



Introduction

LARRY EARL BONE

IN FOCUSING ON "Current Trends in Urban Main Libraries," this issue of *Library Trends*, for the first time in the twenty-year history of this journal, examines the urban main public library as an entity in itself. For many this topic should be most timely—not just those involved in public library service alone, but anyone interested in library service generally. Librarians, whatever type of library they serve, cannot afford to be any more parochial in their attitudes concerning the trends and problems of our cities' libraries than the public generally can be about the major cities and the present crises of these cities. Moreover, at a time when the cities are calling for attention to their needs, the institutions within these urban communities deserve a commensurate concern.

While the subject of branch libraries was dealt with in an issue of *Library Trends* six years ago,¹ the main library has not until now been examined separately. Some may question whether it is valid to consider the urban main library apart from its branches, but most will acknowledge that in recent years there has been a growing distinction, both in collections and services. Main libraries have become less local in character, while branches continue as agencies designed principally to serve their local communities. In the United States a further indication of this dichotomy has been the recent proposal that the central libraries be divorced from the city systems, be supported by the federal government, and thus be available to any resident anywhere.²

For others the term "urban main library" may seem an anachronism, since, as John Humphry is to show in this issue, such libraries are increasingly a part of larger library networks which, with other libraries, serve whole sections of the country or parts of states and not just a single urban community. For the purposes of this issue the urban main library, frequently called the central library, is identified as the largest unit in an urban public library system, even though its service may be

Larry Earl Bone is Assistant Director of Libraries for Public Services, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, Tennessee.

far reaching. Contributors to this issue will serve to refine the definition.

When outlining the issue and its topics to the contributors, moreover, the editor did not attempt to define "urban" too narrowly. Some of the trends discussed may apply to medium-sized, as well as large, urban communities although in most cases it will be obvious that the authors are addressing themselves to the libraries serving populations of more than 500,000.

The responsibility of the contributors lays in outlining the trends in buildings, collections, organization, management, services and personnel, as well as in looking at the library's past development, its present environment, its place in larger networks, and its future prospects. Jacob S. Epstein views the history of urban main libraries in terms of some of its best examples—both libraries and librarians. Larry Earl Bone and Thomas Raines see a growing professional consensus for the urban main library as a research institution and point to the need for systematic collection building. Concurring with this research concept, John Humphry feels that the urban main library, because of existing strength, should play a stronger role in library networks. In David Henington's opinion library organization has become simpler through its evolution, but to John Anderson the administrative problems are more complex. Harry Peterson feels careful planning in building is necessary to accommodate the demands made by the changing urban environment. Changes in the environment will likewise affect the character and goals of users, according to John Parkhill, and he suggests some of the possible ways. In connection with the environment, Thomas Shaughnessy shows the social forces at work on the urban community. With regard to personnel, Ervin Gaines calls for a broader interpretation of professional responsibility for the personnel of main libraries. Finally, in separate appraisals of the urban main library's future, Ralph Blasingame states a number of propositions which he suggests may be bases for argument, rather than firm conclusions; and Lowell Martin stresses the forces that will be at work on the library in the coming years, together with the choices that will have to be made.

In its problems, the urban main library, quite logically, is reflecting the society it serves. It is only natural, therefore, that the difficulties presently experienced by the cities are being felt by the libraries which serve them. Readers will readily recognize the effect of the larger environment on the institution. The ability of the U.S., as well as perhaps other countries, to cope with the problems of the cities is one of the large tests that must be passed. The capacity of the public library pro-

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fession to solve the problems of the urban libraries is a similar test and the national dilemma in microcosm. The importance to the national welfare of the rebirth of the cities and the institutions which serve them should be obvious.

One should not look for unanimity of opinion here, nor should one be surprised to find both optimism and pessimism voiced as the trends are discussed. As suggested above, various viewpoints are represented in the contributors' approaches. In one respect, there is a consensus: urban main libraries must show themselves responsive to change. No matter what topic is discussed, flexibility in approach seems to be the recurring theme. Not all see such flexibility as coming easily. "The winds of change have blown hard, and in new directions," says Lowell Martin, "but the public library has stood unmoved."

After reading these articles a pessimistic conclusion would be that the institution is in decline; an optimistic one would be that the future can be bright if we continue to examine the trends, build on the strengths, and attempt to effect changes where there is weakness. Those who feel deeply that the full potential of the urban main library has not yet been felt, will champion such a positive approach.

All utopias, Lewis Mumford once observed, have been expressed largely in terms of the city. The opportunity he lays before the builders of cities is one that readers of this issue might keep in mind as they consider the past and the current trends of urban main libraries:

Already, in the architecture and layout of the new community, one sees the knowledge and discipline that the machine has provided turned to more vital conquests, more human consummations. Already, in imagination and plan, we have transcended the sinister limitations of the existing metropolitan environment. We have much to unbuild, and much more to build; but the foundations are ready; the machines are set in place and the tools are bright and keen; the architects, the engineers, and the workmen are assembled. None of us may live to see the complete building, and perhaps in the nature of things the building can never be completed; but some of us will see the flag or the fir tree that the workers will plant aloft in ancient ritual when they cap the topmost story.³

References

1. Geddes, Andrew, ed. "Current Trends in Branch Libraries," *Library Trends*, 14:365-457, April 1966.
2. Greenaway, Emerson. "Libraries Look to the State Agency: The Public Library," *American Libraries*, 2:735-36, July 1971.
3. Mumford, Lewis. "Social Basis of the New Urban Order." In *The Culture of Cities*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1938, p. 493.