censored or alternative materials. While physical availability of controversial works can be seen as an important component in lobbying for intellectual freedom of the library patron, it is no longer the only way librarians bring attentions to controversial topics. Technology, particularly lower-cost mobile devices, is able to aid modern day activism, as we have seen recently in Egypt and Iran. For information activists, physicality is no longer a requirement. Rather, community members can use library resources such as Internet-access computers and other materials such as books and films to plan and advocate for a cause. Libraries are capable of encompassing more dimensions of activism than ever before.

Conclusion

As public spaces, a library's design and physical structure has helped inform libraries of their purpose and carry out their mission. The ways libraries are able to serve their communities is directly related to the agency patrons have in a space; furthermore, a library's physical space serves as a place for people to connect and rally for a cause. Even in the midst of advancing technologies that allow people to seek out information from the comfort of their homes, libraries remain a deeply embedded part of a community that is able to offer refuge, inspire activism and create learning opportunities

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