Library as Platform: Embracing the Generativity of Public Library Space

Ingrid Erickson
Syracuse University

Abstract
Public libraries have a long legacy of serving the public via service provision, yet this poster argues that the library needs to be reconsidered for the generativity embedded in its physical space. Investigating the New York Public Library and Seattle Public Library as result of a study focused on mobile knowledge workers shows how the library is currently being used as a 1) space for productivity; 2) space for community building and sociality; 3) space for meeting; and 4) infrastructural space. Adopting this framework puts a new onus not only on designers (or renovators) of a library’s physical environments, but equally on those who help to establish the norms of practice in these spaces.

Keywords: public library; urban; infrastructure; knowledge work; mobile worker


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Contact: inericks@syr.edu

1 Introduction
Public libraries have a long legacy of serving the public, initially by giving them access to resources and, as they have developed over the years in America particularly, by supporting public empowerment through the provision of services (Ellsworth, 1955; Given & Leckie, 2003; Mickiewicz, 2016). In a contemporary library today, it would not be uncommon to find reference specialists ready to answer specific queries, dedicated informational resources (i.e., books or online databases) directed toward particular audiences or populations, and/or a host of classes taught both by librarians as well as members of the community. The public library today is a place aimed at meeting people and their needs where they are, and for many this welcome attitude is a type of refuge from the less welcoming environments in abundance today (Mathiesen, 2015).

This generalized caricature of the library as an accessible, welcoming resource leans heavily on the role of librarians as professionals— as well it should. In this sense, the value of a library in common discourse is primarily constituted by the expertise of those who staff it; librarians are what gives a library its purpose and elevate it to a place of potential transformation for its patrons. Library programs, like those that form the backbone of the iSchool community, take pride in training their students to be worthy civil stewards who not only work in the best interests of their local populations, but are trained to be innovative and agile leaders for the many challenging situations (i.e., budget cuts, patron socioeconomic challenges, etc.) that they may find themselves in (Kajberg, 1997). The young public librarians that seek training in the programs like the one I teach in are often motivated by an evident and worthy social conscience as well as a professional draw to various forms of information organization.

All of this said, I argue that it is time of the library to be reconsidered as a space that has substantive merits beyond those provided by professional librarians. This statement is the result of a two-year, Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded study that has investigated how the library supports mobile knowledge workers— that is, those members of the workforce who regularly work away from a dedicated, organizational office space because of frequent travel, a distributed work arrangement, or,
increasingly, a contingent work status (i.e., freelancer). If we move away from the librarian as the center of the library, we can focus more on how a library space itself can engender a key set of positive outcomes for contemporary patrons of all kinds.

2 Methodology

The study upon which my thesis is drawn was a research project centered on investigating how libraries were, if at all, acting as co-working spaces. This research had two key motivators. First, my curiosity about the shifting spatial value of libraries came in response to the rising number of makerspaces being put into libraries across the country, in which investments were being made in specialized, expensive equipment (e.g., 3D printers) that could be shared amongst a local population, in particular. The secondary motivation sprang from my personal location as a resident of New York City. Urban centers like this, both in the United States and internationally, are seeing a rising number of commercial coworking spaces that promote the affordances of an office without the need for organizational affiliation. The company WeWork is a particularly predominant player in this area, and is now so popular that it can charge a hefty sum to would-be members making it a rather elite institution.

My study focused on a comparison of two public library buildings—one in New York (New York Public Library (NYPL) Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL)) and one in Seattle (Seattle Public Library (SPL) Downtown Branch)—as alternatives to commercial co-working sites. These particular library branches were chosen because both were located in dense urban centers where mobile workers were most likely to be in need of workspace. Data were collected via observation and interviewing techniques during the spring and summer of 2015; a survey of librarians is currently underway and will not be reported on here. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed professionally, and observations were conducted in concert with a workspace/architecture professional who tracked the movements of patrons (not individuals, just numbers and activities) in various areas of the library across three days.

3 Findings

While the findings of this study are nascent, it is clear that the space a library provides for its patrons has several particular generative qualities. First, the library provides a space for productivity. The Seattle Public Library branch we observed has several different levels, which correspond to the architect’s original intentions: Living Room, Mixing Chamber, and Reading Room, in particular. It is also a building, iconically, that has many hidden corners due to the nature of its design. Both the Reading Room and several of these hidden corner spaces allow patrons to set up shop for hours at a time. We also observed several people who return daily to the same spot to engage in their personal activities. The Reading Room in particular (see Figure 1) is a site of productivity for those who make their way there as it on the top floor, open to light and city views, and is otherwise away from any librarian oversight. (It is worth noting that a security guard often monitors the space and particularly enforces the no-sleeping rule.)
By contrast, the SPL’s Living Room space (see Figure 2), which is located on the street level, is a space for community building and sociality. There is a coffee bar located near this space (though no food or drink is allowed in it), so the mood is the opposite of quiet productivity. Key to the design of this space are the chairs, which approximate arm chairs though they are made out of plastic. This is a space where people come and go (our observations found the greatest turnover in this space), but also the space in which there is the most peer interaction. As it is being enacted at SPL, at least, the Living Room approximates what Oldenburg called a third space—a place with no other goal that making and sustaining social connections (Ramon Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Ray Oldenburg, 1989).
The library is also a space for meeting, in the formal sense of the term, though this can be challenging. NYPL’s SIBL has two small conference rooms that it lets patrons pre-book online to hold meetings when necessary, though these meetings are capped at 2 hours maximum. These rooms are nearly constantly booked. The SPL Downtown branch has no such capacity, however, but we observed a group of people having a meeting—furtively, by their own admission—in a corner of the Reading Room where there were movable chairs (See Figure 3). This meeting was held in politely hushed tones so as not to be too disturbing, but the group nevertheless parlayed that they received negative stares from other patrons, who expected the norm of silence to prevail throughout the space.

Finally, any observation of a public library today would confirm that libraries are infrastructural spaces (Hughes, 1987; Star & Ruhleder, 1996). One of the key reasons that people linger in the Living Room space at SPL is that they are simultaneously charging their devices (or, more likely, their portable chargers). People in both library spaces congregate to where there are plugs—either in the wall or the table. Internet is also valuable for many, as are computers for those who don’t have them, but it is obviously that power is king.

4 Conclusion
The library has a legacy of providing access to any and all who would care to visit it, but that access has typically been tagged in the past to information or information expertise in the form of a librarian. Based on a study of coworkers and their appropriation of library spaces in New York and Seattle, it is clear that the library might also be viewed for its spatial generativity. Without, necessarily, the intervention of librarians, the library already provides (and might be augmented to increase this provision) spaces for individual productivity, public sociality, collective collaboration, and infrastructure. In this sense, the library might be accurately conceived as a platform for engagement, rather than a portal to information.

Adopting this framework puts a new onus not only on designers (or renovators) of physical environments, but equally on those who help to establish the norms of practice in these spaces. Many libraries already do
a great job at supporting productivity, for example, but it is not yet standard to realize that modern forms of productivity are strongly linked to infrastructure. Too often these two resources are separated, when increasingly they need to be tightly coupled. Likewise, the introduction of coffee shops in library spaces signals an acceptance that voluble sociality is welcome, however, these areas are still the exception, typically cordoned off in a corner somewhere. Sociality, particularly in the form of team collaboration, is elemental in our modern economy and it is detrimental that libraries have not embraced this fact more overtly with dedicated spaces for group interaction. Seattle Public Library had many empty classroom spaces and language lab cubicles—all fashioned as information delivery environments—and no space for self-directed meeting. In many ways, such as the norm of quiet, we continue to reify the belief that libraries are spaces for individual access and improvement, ideally with expert librarian intervention. It would be interesting to see what might happen both to our understanding of libraries as community spaces—as well as librarianship itself—should we adopt a more expansive, spatial view.

5 References


Oldenburg, R. (1989). The great good place: Café, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day. Paragon House Publishers.
