

Becoming Public: Library Design And The Creation Of Public Space

Abstract: Public library design is an important realm within which the role and philosophy of the public library as a public space is communicated. This paper analyzes various readings of public library designs and further analyzes the topic by considering the use of these built spaces by library patrons. The interaction between library users and the library design is revealing of both the contradictory nature of public space and the ways in which the library is being understood and reimagined. The public interpretation of the principles communicated through library design is revealing of the value of contemporary public space, which is currently being challenged by the encroaching role of commercial establishments. This paper concludes that libraries, as public spaces, play a significant role in the creation of civic society.

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Introduction

The design of the ominous and impressive Library of Congress includes a central reading room contained in a domed enclosure at the heart of the building. The reader must traverse to the center of the building to call upon its resources. Collins (2009) notes that depth connotes power and the deeper the readers go into the building the closer they get to accessing the full power of the institution. This building design literally reflects the philosophical goals and character of the Library of Congress. In the average community branch, it is not likely that patrons will be demanding access to the centrally located furnace room in the basement in order to harness the power of the institution. Yet, even on the smallest scale, library design plays a significant part in transmitting the values and roles of the institution. In the case of the public library building, contemporary design has sought to speak to freedom of access and community. But this narrative is not the property of the design alone. The public interacts with and interprets the space which in turn affects the design. Together the design and the user create a library space that is home to a number of contradictory claims regarding identity and purpose. It is this interaction between the patron and the public library design that will be explored in this paper.

Public Space and the Public Library

Before considering library architecture and design, it is important to explore the library's role as a public space as this significantly impacts how the library is designed and used. Scruton (1987) defines public space as a, "sphere of broad and largely unplanned encounter" (p. 13). The public sphere is a place teeming with unexpected encounters which bring along with them many challenges, contradictions, and revelations. These can vary from a rude experience on public transit or the discovery of the perfect book, left waiting, on a library table. Interactions with strangers in public space requires a degree of flexibility, and this flexibility is rewarded with the fruits of public life including: convenience (streets and transit), beauty (parks and architecture), and community. The acceptance of the possibility of surprise and the related freedom that produces it encourages and enables a variety of behaviours unique to the public sphere.

Scruton (1987) makes the important observation that "a space is made public by the nature of its boundary" (p. 15). Public is defined by the simple truth that it is not private. People may enter or exit at will, for a variety of reasons and perhaps without any justification. They are not burdened by the expected role of the consumer or the guest. Instead people inhabit a space that is shared with strangers with whom, at least ideally, they exist equally. The variety of people that may interact in this space is much broader than in private commercial properties or in private homes, and therefore, public space offers the important possibility of an expanded perspective and of belonging to a community larger than what individuals could construct on their own. If we neglect public spaces, in theory and in use, we diminish the possibility of

varied social interactions and the experience of diversity as social groups become more controlled and segregated (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002).

This does not mean that the public community is necessarily desirable or even palatable. Jane Jacobs (1987) emphasizes the special relationship between members of the public, writing that public spaces, “bring together people who do not know each other in an intimate, private social fashion and in most cases do not care to know each other in that fashion” (p. 95). It is expected, acceptable, and in some ways desirable that public space breeds uncomfortable interactions, as long as it maintains a veneer of safety. Such an environment is often created by the self-policing of the public (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002). The expectations of public behaviour are therefore reinforced by social mores; although, because public space often introduces people from a variety of classes and backgrounds, an individual may experience behaviours they would not personally perform in public. Lees (2001) gives the example of a homeless woman, undressing in order to clean herself, using the library’s bathroom facilities and recognizes that even within this uncomfortable situation the unique nature of public space allows this woman to feel a sense of belonging that prompts her to undertake such an activity. Regardless of this and other unusual uses of public libraries, a recent survey of United Kingdom library patrons concluded that public libraries are seen as a safe environment (Dewe, 2006).

Currently, we are experiencing an intellectual crisis over the value and meaning of public space. As private and commercial interests take precedence over public space, the resources provided to support public spaces as well as a developed understanding of the importance of public space has declined (D’Angelo, 2006). Apologists have argued that the library is one of the few remaining authentic public spaces (Given & Leckie, 2003). Yet, as private spaces expand to provide similar services (a coffee shop as a gathering place, bookstores with couches and reading spaces), public space theorists have faltered in providing a good explanation for the existence of libraries to the general public. Given the lack of a cohesive understanding of the value of public space and what makes it unique, it is only natural that the architecture of public buildings is also facing a crisis of identity. We must first know what public space is before we attempt to build it (Glazer & Lilla, 1987).

The Library as Public Space: The Building

“Architecture, by its very nature, is a public matter. Whether we consider buildings in their aesthetic, economic, or moral dimensions, we must be prepared, at the same time, to treat those dimensions in public terms: to see that buildings can also serve as public art, or as civic monuments, or as contributions to the social life of the city.” (Glazer & Lilla, 1987, p.. ix)

The contemporary public library building is much different than its predecessors of the last century and even the last few decades. Architectural design strives to imbue its buildings with the values of the institution and activities that will be housed within. It is important to remember that architecture cannot “determine symbolism over time” (Vale, 1992). Symbols embedded within the design of a building will not remain static. The building will live beyond the pages of draft paper and the excited or disparaging remarks made on the day of the opening. This is particularly interesting to note when contemporary libraries are housed in historic buildings where the outer work of the building encourages awe and respect while the interior is radically redesigned with a new open concept model meant to encourage interaction between the patrons and the collection, and propagate the notion of the public library as a gathering place. The public library as a gathering place is a rapidly adopted idea that serves to expand the purpose of library space beyond the traditional notion of it being a warehouse for books and instead into a central part of the creation of community (Fialkoff, 2010). Libraries housed in restored historical buildings can function well when they combine the older sense of reverence for knowledge with the more recent focus on community. While theoretically the two foci come into conflict (the old and new philosophies of the library), these contradictions are housed comfortably within the public sphere where a variety of interpretations, opinions, and individuals are expected to reside.

The striking difference between traditional library design and modern library design reveals an attempt to communicate an evolving set of values, from preservation to access, control to community involvement.. Fasick (2011) demonstrates this clearly by arguing that “every public building contains a metaphor – a vision of what the building represents” (p.101). He goes on to suggest that the metaphors that have been exemplified in recent library building projects include exploration, a secure place, an information shopping center, and a theater (p. 103). Some libraries choose to exhibit the values of the library as a public institution within their design plan. For example, the Seattle Public Library, built in 2004, employs an expanse of glass walls to symbolize openness (Fasick, 2011). Similarly, new interior designs aim for flexible layouts and multiple meeting rooms that encourage patrons to view the library as a public commons (May & Black, 2010). Theorists of contemporary library design repeatedly emphasize flexibility (Sannwald, 2003). This is because the world of the public library is changing so rapidly that the solid oak tables and immovable stacks of days passed are no longer realistic or desirable. In this way, the permanence of the older design principles have been replaced both literally, by more flexible designs and furniture, but also metaphorically with libraries whose purposes and community roles are in flux.

During this period of change libraries have also had to contend with the increasing importance of the internet and access to technology. This includes the notion of the “library without walls” and virtual libraries. While an interesting topic, it is beyond the scope of this paper which concerns itself instead with the impact of architecture and design on the concept of public

space and behaviour within that space. Importantly, a recent study of Nova Scotia library patrons revealed they were “unanimous in the importance they placed on physical space” (May & Black, 2010, p. 23).

Design and Interaction in the Public Library

Ultimately, it is neither the architecture nor the fact of a place being public that determines its significance to an individual, although both of these things influence how a place is interpreted and used. In fact, architectural principles and goals can sometimes even subvert the purpose of the library. Some of the most celebrated buildings have been described by librarians and users as “inhuman,” “sterile,” or “simply uncomfortable” (Cohen & Cohen, 1979, p. 3-4). Instead, “places take on meanings through our participation with them” (Lyndon, 1987, p. 157). Even the simplest library designs can have an enduring impact on the user’s understanding of the library. For example, when recalling his childhood library Ewald (2011) described the “well-stocked warren of interconnected sand-colored brick buildings” (p. 346). Here the design is intimately connected to the awe Ewald felt towards the collection. He maintains a memory of the physical representation of his experience of the library’s collection. It is this type of interaction with the public library that determines how it is understood by the public it serves. Both the architecture and the interior design influence user interaction and they can be created with the purpose of communicating certain values and roles. Yet, they hinge on the often unexpected forms of interaction that are produced by the public. People therefore consume the design while applying their own interpretations, expectations, and experiences on it. In this way the public library patrons behave according to a sense of belonging and co-ownership of a public space (to varying degrees abiding by the rules of the space).

A Sense of Belonging

Public space is essential in civic society as it provides a place outside of home and work to which people can attach a sense of ownership and belonging. Significantly, it is a space that does not require them to behave in the role of a consumer. Instead, it permits a sense of freedom and entitlement to members of the public via shared space. People act out this sense of belonging by desiring and feeling entitled to a small sense of territory in the public places that they frequent. This feeling can be extended to commercial establishments such as coffee shops, but with limitations, as the individual is always a consumer and are no longer welcome if they reject that role. The desire for small personal territories drives people to develop habits within the public library, such as returning to the same study carrel day after day. They will often go further and begin leaving personal objects or markers in that spot and if they return to find the favored spot occupied they will find one as near as possible (Cohen & Cohen, 1979). This development of familiarity and attachments to small sub-locations within the library space is incredibly important for illuminating the sense of belonging that can develop and is welcome in the public space. In this way the library becomes the “third space” described by Ray

Oldenburg (1999) in *Great, Good Place*. Interestingly, although Oldenburg's idea has been applied to public spaces, the author himself focuses entirely on commercial enterprises in his seminal exploration of the "third place." The library in the role of a "third place" becomes a space where people can gather and socialize outside of home and work. In modern library design this may be an interaction that occurs over the traditional stacks of books or one over a cup of coffee as increasingly numbers of libraries begin to incorporate comfortable seating spaces and cafés (Harris, 2007).

The Urge and Right to Disrupt

As a result of the sense of belonging, patrons will often disrupt or reinterpret the intended use of library space. An anthropological study of the Library of Congress undertaken by Collins (2009) sheds light on these pockets of disruption within the official structure of the Library of Congress. Activities included sleeping, noisy idleness, and mysterious individuals he describes as "mystagogues engaged in research quite outside of academia" (p. 37). Collins' concluded that such discord is an important part of the creation of a public space. Despite the purposes the space was initially designed for, in the case of the Library of Congress quiet, official study and research, patrons will find other uses and this type of behaviour is what transforms a building into a place (Collins, 2009).

While the mission of the Library of Congress is much different than that of a standard branch library, the necessity of amiable disruption is equally, if not more, present in public libraries. As an extension of "feeling at home" in a public space, individuals will move furniture to better suit their need and leave their belongings at tables and carrels as they explore the space (Cohen & Cohen, 1979; Given & Leckie, 2003).

Anticipating this need has been one of the greatest challenges of public library design. Libraries must strive to create flexible spaces that can be many things to many people. This means providing a space that allows for patrons to interact with the design more than they would when visiting a private or commercial setting. Interestingly, research conducted on the opposite perspective explores how library design seeks to control the behavior of its inhabitants. For more on this perspective see Griffis (2010).

Alone in Public: Individuals within the Public Library

Theories on public life maintain that public space embodies the "paradox of visibility and isolation" (Sennett, 1987, p. 47). This idea is evident in the use of the public library. Unlike libraries of decades earlier, silence is no longer strongly enforced in most library areas. The individuals maintain the right to position themselves in the library according to their needs, and therefore, one library space often accommodates both the community's most studious hermit and most boisterous performer. The concept of the library as a free and open space where a

variety of individuals can interact both with the space and each other is a unique and essential feature of the institution. Libraries are a place to “be with others, yet alone; to fill time in purposively or not; to reflect, relax or react” (Dewe, 2006).

Even the quiet activity of reading alone in the library is essentially social because of its public setting. As a result it becomes “scripted into the production of the civic” (Kelman, 2001). Simply being present within the public place produces a tacit acknowledgment of its principles and expectations. Library design reflects and protects patrons against this reality, often at the same time. One example of this is the study carrel. Study carrels allow patrons to mark out a humble territory for themselves within the broader public space. This provides them with the security of a temporarily private space housed within the pleasure of being in public.

A tension exists between the use of the library as a place for solitary study, reflection, or relaxation and the essential social nature of it as a public space. Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of multi-seated study tables. Libraries consistently report that “unless a library is so crowded that patrons have no other option, four people will never opt to sit together at one table” (Fetzer, 2006) As Cohen & Cohen (1979) artfully recognize “there is just not enough psychological room” (p 3). Studies of room geography which map the human traffic through library space confirm this by noting that individuals will always try to find a spot alone first and then if they are unsuccessful will resort to the spot at the greatest distance from others (Given & Leckie, 2003). This phenomenon is confirmed by research on the psychology of distance zones where it has been discovered that the standard comfortable distance between people in public spaces is between twelve and twenty-five feet unless circumstances do not allow for it (Cohen & Cohen, 1979). Circular tables are the least desirable in the library setting as they limit the number of users at one time because they make it more difficult to mark out territory (Cohen & Cohen, 1979). Importantly, public space does not cancel out all the expectations associated with class and hierarchy. Cohen & Cohen (1979) give the example of the self-assured young attorney who will spread his belongings across an entire table and think nothing of the loss of shared space.

One particularly clever design in response to the problem of territory is a reading table that includes four equal sized rectangles of a different color of wood than the rest of the table. These divisions appeal to the human desire for territory no matter how physically inconsequential. In addition, the table includes a set of reading lights that run the length of the wood and effectively hinder the patron’s ability to make eye contact with the person sitting across from them (Fetzer, 2006). Library furniture design such as this deals with the problem of making the desire for isolation and for public life compatible. In the library even the most philosophical concerns can and must have practical and tangible solutions.

Wayfinding

Another important consideration for library design is the concept of wayfinding. Wayfinding refers to the way individuals move throughout a built space to find specific locations (Mandel, 2010). Understanding the patterns of movement throughout a building can produce significant implications for design. If a library does not consider patron wayfinding, then it risks providing services and materials which are rendered useless by a patron's inability to find them (Mandel, 2010). A library design that is cognizant of traffic patterns will emphasize a layout that feels natural or intuitive. This can include proper and clear signage and an easily available staff. Intuitive design and useful signage is both practical and serves to communicate the library's priorities of improving access and eliminating barriers to information (Mason, 1975).

A study on preferred entrances and exits at a medium-sized urban library was conducted by Mandel (2010) who determined that wayfinding studies of this kind can be extremely effective in determining key locations for displays and other library marketing. Wayfinding reveals both the way a building instructs patron movement and the unexpected ways patrons may move instead. These unexpected paths can be useful in exposing elements of the design that are communicating something unintended. Architectural theory supports the findings of Mandel's study, emphasizing the messages design communicates to the user. Seemingly simple structures like entrances can become quickly complex if not properly emphasized in the design (Arthur & Passini, 2002). Once in a building, especially one with a modern open concept design, there are innumerable paths which the user can take. One may perceive embarking on the chosen one an exercise in whimsy, but in fact the architectural design has a large impact on this behaviour. As Arthur & Passini (2002) explain, "paths and their physical articulation are at the heart of architectural... design" (p. 129).

Designing According to Use

The work of H. Faulkner-Brown, a celebrated architect noted for his work on Newcastle University's Robinson Library, is useful for understanding many of the basic goals in library design (Newcastle University, 2008). Faulkner-Brown's ten commandments of library design, first developed in the 1970s, and his later work on library design (Faulkner-Brown, 1999), adequately summarized the needs of contemporary public library design, and considered all of the topics discussed including the sense of belonging, the need for disruption, solitary experience in public, and the importance of wayfinding (Dewe, 2006). It has been adapted several times since its development but still stands as a general guideline for considering library design. The list of commandments includes the following qualities: flexibility, compactness, accessibility, extendibility, variety, organization, comfort, consistency in environment, security, and economy (Dewe, 2006). This list covers, in a highly practical way, all of the physical and philosophical concerns of the contemporary library. It emphasizes a flexible and friendly design that is economically conscious (given the restricted budgets of contemporary libraries) while noting the importance of organization and comfort, which suggests how to use the library and welcomes the patron to the unique setting of a public

place. The commandment list has since been updated a number of times in order to account for new issues in library service and some versions now include: interactivity and suitability for information technology (Dewe, 2006). The commandments expose the need of libraries to create spaces that express the intangible goals and principles while functioning as highly usable, flexible, and welcoming spaces.

One consequence of this new emphasis on flexible design has been a reduced interaction between the librarian at the traditional reference desk and the patron, who now often wanders in a state of idle discovery and does not think to approach the librarian for help because the space is no longer directed or centered on the librarian and reference desk (Dewe, 2006). This does not mean the open space design eliminates the possibility of interaction between staff and patronage but it does require new methods to encourage that interaction. In fact, the “living room” feeling of new library designs can encourage new and more personal interactions with library staff where patrons feel more intimately associated with the staff and location, and feel comfortable discussing personal matters beyond traditional information retrieval interactions (May & Black, 2010).

Conflicts in Design: Whatever Happened to the Public Good?

There has been some concern that library design which borrows from the commercial world. For example, libraries that create marketing campaigns that mirror the efforts of large chain bookstores. Critics are concerned that these design and marketing tactics communicate a wrong or misguided message on the value and purpose of public libraries. Librarians and theorists who have spoken out against these types of marketing schemes argue that they send the message that the public library is some sort of free recreational centre no different from movie rental shops and book superstores except for public funding. D’Angelo (2006) argues that capitalism of the twentieth century has lost its moral underpinnings and has reduced an active citizenship to a loose aggregate of consumers seeking entertainment. This argument follows that if library design chooses to represent these new ideals they face a serious risk in the possible loss of their social role and the foundational mission of their institution. This may seem extreme but as the architectural principle states, form follows function.

Buschman (2004) makes a similar argument suggesting that if library services and collections focus too heavily on the economy and the economic well-being of the library they risk abandoning the democratic core of the institution and its role in the public sphere. That said, contemporary library design does not necessarily compromise the core values of public libraries. In fact, open planning and flexible designs most often clearly emphasize the library’s role as a public gathering space while the principle of access and mechanizing displays boost circulation (Martin, 2003). Still, the critiques sounded by D’Angelo (2006) among others raise important questions about how libraries should develop and represent themselves.

D'Angelo goes on to argue that if libraries align themselves with a new social order based on profit and commodification of recreation and information, they threaten their reputation as a cornerstone of knowledge and a stalwart supporter of the public good. While the changes in library design which promote comfort and ease of use are based on the success of major bookselling chains it is not in and of itself a bad development and has often been welcomed by patrons. It is important to note that by mimicking these spaces patrons may be more willing to associate their role in the space more as a consumer than a patron, an individual rather than a member of the public. This has yet to be proven, however, and there is some research to the contrary. Even though patrons often undertake similar activities in bookstores and libraries, patrons continue to treat libraries more like their own space freely moving furniture around, spreading out their belongings, staying for long periods of time, and starting conversations with strangers (May & Black, 2010).

D'Angelo is extreme in his condemnations and his apocalyptic prophesies of the loss of the public good and the public sphere, but his arguments are nonetheless salient and raise important questions about how the library presents itself to the public. Public perception is a fickle beast, and the library must maintain its composure while negotiating its civic role rather than pander uncritically to the profit driven and often capricious forces of consumer culture and the market economy. Dewe (2006) echoes D'Angelo's concerns from the United Kingdom library perspective stating that the library must face the challenge of being regarded as a "pleasant but scarcely vital, additional faction in people's quality of life" and become "a serious force for social justice, one of the few uncontrolled routes to personal growth we have" (Dewe, 2006, p. 5).

Conclusion

The public library building is a vessel of contradictory desires and perceptions. These vacillating philosophies serve to strengthen the public library's relevance and not derail it because the principles of public space and the civic society upon which these principles are built uniquely allow for this type of uncertainty, and even encourage it. Public library buildings and designs aim to reflect this. These spaces communicate the values and principles of the public library and also become embedded with new ideas through the public's interaction with them. Libraries are essentially and fundamentally public. The public sphere is a space of conflict and collaboration that can only find true expression in a public space like that which is provided by public libraries. The product of this distinctive setting is an important sense of community in which, with a variety of expressions to choose from, the individual finds him or herself an active part of the public sphere. To question the library's role in society is to recognize the shifting needs of the public. To reject its import is to ignore the complex nature of public life and threaten the delicate, liminal space that protects the individual from a dichotomous existence of shifting between private and commercial spheres.

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