



The Future of the Urban Main Library: II

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IN THE PERIOD AHEAD, the central unit of the large city library will be pulled in opposite directions by two inevitable forces: the specialized demands of an interdependent society centered in the metropolitan area, and the deterioration and rehabilitation of the city itself. One focuses on the expanding vanguard of present-day life, and the other on the struggling rear guard.

THE LIBRARY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

These fundamental forces are being added to others that have pushed and pulled the public library for some time.

A media revolution has been under way for several decades—not solely in newer audio and visual forms, but in traditional print forms as well, specifically in the widely available paperback and the mass circulation magazine. The public library today stands in a different relation to the dissemination of culture than it did fifty years ago: today the passive recipient of entertainment, information and ideology has merely to sit and take in what comes his way, and the selective observer of or participant in the culture can pick and choose among the print and non-print media without ever getting near a public library. If the library was the people's university in the past, today that role is shared with a host of non-institutional sources.

Another force that has worked on the public library in recent decades is the extension of formal education—one hesitates to refer to an educational "revolution" because purposes and methods of schools and colleges have not been fundamentally altered. But more individuals are engaged in formal study, in more locations, and preparing more assignments per student, so that the "knowledge industry" is familiar in contemporary jargon.

Still another force is the new-found emphasis on opening opportu-

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nity to those who have been passed by in a century of economic expansion. This belated concern about the "other America" caught the public library unaware, as it caught other institutions that had worked out a comfortable relation to the advantaged. Schools, churches, and government seek to meet this demand, for the most part without additional revenues or resources, while continuing to serve established clienteles.

More recently a deep-seated questioning of traditional values has appeared in Western society. Materialistic goals, the work ethic, long-accepted sexual practices, and established institutions have all been challenged. The intellectual and moral current of the times is questioning and probing, albeit sometimes confused and contradictory.

The public library has been uncertain in its reaction to each of these trends. Should it remain the bastion of print in book form, or become multi-media? In actuality it is somewhere betwixt and between. Should it directly service the expanding school and college programs or search out some other community function? The official pronouncements say the public library is an informal educational and informational agency, yet the largest single group within its patronage is composed of students engaged in formal study. Should it assign a new priority to the disadvantaged, even if this means transferring resources from ongoing services? The answer thus far has been to keep traditional allocations intact while seeking outside funds for limited outreach purposes, a policy of business as usual plus a fringe of innovation. Should the library reflect traditional values or present the new challenges? It is nine parts tradition, because that is what its existing collections reflect, and one part challenge, because that is what librarians believe the community will tolerate.

The public library has had neither policy nor program for reacting to forces that affect and even threaten its social role. Like other established institutions, it has relied on inertia to carry it through. So ingrained has been the concept of the public library in America, so strong the faith in a people's materials source, that it has fared relatively well through the last fifty years. The winds of change have blown hard, and in new directions, but the public library has stood unmoved. This attests at one and the same time to its ingrained tradition, its institutional inertia, and on the other side to its continuing social role, its acceptance in the order of things. The public library is an agency that is a mixture of service and custom.

URBAN DECAY AND METROPOLITAN DISPERSION

To the forces mentioned above have been added the steady dispersion of the urban center over the metropolitan region, and the desperate effort to rebuild the inner city. Both apply in particular to the central unit of the city library which stands at their vortex, either in the business district or just between it and the nearby ghetto.

Observing all these forces together has prompted some observers to see the central city, and the central library along with it, as dying entities. This is an over-simplification, for the city is still vital and tough, and some of its institutions are used as much or more than before. But decay and dispersion continue, and rehabilitation thus far has hardly stemmed the tide: there is public housing and yet the quality of city dwellings declines; there are community action programs, yet urban group action is weak; there are augmented police forces, yet danger mounts in the streets. Decay and dispersion can and will drain the vitality from the central city, unless they are reversed.

Physical deterioration can be stemmed. This can be done and it is effective when enough is invested. The business centers of some of the oldest cities—Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, even New York—are now substantially rehoused in structures built since World War II. Old residential sections present a more widespread problem, but isolated examples show what can be accomplished with a combination of fresh dollars and new hope. It is not a question of forces beyond man's control or of technology beyond his capacity, but a question of public policy. Only if a major commitment is made (one alternative might be reallocation of military funds) can the city be sustained.

The flow of people from the city to the nearby suburbs and beyond them to decentralized sub-centers within the total metropolitan region must be seen in balance. Formerly the city was the locale of all segments of the society, rich and poor and those in between, intellectuals, anti-intellectuals and the unconcerned. It encompassed all group enterprises, from government to manufacturing, from finance to culture.

For some time certain of these groups have been moving out, and will continue doing so: the family seeking space and community homogeneity, the non-specialized retailer who sells to such families, the manufacturer building a plant based on new technology, and, most recently, the headquarters of super-corporations. This process has advanced to the stage where many people live out their lives—as workers,

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parents and consumers—in the metropolitan region, but outside the central city.

However, other individuals and enterprises elect to remain. Someone has said that those remaining are the rich who can afford to live well in the city and the poor who cannot afford to get out. But, many others remain by choice: young professionals, blue collar families, intellectuals, older persons beyond the family stage, and younger persons resisting suburbia. Many enterprises also remain by choice: the financial institutions; the communications agencies; specialized retailers; small and medium-sized firms that serve the super-corporations directly or indirectly; and cultural institutions, including museum, theater, art gallery and concert hall.

Further, the city is not characterized solely and fully by residents within its boundaries. Is Newark, New Jersey, the 350,000 people who live there, or the 150,000 people who come in each day to work or study there? In reality it is both, even though the two may seldom meet. Many metropolitan residents depend directly on the city: they work there, shop there, and use the institutions there. These are present and potential users of the central urban library no less than local residents.

The resources and functions of the city are being redefined by shifting populations and activities. Formerly it was *the* center, and all else was ancillary. Now it is a partner in the metropolitan complex, as dependent on the outlying regions as they are on it. Its role in the partnership is that of a specialist in business, communications, finance, education, and culture. It is the chosen habitat of a growing group of cosmopolitans. It has the townhouse and the duplex apartment, the corporate board room, the central money exchanges, the newspaper office, the television studio, the museum and the playhouse. And it has the central public library and many of the strong specialized libraries.

USE OF THE CENTRAL LIBRARY

How fares the central unit of the city public library at the vortex of urban social change? One set of considerations relates to the effect of deep-seated social change on the central library, and its potential as these trends continue; another set derives from the social functions that have preserved the institution over a century. What is it in the public library concept that provides a lodestar for these next years?

The first hard fact is that patronage of the central library has kept up surprisingly well even in cases where total city populations have de-

creased. However, confirmed library users have moved out and branch library circulation has declined. Yet in some cases use of the central unit of the city has increased, and usually has decreased less than branch use (e.g., Baltimore and Newark). It is worth noting certain common characteristics of these two quite disparate examples: each has a central library of considerable strength for the respective sizes of the cities, each has retained the loyalty of departed users, each is convenient to a commuting population, each has built a role as a metropolitan resource extending beyond the city boundaries, and each is designated by its state as a resource center for its region.

Who among the metropolitan residents accounts for this continued use of the central unit? Recent studies in Chicago, San Francisco, Baltimore and elsewhere tell a consistent story. Students figure to a considerable extent, and general adult readers to some extent. The students come in large numbers because their school and college collections are inadequate, inconvenient or closed. Here the balance is changing as libraries in educational institutions improve. There will always be some students seeking out strong central collections, public or private, but mass use from this contingent will decline. General adult readers constitute a residue of those who find the agency convenient and/or economical, but they cannot be expected to increase unless the library develops a cultural-educational program distinct from that available from a good bookstore.

Among the central library users are a wide variety (not necessarily a large gross number) of "specialists" characteristic of the urban society, from the secretary looking up information for her boss to the professional keeping up with his calling. The businessman comes first to mind in this category, and many city libraries have a distinct service division for him. The technological and scientific worker appears, as does the community leader and government official, the clergyman and the journalist. Note that most of these are "unaffiliated" readers, not connected with a university or specialized library designed to meet their needs.

Another group discernible among existing patrons, if one looks closely enough, is that of the cultural sophisticates or cosmopolitans who have gone beyond popular reading and follow intellectual, social, literary and artistic interests in some depth. By no means all in this group live in the central city, although they do bulk large among those who by choice remain or return to live in a central location. Those who are suburban dwellers are more than likely to be among the commuters

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to the city, for they are found particularly in professional, communications, educational and governmental endeavors.

In the ebb and flow of population in the metropolitan area, the unaffiliated specialist and the cultural cosmopolitan remain as potential users of a strong central library, and their numbers will increase. But they do not bulk large among present users and the central library is not particularly geared to them. A recent field study in the Deiches series in Baltimore found that while community leaders (in business, social action, and the arts) are more likely than the average person to be users of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, they do not use the institution much for information or materials connected with their leadership roles. Thus there is a clue to the future of the central urban library. If it wants to serve the technical specialist and the intellectual sophisticate, it must consciously decide to do so, make plans for the purpose, and reach out as it would to other target groups. Lacking this the central library will attract only a residue of specialists and cosmopolitans, to go along with its residue of students and popular readers.

These more specialized groups live both within and outside the city proper. While some suburbanites live out their lives in the environs, others garden on their quarter acre in the afternoon and attend a play and have dinner in the city at night. They are not suburbanites but metropolitanites. Thus we see another clue to the future urban central library: it must be a center for the metropolitan area as a whole and not exclusively an agency for the city which brought it into existence. The future of the urban main public library depends on the extent to which it becomes a metropolitan-wide facility, for a specialized and cosmopolitan population found both inside and outside the city boundaries.

POTENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE CENTRAL LIBRARY

In addition to looking for the future role of the urban main library among present and potential user groups, one can seek among the recognized and recommended functions of the public library, testing these possibilities against the condition of the central city today.

Starting with the most common, one can ask about the central library as the source of popular literature reflecting the culture, expressions and problems of the day. Here is where the newspaper, the magazine and the paperback blanket the field, competing with a variety of non-print materials, both with fingertip availability. Such convenience cannot even be approached by a central city library except for the few who

work or live in its immediate shadow. For the book of the year and the magazine of the month, those who live or work in the central city, whether it be businessman, secretary, young intellectual, or escapee from from the suburbs, will be disposed to get what they want from commercial sources.

Another possibility is the central public library as an agency for students. Here again the long term prospect is static. The strengthening of school and college libraries in the last decade is a phenomenon of American library development, and it will continue in the next decade to the point where regularly used sources will be supplied in the school and on the campus.

Is that old standby, the public library as a focal point for children's resources and services, viable? The central city is no longer the locale of children, if it ever was. And as the school comes more to mean exploration and natural growth, rather than coercion and standardization, weighty arguments can be advanced for media provision within the context of that same experience.

Thus the general and traditional functions of public libraries—popular reading, students' materials, children's services—show little promise for central urban libraries in the future. One must look to more specialized functions if there is to be a place and role for what has been the flagship of urban library service. Interestingly enough, analysis by function leads in the same direction as analysis based on population trends.

Service to specialized groups and interests in the total metropolitan arena is a promising avenue for the urban main library. Because it is promising, and also because it is too readily thought of by some librarians to be simply more of what they have already been doing, this prospect will be explored in greater detail in the next section of this article.

Finally there is the "educational" function of the public library. This is the oft-repeated, honorable—and persistently ambiguous—activity of the agency. However, those who see education as an important function of the public library have a hard time defining the term. They say it is not education as referred to in formal classes and a prescribed curriculum; it is not educational as a museum is (more individual and informal than that); it is more diversified and substantial than the education one receives by reading the newspaper; nor is it like taking a walk down a busy city street and keeping one's eyes open. The essential educational nature of the public library never comes completely clear.

The working answer given at one time was reading programs and reading courses which in their heyday were headed up in the central

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main library. Their time passed, for reasons deriving both from the society and from within the library itself. At another time the answer was group programs: lectures, forums, book discussions and films. Such programs are still maintained by some central libraries, as a kind of minor auxiliary to the regular delivery system, but few now take group activities to be the measure of educational service in the library.

Yet people do, outside their formal education and job training and occasional supplementary courses, seek understanding of what troubles them, what eludes them, and what challenges them. One has only to talk to his neighbors to be struck by this searching. They may not be community leaders nor social critics, but they seek to comprehend the world in which they live, the people in it, the problems on the one hand and the emerging prospects on the other. But their search is not rewarded either by sitting at home and watching television, nor by stirring themselves and going to an adult education class (nor, it might be added, by turning to the typical library of a thousand or a million volumes). We are a searching people, feeling about in communication gluttage for meaning.

The term media center is hopefully applied in the schools to a library that not only has resources in many forms, but which also (and more importantly) relates whatever it has to the educational experience of young people. Transfer this idea (not the specifics) to the society at large. Think of a central media center presenting the trends, problems, expressions and accomplishments of the day: not static, but alive with sight and sound; selective, but open-minded; diversified, but purposeful; not media alone, but makers of media also—authors, artists, film makers, and columnists. As proposed in a recent study of the Chicago Public Library,¹ this is described as having the best features of a bookstore, a museum, a theater and a library. It is the “popular library” found in some central library buildings—transformed, vitalized, given purpose, and made educational. The urban central library that can grasp this concept will become the most popular and exciting place in town, and will draw the suburbanite from his green lawns and complacency.

The information function also has a potential now hardly realized in urban main libraries. Repeated studies have shown the library to be only one among many sources to which people turn for information, and by no means the first source. Yet organized and publicized telephone reference service, for example, has elicited considerable response. It is not as though information provision works smoothly,

promptly and impartially through present non-library mechanisms, so that the library has only to add its little special contribution. On the contrary, sources of information are sometimes non-existent, often unknown if they do exist, and suspect if they are known. Small wonder that the person who finds that he can get an answer by dialing his public library soon becomes a regular patron of the service.

For all the scope of collections and the size of staff, central library reference service stays fairly well within either questions of fact that can be answered from standard printed sources, or questions of interpretation that can be answered by consulting a general collection of some size. On the one side the questions of daily living—the food market daily, entertainment currently running, the newest products, changed laws and regulations, traffic patterns and transportation schedules—comprise only a small part of inquiries coming to the public library, although every individual faces several such information needs every day. On the other side highly specialized and technical questions are also uncommon, in part because inquirers believe the library could not handle them, in part because the resources actually are not equal to them, and in part because the staff by policy or inclination does not take the time to research them.

There is also the role of the central city library as a reference and bibliographic center for other libraries in its region. The metropolitan area abounds in partial collections, in smaller centers, in business and industry, and in schools. Over the years in one way or another most city libraries have been called on by these smaller units for specialized materials and for bibliographical information, and many have responded. Part of the response has been recognized and formalized in the shape of legal designation of some city libraries as regional resource centers with state funds supplied for the purpose. Part of the response has been informal, as when a local business either foregoes a library of its own entirely or consciously limits its holdings because of the availability of the central city collection. Currently the need for one bibliographic center in a metropolitan area is increasing as the national automation of publication records becomes a reality.

Informal relations have grown up primarily with smaller public libraries, with special libraries to some extent, and only occasionally with school and college libraries. To a considerable degree the fences between types of libraries have stood intact. In particular the school library, for all its small size and expanding demands, has sought to remain alone; with the greater strength it acquires as a media center, it

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may be more established and self-confident and therefore willing to turn to larger resources as needed.

Whether the urban main library can and should become the reference and bibliographic center for a region is a moot point. In the very large metropolis, where the central public library has a genuine degree of strength, there are also likely to be great university and scholarly libraries. They are moving to form consortia and to establish mechanisms of joint records information and of sharing, either without the public library as a participant, or with the public agency in a minor role. Even in lesser centers—Louisville would be an example—new referral centers may well be in an academic rather than a city location. For some metropolitan centers with depth in the public library and limitations in academic and specialized collections, the urban main library may be the logical agency for the purpose, if it develops a degree of specialization in its resources and a degree of sophistication in its bibliographical capacity.

Thus the urban main library might become a new and refreshing educational center. It might become a pervasive information agency. It might become a reference and bibliographical center for its region. The society needs these functions and the institution has the potential, but it is not going to become any of these simply by continuing its present program. The need for redirection and refocusing can be illustrated by returning to the promising prospect of providing specialized resources and services.

SERVICE TO SPECIALIZED GROUPS

We have seen that the metropolitan region is the site of specialists high and low and in rich variety, in the city and outside. Many are not affiliated with university or specialized libraries. Indeed this is a specialized society without library service for many of its specialists. Here is where the urban main library has an opportunity and a responsibility.

Many city librarians, when specialists are brought into the picture, and complacently and say that such people already come to them. Of course they come—a motivated searcher turns anywhere he can. But many do not call on what they see as a students' and general readers' institution. And those that do often find neither resources nor staff at their level.

The public library, like other libraries, has been more materials oriented than user oriented. The librarian builds collections, first seeking

breadth and then some degree of depth to the extent that money allows. Subjects guide acquisition, from 000 to 999. The result, with the exception of a handful of public libraries with extraordinary resources, is a middle range of materials, neither too ephemeral nor too advanced. It is a collection beyond the partial resources of the branch or the school, but short of specialism as this applies in urban activities today.

For whom are the materials in the urban main library acquired? The librarian would say for all who want and need them; here they are, ready to be used. The general reader, venturing beyond the newsstand and the book club, responds to some extent, seeking an educational source which the organized middle-range collection somehow does not provide. The student responds, to the extent that he cannot get what he needs where his classes are held.

The development of subject departments in central libraries was an attempt to build capacity for more specialized readers. Materials are arranged according to subject areas and librarians with background selected in the topics covered. This is a step toward specialized service, and it has seemed to administrators over the years to be worth its cost. But the subject structure adopted was more a reflection of prevailing classification schemes and customary academic curriculum groupings. The literature department and the history room exemplify this structure. Certainly there are many students pursuing these subjects, but who are the unaffiliated specialists, outside of universities, who devote themselves to these parts of the world of knowledge? Other groupings in applied fields do reflect the world of work and service—business, law and social service, for example—but these tend to be bunched together in the library subject structure and come out in the form of the old standby, the inclusive and academic social science or social studies department.

Organization for specialized service would start with user groups rather than subject areas. The professions, the industries of an area, governmental needs, community leaders, intellectual sophisticates—these would be the starting points. Collection, staff and space would be built around such user groups.

This has been done to a limited extent by the public library, with resulting response by specialized groups and with approval of the public at large. Service to the business community is one example. Business departments or branches at their peak were vital centers of service. The materials assembled cut across the distinctions of reference and circulating and periodical forms. Subjects included not just business in

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the narrow sense, but economics, population, law, government, and aspects of technology. A few public business libraries even had selected fiction for the businessman. Certain of these business units remain, but others have restricted service or closed as limited funds prompted a pullback to the undifferentiated, middle-range functions.

A less common example is the municipal or government reference unit, and these too have declined as public library divisions. In order to get specialized rather than middle-range service, a few cities have pulled the municipal reference unit out of the public library and placed them in city hall, not under public library administration. There some exemplify what provision for a target group can be. To give another example, in the Chicago study mentioned above¹ as the surveyors tried to grasp the purpose and the clientele of the central subject departments, it was interesting to come upon the education unit and find reasonably definite answers. Its relative effectiveness derived from the fact that it was not so much a collection of books about education as a service agency developed for and used by teachers, educational administrators and lay people concerned about the schools (the latter in a sense specialists for a day).

Not only collection but staff would be oriented toward the user group in an effective specialists' unit within the public library, and staff would have to be increased in number per user. To a considerable extent the other evident user groups—general adult readers and students—are either self-directed or guided by the teacher. The general reader follows his bent, listens to his friends or reads his newspaper or magazine book reviews. The student works from a reading list or on an assigned topic. This is not to say that such patrons do not need staff assistance, but it is evident that in any urban central library most find their own way. Specialists, paradoxically enough, need more intensified staff service, as illustrated in the better special libraries.

The ratio of professional staff to population in the public library gives one pause. Usually this amounts to one professional for each 4,000 to 5,000 people. From this limited group must come service to children, students, young adults, and adults. As a result the relation of librarian to client is far from intense. The library is not like a school or hospital where the interface between user and professional is of the essence. It is more like a park, which is prepared and opened and which people use as the spirit moves. Or the library is a school or hospital in which the user wanders, partaking here and there of what he searches out for himself or what he stumbles on by accident. Many li-

library patrons use the agency repeatedly without exchanging a word with the professional who maintains the facility. Such a meager client-professional relationship is not propitious for service to specialists.

At this point in reading this article, the library administrator may well explode in righteous indignation for the implication is that collections are needed in selected areas in much greater depth, with more staff and more specialized staff. The administrator asks where the money will come from, given another of the realities of the urban condition, the desperate city financial situation?

This defines the problem. The choice is to continue the whole circle of middle-level service for students and general readers, hoping to retain a user base—or to realign priorities and available finances to concentrate on specialized service to selected groups. In this direction the central urban library can find an enlarged role that will provide not only a patronage base, but also leverage for increased funds. Present support would not finance a whole congeries of special group services, but reallocation within present budgets would make it possible to finance some. Once certain groups are served in an essential way, the argument can be pressed for support to reach further. Certainly a shift to region-wide service and state money, as distinct from competing for city dollars needed to prevent the city from falling apart, can be more readily achieved if an agency is serving the specialists in the total metropolis rather than only the students and general readers who can conveniently reach the urban central library.

The central unit of the city library as it stands is viable in the dictionary meaning of the word—"capable of living." Several residual publics will continue to use it, although in decreasing numbers unless aims are sharpened and programs tightened. Public faith in the library concept continues, but without strong commitment. There will be a central library, useful to a small minority, constituting one of the lesser adornments of the city. If one is satisfied with existence alone, little need be done.

But the struggling city and the growing metropolis alike have need for the prospective central library. No other agency can as readily bridge the information gap, fill an enlarging educational void, and service a constellation of specialities. Means to meet each of these will emerge in megalopolis of the 1970s, whether from the library or elsewhere.

The prospect enlarged upon above is a possibility but not a probability. Looking at the central library as it stands, stirrings can be dis-

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cerned only in the information function, and these are sporadic rather than sustained. The central library today is not as "educational" as it was a generation or two ago, nor is it as specialized. What it has become is solidified in building, budget and bodies, and it will take not just enlightened but aggressive, indeed "offensive," administration in both meanings of the term to break the mold.

In the process the central unit of the urban public library will have to shed characteristics implied in its very description as "urban" and "public." It will have to become a metropolitan or regional institution not bound to a restricted geographic area. Planning, funding, and programming will have to take on a state-wide and even national perspective. Similarly, as its geographic boundaries fade, its heritage as all the people's library will have to be reexamined. This does not mean that service to local neighborhoods or to general readers will be abandoned, but these are responsibilities of other divisions of the city library. The destiny of the central public library could be as the generic library, bound neither by geography nor history, leading the way to functions now only dimly seen.

Reference

1. Chicago Public Library Survey. *Library Response to Urban Change; A Study of the Chicago Public Library*. Lowell A. Martin, survey director. Chicago, ALA, 1969.

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