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The Emerging Environment of the

Urban Main Library

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THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT in which most main libraries are located has, in one sense, already emerged. Perhaps certain environmental problems are becoming more acute and more evident in some parts of the country than in others, but basically urban libraries exist in a setting which has long been forecast, and which has been developing gradually for decades. According to Richardson,

> Many of the issues that we now call "urban problems" or the "urban crisis" have been with us for at least a century and in some instances much longer. In the 1840's and 1850's, New York, Boston and Philadelphia suffered from poverty, slums, pollution, inadequate education, crime in the streets, an overloaded transportation and communications network and administrations seemingly overwhelmed by the pace of change, just as they do today.[1]

In this context, what seems to be definitely emerging is our own consciousness of these events, and a belated awareness of their implications for the urban main library.

At the same time, however, the magnitude and complexity of the issues confronting our cities today are more than just the result of the sum total of demographic trends and socio-economic indicators, for certainly within the last decade or so the very function of the city has radically changed. According to Richard Meier, "Cities were evolved primarily for the facilitation of human communication."[2] They have functioned as centers of security, repositories and custodians of knowledge, disseminators of information, in short, as the control and communications center of the total society.[3] McLuhan holds that the future of the city lies in more precisely defining this function, with the city developing as an information megalopolis.[4]

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But other social observers see more nostalgia than substance in this view. One has flatly stated that in these final decades of the twentieth century it is abundantly clear that cities can no longer perform these functions. "Big cities . . . are dying. . . . Post-Urban Society . . . is already so far realized that what we are dealing with is not urban prophecy but solid present fact."[5] Lewis Mumford, noting the many destructive forces now at work in the city, can envisage nothing but steady decline, not only of the urban center, but of the society which it nourishes, unless the city is fundamentally reoriented to foster the human personality.[6]

Despite the various theories which attempt to explain how our cities reached their present condition, it seems safe to say that any alteration in the function of a city is significantly influenced by radical changes in that city's social environment, regardless of whether the changes had been forecast, or were brought about by unanticipated eruptions, such as the urban riots of 1967.

It is this constantly changing, continually emerging environment that is the focus of this paper. Naturally, not all of the factors which comprise this environment will be treated. In fact, there are almost too many to list and identify accurately. To the extent that they influence or modify the function of the city, however, they also impinge upon the city's institutions, including its main library. Some of the factors clearly have more significance for the library than others, although all are probably interrelated.

Similarly, the author does not feel that an etiological approach to the topic is appropriate, either. Such a procedure would lead one back to the very dilemma which urban strategists have been facing for years, namely, that the rational or intellectualized approach frequently is dysfunctional as far as solving urban problems is concerned because it inhibits decision-making by demanding additional information or accuracy checks on given information before decisions may be made. As any social scientist will admit, it is extremely difficult to attribute causality to a particular social phenomenon. Moreover, in the social sciences even a relatively certain determination of the causes of a specific occurrence (for example, changes in the pattern of library use), does not mean that we have the research knowledge or technical competence to modify or affect the causal agent.

The approach taken here, then, will be to identify in a macroscopic way a few of the larger factors in the urban environment which seem to hold special significance for the urban main library. One of the

weaknesses in this method, of course, is that the less salient, specific factor is either overlooked or given insufficient treatment.

Even the most cursory survey of the recent literature on the urban condition reveals its problem orientation. Often the language of crisis with which this subject is discussed—sick cities, urban crisis, spreading blight—creates an emotional rather than intellectual response on the part of the reader. There is, of course, the view that many of these problems are unreal, figments of a Madison Avenue mind, or that they are the inevitable side effects of urbanization and are no more acute today than they have ever been.[7]

The more prevalent view, however, seems to be that both the nature and magnitude of many of these problems indicate that they are more than mere characteristics of social process. For example, the psychological environment within which the main library exists is obviously more than a mere product of rapidly changing life styles, television, or the bomb. The fact that we cannot fully analyze or even adequately describe this environment does not lessen its significance for urban institutions.

One important aspect of this environment consists in the fact that our expectations are increasing faster than our achievements.[8] As the exodus of the more affluent continues from the central city to the suburbs, the gap between the quality of life in the central city and at the periphery widens. Often this gap takes on racial significance when black city dwellers cannot, for reasons of race, move to the suburbs.

Exacerbating this situation is the fact that the central city has in many instances remained the place where important members of the commercial and intellectual elite live. By habit and tradition, this group typically prizes the cultural amenities of the central city, and tends to resent the spread of lower class people into areas where these cultural and commercial institutions are established. In the resulting conflict, two major functions of the central city are weakened—on the one hand, the maintenance of a rather urbane style of life and of a concentrated and, at the same time, diverse market for the exchange of wealth and ideas; on the other, the function of providing a place in which the poor are housed, educated, employed, and by slow degrees assimilated into a higher standard of living.[9] In several cities these two functions geographically overlap to a large extent. The poor have already moved from their ghettoes into other central city locations, including areas around or near the city's universities, museums, main library and theaters.

For library users among this group, the large main library with its reference and research collections must also serve as a neighborhood branch. In this role, the main library is faced with the formidable task of serving as a local community agency with indigenous personnel and special services appropriate to the needs of this group. The task is frequently made all the more difficult by the level of sophistication that is sometimes required to enter such large and organizationally complex buildings, and by the forbidding, monumental style of much main library architecture.

Few could express more intensely or with greater insight the anxiety caused by the imposing structure of the main library than James Baldwin in his book, *Go Tell It on the Mountain:*

> He loved this street, not for the people or the shops but for the stone lions that guarded the great main building of the Public Library, a building filled with books and unimaginably vast, and which he had never yet dared to enter. . . . He had never gone in because the building was so big that it must be full of corridors and marble steps, in the maze of which he would be lost and never find the book he wanted.[10]

Yet history will confirm that main public libraries have responded to the needs of special clientele groups. Perhaps the most obvious example is the justly renowned business service offered directly by the main library, or sometimes through a special branch located in the center of the business district. A special unit or task force, possibly modeled on this type of service, focusing on the special needs of the disadvantaged, would undoubtedly be appropriate in some central libraries.

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that old remedies, simply relabeled and placed in new packages, will meet the challenge posed by the urban poor. The inner-city disadvantaged do not reach out in the same manner for those educational and social services as do the motivated or even as previous immigrants to the cities did.[11] Today's poor do not have the heritage, by and large, of anticipating the reward for climbing the cultural and educational ladders created by society. Some lack motivation; others are not even aware that the ladders exist.[12]

Lowell Martin made a similar observation in his study of library service to the disadvantaged of Baltimore. He found that one mark of the disadvantaged person which appeared again and again is that of being culturally cut off and isolated. He does not participate in the educational and cultural institutions of the city, even though he frequently lives closer to them than most of those who do participate.[13] It seems extremely ironic that this condition has come to characterize a signifi-

cant proportion of the populations of our cities, cities which originally evolved as centers for human communication.

Another facet of the psychological environment in which the main library operates is one that seems to be especially characteristic of the well-educated professional who resides in the central city, typically in high rise apartments. Webber holds that such persons may be virtually rootless in terms of belonging to specific geographic communities.[14] But having had the opportunity to develop and cultivate specific interests, the individual seeks out others with whom he can associate to share these interests. The communities to which he belongs are no longer the communities of place to which his ancestors may have been bound.

With expanding opportunities for education and increased leisure time, many persons are becoming more closely tied to various interest communities than to place communities, whether the interest be based upon occupation, free time activity, social relationships, or intellectual pursuits. Ease of communication and transportation has reinforced this trend, enabling members to interact with each other wherever they may be located.[15]

If Webber's analysis is accurate, it would seem to hold several implications for the main library. It seems logical to assume, for example, that some of these communities will develop interests to a sophisticated level, thereby generating in some instances needs for corresponding levels of information. Given the indefinite breadth of possible interest areas, it would seem to follow that printed materials alone will not satisfy completely many of these informational requirements.

To respond adequately to the needs of this important and expanding clientele, the main library must do more than has been so often done in the past—simply establish a separate film or audiovisual service department. Tokenism and the provision of symbolic services will no longer pass. Instead, the very concept of media services must be changed from that of a separate adjunct to the central enterprise of providing books and giving "regular" library service,[16] to one of creating a new, integrated library environment for all who are alert to the trends, artistic expressions, fads, and issues around them. This environment might combine the best features of a bookstore, a museum, a theater, a computer center, and a library. For the individual responding to the world around him and stimulated by man's creations, the main library could become one of the most exciting and vital places in the city.[17]

In addition to the psychological environment, social institutions must also be attuned to changes within the social or demographic area. Al-

though the central city continues to function as a so-called melting pot, present trends indicate that more and more ingredients are being removed. An analysis of the 1970 census revealed that the population problems of the central cities are expected to worsen, at least for the next few decades. Experts predict that Negroes will make only negligible integration gains in most suburbs, while the flight on the part of whites from central cities is calculated to continue. If present trends continue, Negroes will comprise one-third of city populations by 1985, up from the current one-fourth.[18]

According to Jerome Fellmann, the rate of change is accelerating. "During the decade 1940 to 1950 suburbs grew three times as fast as they had from 1930 to 1940, and they accounted for nearly one-half of the total United States population increase. Nearly two-thirds of the population growth between 1950 and 1960 occurred outside the central cities but within SMSA's."[19] Echoing these sentiments, a research report prepared for the National Commission on Urban Problems states that assuming boundaries remain constant, between 1960 and 1985 the SMSA (standard metropolitan statistical area) population in the U.S. will increase by 58 percent, but the population in central cities will increase by only 13 percent.[20]

As the statistical data accumulate, they also point up the fact that central cities will continue to hold a disproportionate number of the poor. Large cities have always been places of the poor and underprivileged. For many immigrant groups, cities served as basic training camps. Today, however, most of the city's poor come not from other countries, but from within. Some have moved from dirt farms and migrant worker camps to the cities. Others have been city residents for years but have never been reached by the city's effort to elevate them. And many were and still are denied the opportunity to develop individual capacities because of race.[21]

Today black Americans comprise an unusually large percentage of the central city's poor. This is due partly to the fact that unlike other immigrant groups, many blacks have had no opportunity to acquire a decent range of political, economic and social skills.[22] Even the briefest examination of history will reveal that gaps develop between the haves and have-nots in a society. In the United States, however, this gap is frequently characterized not only by economic status, but by skin color as well. Experts predict that the number of poor will decline in the years ahead, but that the proportion that is black, and the proportion

that lives in the central city will increase, thus deepening the gap be-
tween city and suburb.

In the vacuum created by the exodus of middle class families from
the cities are left increasing numbers of the poor and disadvantaged.
These population groups place different and significantly heavier de-
mands upon public service agencies than the now departed group
which they replaced. At the same time, they are much less able to con-
tribute to the cost of the services they require. The tremendous social
and economic pressures which are being brought to bear on the city
and its institutions by these trends lead one to believe that Keats's
prophecy is about to be realized:

> Things fall apart; the
> center cannot hold. Mere
> anarchy is loosed upon the
> world.

The noted authority on urban problems, George Sternlieb, was re-
cently quoted as saying that "the only thing that's holding our central
cities together is the suburban housing shortage."[23] If suburban barriers
were lowered, he believes the cities' remaining middle class and lower
middle class residents who are now deterred from moving by high costs
and zoning regulations would be the first to move. The net result
would be to diminish even further the tax base from which so many
costly services are financed.[23]

This shift of populations from central city to suburb naturally brings
with it many side effects, some of which are now quite prominent. One
of these has been the creation of the forty-hour central city. In many
cities, the commuter exodus begins around 3 p.m., so that by 6 p.m. the
central city is virtually lifeless any weekday evening.[24]

But functions other than residential are becoming suburbanized. The
outward migration of shopping facilities is a commonly recognized as-
pect of the emerging pattern of functional suburbanization, as is the
rapid development of industrial parks outside of their older home, the
central cities.[25] The suburbs of New York City, which created a na-
tional image of bedroom villages for city workers, now send less than
half their workers to jobs in the city. These suburbs now contain ap-
proximately 50 percent of the area's manufacturing and retail jobs, and
they have a full range of urban facilities.[26]

The trend toward decentralization of economic functions has seen
the gradual decline of the city's central business district as a focal point
for retailing, manufacturing and wholesaling. Naturally a number of

factors underlie this decline. Some have already been mentioned, for example, the continuing loss of city population and decreasing job opportunity. These occurrences have, in turn, tended to reduce the number of prospective downtown shoppers. Consequently, department stores, once the exclusive possession of the central business district, have been established in large numbers in outlying areas. In an attempt to reverse the declining retail importance of their business districts, a number of small and medium-sized cities have converted the main shopping area into a pedestrian mall. However, the success of this experiment is as yet unclear.[27]

Changes in transportation options for both consumers and manufacturers also adversely affected the city's role as commercial center. The shift in the transportation of goods from rail to truck freed wholesalers from the need to be located on a rail line, thereby weakening the central city as the preferred distribution point for wholesalers.[28]

Similarly, the major cities of the nation have been steadily declining relative to the suburban hinterland as centers for manufacturing. New transportation routes and options no longer bind the plant to the natural transportation routes of the area. This factor, combined with the obsolescence of existing manufacturing structures and rising taxes, has literally forced manufacturers to relocate to more hospitable surroundings.[29]

A significant by-product of these developments is the growth of complex arrays of suburban communities, the boundaries of many of which are indistinguishable except in a political sense. The automobile and the freeways it has generated have created among suburbanites an independence of the city. In place of an urban center, highly mobile suburbanites use the various facilities of their separate communities collectively, as an interlinked outer city.[30] For these people, the central business district, the traditional home of the public library in the large and small towns of the nation, is no longer effectively acting as the attractor, the focus. According to Fellmann, in our sprawling fringe zones of expanding metropolitan areas, "the whole concept of municipally centered library facilities may have lost its meaning."[31]

While many of these changes are taking place at the periphery, there are significant, though perhaps less obvious ones occurring within the central business district. In terms of land area, horizontal growth of the business area may have essentially come to an end with the technologies that have enabled cities to grow vertically, for example, the skyscraper and the elevator. But definite shifts in the boundaries of busi-

ness districts have been observed by geographers who have identified a "zone of discard" and a "zone of assimilation" associated with these changes.[32] The zone of discard is the area from which the central business district is shifting. In earlier times this area was the hub of the city, frequently situated at a city's major intersection. Because of location and heavy pedestrian traffic, older main libraries were often located in this area. The zone of assimilation, on the other hand, is the area toward which the central business district is moving, a district that is characterized by newer hotels, professional offices, and speciality shops.[33]

Some urbanologists, noting these trends, believe that the central business district of the future will change considerably, possibly consisting of two centers separated by a band of parking. The financial and office district in some large cities remains viable, attracted to the focus of metropolitan transportation and the advantages of linkages with other office functions. The other center might evolve into one of dual services, providing speciality shops and specialized services for the entire metropolitan area, and mass selling stores and less specialized services to meet some of the needs of inner-city residents.[34]

Although any change in the location of a city's central business district poses substantial problems not only for long-established business enterprises, but also for service agencies and institutions which may appear to be unmovable because of attachments—both real and symbolic—to existing structures, the overriding concern must be reversing the outward movement of people, jobs and business. For if this trend continues, it will only be a matter of time before our central cities become the hopeless reservations of the poor and the powerless.

Reversing this trend is not merely a matter of economics; it is innately and primarily political. Obviously the city has neither the power nor the resources to respond to these challenges. According to Gulick, neither the city nor the state, under our present system of government, is able to address adequately many issues which deeply affect the quality of life.[35]

"Shrinking tax base," "fiscal crisis," and "budget crunch" are only a few of the recently coined phrases which describe one of the most serious problems facing city government today. For the most part the city relies on property tax to support municipal services. Recent studies have shown, however, that these taxes are distinctly regressive; that is, they weigh more heavily on the poor than on the rich and discourage the construction of housing for the poor. Secondly, they are inelastic

and nonresponsive in that they frequently lag behind wage-price levels. Thirdly, they act as location-shifters insofar as they often force business enterprises to seek areas of lower tax rates. In other words, the sources of income which the states have given to the cities are precisely those which work against their inhabitants.[36]

The complexities and problems of life in our cities together with the inadequacies of local government seem at last to be forcing both state and federal governments to assume a greater degree of responsibility for the physical and social growth and development of urban communities. If our cities are to develop self-generating economies and improve the quality of life for their residents, additional federal aid must be forthcoming.

In the midst of these trends, problems, and issues stand the city's institutions and service agencies. Those which provide obviously essential services, for example, police, fire, and sanitation agencies, seem to have been able to adjust to the turmoil and, in some cases, even improve their services. Others, less obvious perhaps, but hardly less essential, have not adequately responded to their multi-faceted environments. Urban libraries and welfare service agencies, to cite two examples, do not appear to have anticipated many societal changes, and therefore, have been forced to assume almost defensive postures. Libraries, especially, appear to be continually reacting to social, political, and even technological stimuli, but rarely anticipating these changes. In certain instances branch libraries or neighborhood library centers have responded in meaningful ways to their environments. But significant examples of such response on the part of the main library appear to be quite rare and isolated.

Given the speed with which change is occurring on the one hand, and the gravity and complexity of our urban problems on the other, the main library must adopt a more flexible, responsive posture. With respect to its political environment, the library must assume a much more aggressive role and participate fully in the political process. In the social area, it must be attuned to the needs of its constantly changing clientele groups. In many cities, the development of urban campuses and university libraries may suggest that the main library relinquish some of its aspirations to support research and set new priorities. In terms of the psychological environment in which the main library functions, it must be careful not to raise expectations to levels it cannot reach or claim to provide services which are more symbolic than real. Instead, the library must develop new approaches for closing the gaps,

increasing self-esteem, and fostering human communication. Depending on its several environments, then, "The big city public library of the future will be many kinds of institutions responding to new demands, new opportunities, and new resources which are just beginning to be evident."[37] However, old patterns must be broken if new institutions are to emerge.

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