



The Future of the Urban Main Library: I

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TO APPROACH THIS TOPIC with any degree of optimism requires that one assume that the city itself has a future; a future, that is, which includes the continued existence of the city as more than a place where there are an increasing number of unfortunate people leading more or less unfortunate lives, or, at least, that one assume that urban social agencies may survive despite the current trends in urbanization. John Seeley puts it succinctly:

What is significant about the city is not that it is a "population center" or a place of intersection of roads, rail lines, waterways, or whatnot. A city is that place where whatever is highest in the civilization is being most actively, most vividly, most truly carried on. The city is the locus of the civilization's conscience. Failing that, the city is a population trap, a behavioral sink.¹

It is not possible for reasons of time and space to review the large and growing literature on urbanization in this paper. However, some of the major trends which suggest that at least some cities are headed toward status as "behavioral sinks" are indicated by Webber:

We are passing through a revolution that is unhitching the social processes of urbanization from the locationally fixed city and region. Reflecting the current explosion in science and technology, employment is shifting from the production of goods to services; increasing ease of transportation and communication is dissolving the spatial barriers to social intercourse; and Americans are forming social communities comprised of spatially dispersed members. A new kind of large-scale urban society is emerging that is increasingly independent of the city.²

We live in an atmosphere in which many people, particularly experts, believe that we can plan our way out of the problems which confront us—that it is only failure to plan or poor planning which has put us where we are. In this atmosphere it is tempting to launch into a pro-

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cess of fact collecting, with the assumption that one can extrapolate from facts about the past and divine the future. Instead of this activity, one might perhaps regard some actual results of planning for the future (i.e., public housing) and conclude with Seeley that the future is un-plannable, that being undesigned (it will be so unlike what is presently known and it will be shaped by forces which can neither be divined nor controlled), it is undesignable:

We must take it that all large systems—except for the supply of minimum needs at the cost of minimum effort—will largely disappear. What we have to imagine, apart from this minimum, is virtually a nonsystem, and that is, of course, for us, almost beyond imagining. To picture the undesigned is almost as difficult as to design it.³

Perhaps it will do no great harm for an article in such a pragmatic journal as this one and for such a pragmatic group as the presumed audience to state this view and then set it aside. It does suggest, however, that long-term prophecy about the future of any social agency is probably unprofitable.

Aside from speculations about the future of our society, the definition of urban main library is not so self-evident as might at first be assumed. Should one take the term to mean only the central library facility in the great cities? If so, does Newark, New Jersey, with a population of less than 500,000 qualify for inclusion? Newark, it has been said, is going wherever cities are going, but it is getting there faster. Several state library development plans (New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, for example) are based upon having services and resources emanate from the strongest (or at least largest) libraries in rather large areas. Do these libraries qualify as urban main libraries? In at least two of the states named above, no distinction in the setting of standards to be achieved by these libraries is made, regardless of the population in the city or town in which each is located, or the area which it serves. Does this mean that all libraries in population centers are or should be considered the same? If so, the term urban main library will have to encompass libraries in cities with populations of several million on the one hand, to towns of less than 20,000 on the other. After considering several possible definitions, the decision was rather arbitrarily made to carefully consider as a basis for study some twenty-eight cities, most of them with populations over 50,000 plus certain regional cities, irrespective of population, included in order to represent the several major sections of the country. The balance of this paper consists of a series of propositions which appear to be supported to one degree or another by

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facts and ideas gathered⁴ and by previous experience of the author. They are stated more as bases for argument than as firm conclusions.

1. The public libraries in the cities studied have been more successful in gaining support funds from their municipal governments than one would suppose, given the attention paid to the crisis of the cities. Any number of reasons may be suggested for this success, but the lack of evidence of new thinking about the role of the main facility suggests that library leaders and supporters have successfully pursued administrative styles suited to an era in which accountability has not been stressed, into an era in which it is being stressed. Some recent declines in the rate of increase in appropriations and some recent reports of major cuts in appropriations to certain city libraries suggest that darker times are just around the corner.
2. There is no one future for the urban main library; there are instead many potential futures, depending on the history and characteristics of any given city and upon the imagination (or lack of it) shown by the individual decisionmakers.
3. There are at least two kinds of cities for which the futures of the urban main library probably will differ significantly. (It should be noted, however, than any categorization of cities is apt to be faulty and lead to oversimplification.) First, there are those cities which experienced major growth as a consequence of the process of industrialization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These cities are remarkably different, spatially and socially, from the second group; the post-industrial cities are characteristically found in the Southeast, the Southwest and the Far West. Cities in the first group are either losing population or generally holding steady; cities in the second group are gaining population, but present a pattern of growth unlike cities in the first group.
4. The differences in these futures are apt to be determined by external forces; evidence of major change initiated by librarians is generally lacking and some of the apparent changes which have received a good deal of publicity (service to the disadvantaged, for example) appear not to have influenced the division of resources internally.
5. The development of the prototype public library in the older cities coincides roughly with the onset of industrialization. It seems probable that the spatial and social forces then at work encouraged the historic concept of the library as a storehouse, as one means of adjusting unskilled in-migrants to an emerging occupational structure based on specialized skills and information.
6. As the processes of industrialization-urbanization continued, this prototype library changed and began leaning toward support of industrial-business development, scholarship and serious study—in

general adopting an elite orientation. Recent developments in the spatial aspects of urbanization and changes in the inner-city populations of the older group of cities (and the myriad interactions between the two) increasingly suggest that this orientation is dysfunctional for a growing portion of the population. The main library appears, however, not to have changed significantly.

7. Most cities are experiencing a financial crunch as a result of new demands for services, inflation, unionization and other factors, thus creating internal and external conflicts for the library—and other agencies. Given a lack of evidence of internal change, these conflicts may be resolved more by across-the-board cuts in service than by changing outlook, organization or general adaptation to present conditions. The consequences of such administrative action may well accelerate the apparent rate of decline in certain services. For example, since newest materials are generally the most used, reduction in the number of new items purchased will result in an exponential reduction in circulation.
8. It is unlikely, judging from past experience, that income from state or federal sources will become available in sufficient amounts to offset the problems suggested above.
9. Pared down to some minimum which may be required to satisfy man's seeming need to have a storehouse of information, whether or not it is used or useful, the urban main facility of the libraries in older cities operated in the traditional fashion, will be characterized by a general decline in service potential.
10. Different futures can be envisioned; that is, it seems possible to find directions for these libraries in community service of one kind or another. However, in the face of declining ability to pay the bills, these directions suggest reducing the priority now generally assigned to the urban main library facility. In thinking of the potential for defining new courses of action, one must hope for: (1) new leadership less concerned with national norms than with local viability, (2) development of a series of goals, (3) development of measuring devices to establish effective feedback systems, and (4) major overhaul of present administration styles.
11. Post-industrial cities are growing—in some cases very rapidly—in population, but are currently showing less inclination to increase public library expenditures than the older cities (which appear to be more hardpressed financially). This tendency may be a result of the different histories of the two categories of cities. The post-industrial city has experienced its growth in a period not marked by the need for (or apparent need for) institutions useful in adjusting a large percentage of its in-migrant population to emerging occupations. That job structure was well defined prior to the growth of

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these cities and other means of adjustment have developed. Relatively large populations of retired persons and other factors undoubtedly affect the lesser emphasis on library expenditure.

12. The in-migrant to the post-industrial city is apt to be either relatively young and well educated or ready for retirement. If young, he is apt to have acquired information-seeking habits within his own specialty which are not likely to include the public library. He may use that library, and certainly may wish his children to have it available. However, his special information needs are likely to be supplied through his interest groups. The distance of his home (and quite possibly his place of work) from downtown make use of a central city facility difficult. The stage of development of that facility, just prior to the city's period of rapid growth, probably makes use of the main library unrewarding anyway.
13. In these newer large cities, the need for the large specialized collections and staffs often found in the older cities is not so acute as to be given high priority.

References

1. Seeley, John R. "Remaking the Urban Scene: New Youth in an Old Environment," *Daedalus*, 97:1136, Fall 1968.
2. Webber, Melvin M. "The Post-City Age," *Daedalus*, 97:1092, Fall 1968.
3. Seeley, *op. cit.*, p. 1137.
4. The topic for this paper also furnished the focus for a doctoral seminar at Rutgers University Graduate School of Library Service during the Spring 1971 term. Six students and I examined this topic from various points of view for a period of several months. This paper is based in part on speculation about the ideas generated by the considerable amount of fact-finding done outside the classroom and the discussions which that fact-finding touched off.