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# Open Wide the Doors: The Children's Room as Place in Public Libraries, 1876–1925

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## ABSTRACT

The word “place” can mean both the physical brick-and-mortar and the concept of “appropriate space,” defined functionally. This article examines the language of children’s place in public libraries from 1876 to 1925 in order to understand debates around the establishment of children’s rooms. Debates over the proper place for children encompassed the establishment of practices allowing children to enter the doors of the building as well as the creation of physical “children’s rooms,” although these rooms were policed in ways that restricted and defined their use. Examining the rhetoric of place and physicality illuminates some of the emerging cultural ideas about libraries as children’s places, their purposes, and their limitations.

Children relate to their books, stories, and their libraries not only intellectually, emotionally, but also physically. They connect to libraries as places as they cross the threshold, enter the doors, and touch the railings, shelves, books, and anything else they can reach. When children’s rooms were first becoming a common feature of public libraries in the United States in the early twentieth century, librarians’ developing practices and debates about the purposes of children’s rooms were well documented in *Library Journal* and *Public Libraries*. Librarians discussed issues such as whether children’s rooms were a good idea and to what degree children’s rooms should be open. Many librarians captured anecdotes that suggest that children had their own opinions about their preferences in public library services as they did about favorite books, authors, and other reading materials (McDowell 2009b, 2011).

This article will examine the language of children’s place in public libraries from 1876 to 1925 in order to understand debates around the establishment of children’s rooms in public libraries. This time period

saw the emergence of professional librarianship, the establishment of the first organization for children's librarians as part of the American Library Association, and the emergence of professional norms for public library services to youth. Examining the rhetoric of place and physicality illuminates some of the emerging cultural ideas about libraries as children's places, their purposes, and their limitations.

Other scholars have used similar approaches to understanding trends in the emerging field of professional librarianship in the United States. In a related analysis of rhetoric, Jacalyn Eddy analyzed the language of gender in libraries found in *Library Journal* in order to understand how the concept of gender figured into cultural conceptions of the functions and ideology of the library (2001). Focusing on architecture, Abigail Van Slyck devoted a chapter in her book *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890–1920* (1995) to understanding public libraries as places for children by drawing on childhood recollections of adults who had been public library patrons. Van Slyck concluded that there was a strong dichotomy between librarians in urban areas and the throngs of children demanding library service and libraries in more rural areas where librarians served as often intimidating gatekeepers. However, this dichotomy may be overstated; crowds and gatekeeping were issues in public libraries serving children in libraries of all sizes. Exploring the historical voices of children and librarians may nuance our understanding of how both groups conceptualized the importance of children's places in public libraries.

Foundational to this investigation is Wayne Wiegand's work analyzing the complex cultural dynamics at play during these formative years of librarians' discourse (Wiegand, 1986). Recently, there have been a number of historical studies published about library as place, refining understandings of the physical and spatial aspects of library. Ways of analyzing place in libraries can engage a range of theoretical perspectives, from Foucault's "expert" institutions to the Habermasian "public sphere" and Oldenburg's "third place" (Black, Pepper, & Bagshaw, 2009). The introductory chapter of Buschman & Leckie's *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture* (2007) connects libraries to a broader "vein of scholarship" stretching back to Newtonian physics and including geography and urban planning scholarship by David Harvey (1973, 2001). One chapter in this book, by McKenzie et al. (2007), analyzes the library as place through the lens of the program room as a women's and/or children's space during specific events, focusing on the "door" to frame the differentiation of these spaces and programs.

I use the term "place" to mean both the physical brick-and-mortar aspects of public library children's rooms and the conceptual idea of a place defined by its function. In this case, conceptually, "place" refers to where children are allowed to be and what they are allowed to use. Car-

penter's useful redefinition of the library as a "shared resource for reading and information" also highlights the functional elements of the physical location in ways that highlight the purposes of the place in addition to its physical manifestation (1996, p. 3). "Place" also connotes Oldenburg's idea of the "third place" that is neither work nor home and is defined by its function of allowing regular participation in an informal community (1999). At this time, children went to school, held jobs, and moved about more freely in their neighborhoods in ways that allowed any gathering place to function as a community space for young people (Zelizer, 1994; Peiss, 1986).

### "NOT A STEP INSIDE THE DOOR"

Before children had any sort of place in libraries, they were shut out—unless accompanied by an adult. William I. Fletcher was a proponent of letting children into libraries, as expressed in his 1876 article "Public Libraries and the Young," part of the first major report on public libraries in the United States. As a child, Fletcher was himself "rudely thrown out" of Boston Atheneum when he approached the doors without his father, who had previously accompanied him there (Bobinski, 1970). In a memoir-like reflection article for the 1914 issue of *Library Journal*, Fletcher (b. 1844) recounted his experience from sometime during the 1850s when he was on a trip to Boston with his brother. This was his story of attempting to visit a library:

Wandering in this way one day we passed the Athenaeum, and my brother 'dared' me to go in. Not to be stumped, I opened the door and stepped timidly into the vestibule. Presently appeared a man who seemed to belong to the place, of whom I asked if boys would be allowed to come in to see the building. His frigid reply, "Not a step inside the door!" sent me packing and, I am sure, helped make me a lifelong advocate of a hospitable atmosphere in libraries, especially for the small boy! (p. 579)

The issue of the door, in this case an entrance door that was closed to children, comes up repeatedly in descriptions of early children's librarianship, always accompanied by the question of whether children should be let in or shut out.

Fletcher would have applauded the work of Minerva Sanders at the Pawtucket Public Library, who was exhorting her fellow librarians to "open wide the doors" to children as early as 1887 and had in fact been admitting children for several years prior to this (1887, p. 396). She noted that a recent regional investigation of whether public libraries admitted children found a few exceptional libraries that did admit children but more that did not. As a result, she "became disheartened and ceased investigation, for the popular verdict seems to be 'Children and Dogs not

allowed.” Nonetheless, she exhorted her colleagues: “Let us gather the children in” (p. 399).

### OPEN DOORS: THE CHILDREN’S ROOM

More libraries increased their admission of young people from the late 1880s to the late 1890s. Librarians acknowledged this change in their publications, noting that “the admission of children under 12 to membership is of comparatively recent date” (Plummer, 1897, p. 679). As the doors opened, public libraries began to develop organized areas for children. Fannette Thomas describes the affordance of specialized space for children as one of the five aspects of children’s public library services, along with specialized collections, personnel, interagency cooperation, and techniques (1982). The use of the term “children’s room” to describe this space became more common in the 1890s and beyond. “The library has expanded,” noted one librarian, and it has “added new functions, new departments, one of the most recent of which is the Children’s Room” (Moses 1909, p. 247).

The use of “room” here was metaphorical—meaning any space where children were welcome—as well as literal—a particular room served as this place. Public libraries designated unused rooms in basements or, when possible, built rooms especially for children. There were still challenges, as when Providence Library intended to build a children’s room for their 1897 library but ran out of money, or when Chicago successfully built a children’s room but in a downtown location that was not readily accessible to most children (Plummer, 1897). Some libraries had only an alcove or a corridor to devote to children. Librarians themselves were concerned about whether children’s attitudes toward the room would foster good reading habits, worrying that children might “resent” reading suggestions. As one librarian saw it, the child “feels that his freedom is being interfered with, that the children’s room is his own domain and that here he can read what he chooses” (Van, 1906, p. 184).

The development of the children’s room elicited some debates over its usefulness. Some objected to the separation of children from adults, where they would be most likely to learn decorum and manners. Brooklyn librarians, at the time, saw their “small town” as having starkly different needs from the “big city” next door. Librarians acknowledged that children needed a separate room in “a busy city library” like those in Manhattan but chose not to separate children and adults in Brooklyn, arguing that there were “many advantages to the children of their mingling with the grown people in the town library” (Hunt, 1903, p. 54). Although children were increasingly separated from adults through schools, public libraries, playgrounds, and other Progressive Era institutions, some objected outright to these developments in what soon became known as the Century of the Child (Key, 1909). One librarian argued:

We are hedging the boy's and girl's spirit around with public utilities; we are building up their green fields with institutions which lay claim upon their hours from sunrise to sunset. . . . We are in danger of tiring the present day boy and girl. (Moses, 1909, pp. 247–248)

Still, most public libraries saw great value in opening the library doors to children, and they began to designate or design places especially for children, beginning in the 1890s and increasing after 1900.

The best evidence of new children's rooms appears in formal and informal surveys conducted by public librarians of the time. In the 1893 edition of an important early series of library surveys, the "Reading of the Young" surveys (McDowell, 2009b), well-known Hartford Public Library director and children's services advocate Caroline Hewins asked librarians: "Have you a children's reading room?" Responses came from 146 libraries; of these, 5 had rooms or plans for rooms, another 3 "wished" to have one, and many adult reading rooms were open to children, some with a special table (Hewins, 1893, p. 252). In 1894, Lutie Stearns repeated the question for the next survey in the series and found similar results, although more libraries responded with their makeshift approaches to creating places for children. For instance, Minneapolis Public Library replied that they had a "lower corridor" devoted to children, with book cases and tables, and Cleveland had a "special alcove," while other places had full children's reading rooms (p. 85). By 1898, the phrase "children's room" was coming into more common professional parlance, and the first survey question was: "Have you a children's room or children's department?" Of the 125 libraries responding, 30 had such places, while another two had imminent plans to open rooms (Hewins, 1898, pp. 35–38).

Opening days of new libraries or new children's rooms were cause for public celebration. At such times, not only were the doors open wide, but, in some cases, children were invited to see behind all of the doors in new library buildings. For example, at the opening of the St. Louis Public Library in 1912, there was a special opening for children, with a tour that "included all the departments open to the public—the bindery, the catalog room, the training classrooms and the stacks." Each tour began or ended in a story hour room, where children's librarians told stories all day (Power, 1912, p. 145). At other openings, children were welcomed partially in to the public library space. For example, one library had an assembly room where children were not admitted without parents, even on opening day (Pretlow, 1908, p. 179).

As they opened these rooms, librarians defined the purposes of these spaces, which required that children use the place "properly." Several librarians described the function of the children's room as "the introduction to the intermediate department and more often to the adult department" (Curran, 1915, p. 176). Others described the children's room as a training ground, "whose function it is to lay the 'foundation' for real use

of the adult collections” (Hazeltine, 1916, p. 160). Yet another librarian argued that children should have it “impressed upon” them that the children’s room was “a reading and study room” so that, if a child was “wandering around aimlessly, not behaving badly but simply killing time,” then

he should be, not crossly or resentfully, but pleasantly advised to go out into the park to play, as he doesn’t feel like reading and this is a *library*. I know that this has an excellent effect in developing the right idea of the purpose of the place. (Hunt, 1903, p. 55)

Sanders’s cry of “open wide the doors” was answered; children were allowed in to public libraries and welcomed in to children’s rooms, but crowded spaces and behavior issues as well as the more clearly defined purposes of the children’s room served to temper the “openness” of children’s rooms.

### IN OR OUT: CROWDS AND BEHAVIOR

What librarians wrote most often about children’s presence in these new rooms can be summed up in a single word: crowds. They described “crowded children’s rooms” sometimes in vivid terms, such as a seeing a “hoard of hands waving before our faces” (Underhill, 1910). A Portland-based librarian on a visit to the East Coast described the “long lines of children in New York and Brooklyn” (Cameron, 1925, p. 494). Another librarian mentioned that typical Saturday afternoons saw “a hundred children or more and several teachers in the room” (Stearns, 1901, p. 736). The opening of Hudson Park Branch in New York City brought a crowd that surged in to see the new place:

About half-past three on the opening day there was the sound of many feet pressing eagerly along in the streets, the doors swung open and an army of children marched in. They packed the steps and every inch of open space on both floors and still they came, packing closer.

The librarian moved through the crowd with difficulty, saying that she “wedged” her way back “to the children’s application desk” while “across a sea of children’s faces” she saw “a wave of impatience spread” (Pretlow, 1908, p. 177). We see here the physicality of the space and the embodied experience of the librarian as she made her way through the crowd. These descriptions imply vast groups of bodies, reinforcing the role that children’s librarians hoped to play in bringing order to the children’s room.

Of course, crowds were common in burgeoning urban communities at this time as well, due in part to the massive influx of recent immigrants. Many public librarians argued that public libraries had an obligation to both serve and “educate” recent immigrants in American cultural norms through their function as places. They argued that the public library “must be one of the agents, which by providing wholesome mental furnishings,

will counteract the coarsening effect of promiscuous living in crowded tenements" (Underhill, 1910, p. 155). In the overall geography of urban spaces, public libraries were crowded, but some children's homes were much more crowded.

Maintaining order among the crowds was challenging. Behavior and discipline were topics of significant professional debate during this transformative time as children's rooms opened. By far the most common disciplinary measure that children's librarians described was sending children "out," which reiterates the earlier metaphor of the door that let children in or kept them out. However, the expulsion of children from the children's room or public library was taken very seriously. Lutie Stearns's 1901 article on discipline directly addressed "how best to win or conquer" children, including "whether to expel them altogether" in some cases. As Stearns wrote: "We deem the question of banishment a serious one. Unruly boys are often just the ones that need the influence of the library most." She described a case where a boy was asked to "stay from the library altogether for a month and when he came back he would begin a new slate" (p. 737). In another case, six boys had stopped coming back to the library after Stearns appealed to their parents for help with discipline. Though she was sorry to see them go, she also wrote that "after giving the lads a year's trial I decided there was no use in making others suffer for their misdeeds," and their banishment was final (pp. 736-737).

While being cast out—as either threat or punishment—is the most frequently mentioned disciplinary measure, a close second was the mention of the use of physical intimidation by adult male authority figures such as janitors or police officers. While this was effective, it rankled librarians in their hopes of establishing a warm and welcoming tone in the children's room. Stearns described the "surprising and painful" results of informally surveying her colleagues at a conference symposium, that "the almost universal testimony" was "that the leading device used in preserving order is the policeman!" (1901, p. 735). This sense of discomfort with police-enforced discipline makes more sense when juxtaposed with another librarians' description of aspirations for the children's room:

Let the discipline of the room seem to be incidental; let the child feel that it is first and foremost a library where books are to be had for the asking, and that you are there to make it easier to get them. (Plummer, 1897, p. 682)

Certainly the presence of adult male police officers and janitors was not in the spirit of this intention, but it was effective at quashing the general uproar. One librarian described a very busy day when she was "trying to answer six questions a minute" and behavior became rowdy enough that she was forced to call in the "impressive janitor." This janitor "sat near

the gate and looked over the crowd and when he scowled the obstreperous twelve-year-olds made themselves less conspicuous" (Stearns, 1901, p. 736).

Of course, many children did comply with the explicit or implied rules of comportment, despite crowding and distractions. A few children were so disciplined and regular in their use of the library that it drew the librarians' attention. If place is one significant aspect of children's public library services, another important and perhaps overlooked aspect is that of time. Several librarians remarked about children who appeared weekly, including one girl who "used to come regularly every Saturday at 2 pm" (*Boston Herald*, 1881, p. 205) and a boy who "drew two books regularly every Saturday for more than a year" (Van, 1906, p. 183).

Some librarians found that children were disciplining other children, "policing" the space themselves. In one case, a young man presented himself for this purpose even "before the first stone of the building was laid." A boy "who said he was the 'main guy' had presented himself and asking for 'de boss' had offered to protect him and his property for the sum of five cents per week." The librarian describes him as "a little Irish lad of possibly fourteen years." The boy explained that "it takes money and treats to keep the [other] boys quiet" (Pretlow, 1908, p. 177).

Given the context of recent immigration, there were prevalent concerns over how various immigrant groups, particularly the "Celtic races," would impact American society (Jacobsen, 1998). It is not surprising, therefore, that this was not the only "Irish lad" to be presented with some ambivalence in children's librarians' writings. In another case, a librarian described a temporary arrangement in which an older child took it upon himself to discipline younger children:

An Irish lad about fifteen would turn handspings, desks and railings notwithstanding; indeed, all probable obstructions seemed to be in just the right places to show his excellent skill in springing over them. Now, handspings are not desirable in a library at any time, but when you are half crazy with work and worry they are impossible. I sent the boy out and told him not to come back for a week. An hour later someone came up to the children's room and said, "We've had one peaceful hour down stairs, the nicest boy has been helping us, he can do anything with the big boys and girls, he keeps them in line and makes the boys take their hats off and—" but I waited no longer, I ran to look at this genius and found, solemn and important, my hand-spring boy. I pretended not to recognize him and for a week he helped us with the children every evening, then he grew tired of it and went back to the streets where he is known as an impossible tough. (Pretlow, 1908, p. 178)

In addition to the effectiveness of the child-imposed discipline, for the time that it lasted, this anecdote demonstrates that children's physical relationships to spaces might include playful misbehavior in the library, even by an "impossible tough." This demonstrates that the same children

who were creatively (and even physically) disruptive could also be the leaders in creating order.

Not all children were comfortable enough to use the library desks and railings to "turn handsprings." Sometimes issues of physical presence were more subtle, as when children's body language expressed reluctance or trepidation. One librarian described an "Irish newsboy" who came into the children's room of the Boston Public Library by "edging along the rail in the lower hall of the Public Library till he approached one of the lady attendants, saying, 'Missus.'" Not only does this description highlight his physical reluctance and caution, but the beginning of the interaction demonstrates that he approached the librarian as an authority figure. At other times, librarians wrote about children's demeanor or physicality through the lens of their own interpretations. This same librarian described "a young girl, fourteen years of age" who "wandered into the library one day looking as if she would like a book and did not know how to obtain it" (*Boston Herald*, 1881, p. 204). That the librarian inferred a need for knowledge in the second case but not the first points to how complex it is to interpret this kind of historical information about embodiment and physicality.

### CHILDREN'S PLACE IN LIBRARIES

In thinking about reading, libraries, and collections, it is sometimes tempting to eschew the importance of the entrance doors and the physicality of place once children cross the threshold and come inside. The advent of new spaces for young people elicited results that ranged from enthusiasm to caution in young readers' approaches. But, overall, a wide array of child and adult voices agreed, by the mid-1920s, that children having their own place in the public library was a public good. One librarian argued that

there was no place in this community where the young people could meet for any kind of simple amusement, the only "social centers" being the cheap vaudeville theater, the usual moving picture show and the streets, until the little branch of the public library opened its doors. (Tyler, 1912, p. 550)

As the doors were open wide, new issues emerged that, ultimately, affected the design of spaces for children. Librarians began to notice that adult-sized furnishings could pose barriers for children. One librarian described a child's challenge of height by noting that "by standing up very straight he could look across the top of the desk" so that "his eyes met" the librarian's (Pretlow, 1903, p. 171). The voices of children and their librarians no doubt contributed to the eventual development of child-sized furnishings to ameliorate physical barriers.

Although the children's room as place and the children's department

as bureaucratic form became standard in public libraries, they did so as a result of a process of professional negotiation around issues such as the purposes of letting children in and the problems of crowds and discipline. Further research could examine buildings, blueprints, and architectural records to augment our understandings of how various factors informed the ongoing development of children's rooms in public libraries.

Today, nineteenth-century buildings are renovated, replaced, repurposed, or simply "mashed-up" with twenty-first century technologies, and issues of design for youth are becoming increasingly important. Public libraries need to insure that they remain relevant to communities by continuing to serve as the destinations they once were for crowds of young people. Reflecting on these early debates can help us think more deeply about issues of public places for children and the "doors" we are opening today as we embrace the reading, viewing, gaming, and creating that are all part of the twenty-first-century child's literacy.

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