L550: Issues in Public Librarianship
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Literature Review #3:

Library Space as Community Space

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The role of the public library as a community space presents two sets of challenges: the practical, and the philosophical. Practical challenges for the library that wishes to be a community center include issues such as building design and décor; meeting room policies; patron behavior policies (as a civic center, how do we define civility?); service to specific populations such as the homeless or immigrants or tourists; involvement in civic endeavors such as adult literacy training, health information, and tax assistance; promotion of the library to various populations and interest groups; knowing the community as it changes over time (and not leaving anyone out); and sustaining vibrant programming and rich collections that respond to patrons' diverse needs and interests. Philosophical challenges go to the identity of the library itself. What kind of institution do we want to be? What role do we play in our community? Is our role as destination more important than our role as information resource? What difference can we really make?

The 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library (i.e., Harlem) in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated what a difference a community-focused library can make not only for the people it serves, but even for the life of the arts (Anderson, 2003). Branch director Ernestine Rose arrived in 1920, and through close attention to the neighborhood around her she made the Harlem library a sparkplug of the Harlem Renaissance. She built collections relating to African American history and culture, and sought out community leaders for advice as well as support of programming like art shows, literary and civic forums, and dramatic productions. The Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints that she established in 1925 became the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the jewels of the New York Public Library. She also broke the color line

in employment by hiring African American assistants (a revolutionary act for the time, but one that Rose took as simple common sense for community service).

The principles evident in Rose's service continue to echo in library literature. When a group of librarians, publishers, consultants, and other media and communications professionals got together in 2000 to brainstorm possible futures for different kinds of libraries, they concluded that the public library had the best shot of survival in the new world of information, primarily because of the potency and attractiveness of its role as community center (Himmel & Wilson, 2001). Piwowarczyk describes the library as a host for the community, stressing collections development ("a good host lays out a spread"), physically inviting space, library promotions and advertising (the host's invitation), and the librarian's role as friendly guide to information as essential components of good hosting (Piwowarczyk, 2002). Schull lays out in more significant detail the practicalities of civic librarianship (Schull, 2004), pointing out that these concerns for the library's role are not new but have been with us from the beginning.

One of the things that make the community center role attractive is the idea of social capital: how human beings derive value from public or civic relationships, and how fostering those relationships through public policy can build healthier, safer, happier communities more engaged in the democratic process. The public library plays a natural part in this configuration, both as information resource and guide, and as a place for people to gather and make connections. The term "social capital" was coined by sociologist James Coleman in the 1980s, and popularized by Robert D. Coleman in 2000 (Goulding, 2004). Michael Cart (2002) is just one scholar who has applied the ideas of

social capital to librarianship, with more practical applications coming from Katherine de la Peña McCook (2000) and Diantha Schull (2004).

Reaching this shining ideal of community service, as stated at the outset, carries with it practical implications. The services offered by strong collections, exciting programming and effective community outreach must be supported by clearly communicated, consistently applied policies that understand the law and respect patrons (Budt & Lipinski, 2003), and by a physical space that is not only functional but inviting (Sivulich, 2001). The Brown County Public Library in Nashville (http://browncounty.lib.in.us/) makes a prime example of how to design a library building as community space. Its rustic architecture still lets in generous daylight, and intriguing artwork graces exteriors and interiors throughout. Collections are housed on an expansive single floor, arranged in such a way to provide welcoming but clearly demarcated spaces for different uses. A play space highlights the children's area at one corner, while a cozy reading area with sofas in front of the fireplace on the other side of the stacks makes a delightful place to commune with a good book. Public computers are readily available near the entrance, adjacent to the circulation desk (which is tucked to the side—in plain sight, but inobtrusive). You enter the library and immediately want to explore. It is a space that makes you smile. The lower level includes a series of conference rooms, which host an active range of classes and meetings. This is a library that knows how to treat its patrons and staff in creating a space worth going to, and spending time in.

References

Anderson, S. A. (2003). "The place to go": The 135th Street Branch Library and the

     Harlem Renaissance. *Library Quarterly 73*(4), 383-421.

     Profiles the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library in the 1920's,
     and the unflagging efforts by librarian Ernestine Rose to build relevant
     collections, foster relationships with community leaders, promote
     programs for art and literature, and create a nurturing atmosphere for
     artists and writers. Rose came to Harlem after working in branches serving
     immigrant communities in New York, and applied the same principles of
     neighborhood understanding and dedication to service in the Harlem
     environment. This commitment to meaningful service made the 135th
     Street Branch "the place to go" for the Harlem Renaissance.

Budt, M. & Lipinski, T. (2003). Just who can use the meeting room? *The Shy Librarian*

     3(2), 1, 12-13.

     Extracted with permission from a longer chapter in Mary Minow's and
     Tomas Lipinski's *The library's legal answer book* (ALA, 2003).
     Beginning with a specific example, Budt and Lipinski lay out legal
     ramifications of library meeting room policies in relation to the definition
     of "public forums" and the principles of free speech. They provide advice
     regarding potential controversies surrounding meeting room reservations
     (Who can use them? How may they use them?), again providing
     examples.

Cart, M. (2002). America's front porch—The public library. *Public Library Quarterly*

     21(1), 3-21. Retrieved October 4, 2005, from

     http://www.haworthpressinc.com/store/product.asp?sku=J118 (accessed through

     Indiana University Libraries).

Based on Cart's address to the Texas Women's University School of Library and
Information Studies, 9/27/2000. Cart delineates the public library's role as a centering
institution and gathering place, stressing that the potency of this role cannot be
maintained or developed without partnerships with other institutions, and a place at the
civic decision-making table. Draws heavily from Robert D. Putnam's popularization of
the concept of social capital in *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American
community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), and Katherine de la Peña McCook's *A place at the
table: Participating in community building* (ALA, 2000).

Goulding, A. (2004). Libraries and social capital. *Journal of Librarianship and*

Information Science 36(1), 3-6. Retrieved October 4, 2005, from

http://bert.lib.indiana.edu:3111/cgi/reprint/36/1/3 (SAGE Publications, accessed

through Indiana University Libraries).

Defines the concept of social capital as a tool for civic planning (not just
for having a good feeling about where you live), and examines the public
library as a tool for building social capital. Compares American and
British attitudes toward the ability of government to set policies that will
effectively develop social capital. Encourages librarians to promote the
library as instrumental in building desirable values for a community and
fostering democracy and civic engagement. Treatments like this one
informed my petulance during our "PL as Community Center" class
session on 9/27, when we discussed the differences between libraries and
book stores *again* instead of talking about the things that make me starry-
eyed about library service: the library as social capital, as a necessary,
positive place in the community and a valued destination for building
connections and getting what you need (which is what I thought "the
public library as community center" meant).

Himmel, E. E. & Wilson, W. (2001). Are libraries (and librarians) kaput? *Public Library*

Quarterly 19(1), 3-9. Retrieved October 4, 2005, from

http://www.haworthpressinc.com/store/product.asp?sku=J118 (accessed through

Indiana University Libraries).

Prompted by a listserv discussion, analyzes the results of a gathering to
brain-storm scenarios for the futures of different kinds of libraries.
According to their deliberations, the future of the public library appears
rosier than for academic or special libraries, primarily because of its role
as a community center, community icon, and personal information coach.
Frankly, these people seem to be taking their discussions a little too
seriously; given the comments on the participants' backgrounds (many of
them don't use public libraries themselves, they buy their books…), I
don't think they have their finger on the pulse of things. Still, their
conclusions are interesting—and it's important to note that civic
administrators who hold library purse strings may be working from the
same vague impressions of the public library.

McCook, K. P. (2000). *A place at the table: Participating in community building*.

Chicago: ALA.

This book is on Reserve in the SLIS Library. Foreword by Sarah Ann Long, ALA President 1999-2000 (who made "Libraries Build Community" her presidential theme). Nine chapters deal with the ramifications of community, community diversity, visions of community, factors for success, examples from practice, "cybercommunity", connecting the public library to community building, librarianship in this context, and advocacy. Presents Putnam's concept of social capital, and points out that he ignored libraries in his initial formulation (however, see his 2003 book on partnerships, *Better together*, cited in Schull 2003, for a more enlightened view). Breaks down the twenty-eight factors for successful community-building developed by Mattessich and Monsey of the Wilder Foundation. Provides her own five skills for the librarian as community builder: understanding the community; sincerity of commitment; a relationship of trust; organizing experience; flexibility and adaptability.

Piwowarczyk, L. (2002). Rules of the role: Library as host/community as guest. Part One:

Booking the guests: Preparation and invitation. *Library Mosaics 13*(1), 8-10. Part

Two: Welcoming the guests. *Library Mosaics 13*(2), 16-18. Retrieved October 4,

2005, from H. W. Wilson Library Literature & Information Science Full Text

database (Document IDs: AN 200200101871001 and AN 200206001871005,

accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

Uses the metaphor of guest and host to examine the ways in which a public library serves the community and promotes itself to the community. A good host provides an array of treats (i.e., collections), a welcoming and comfortable place in which to gather, genial people with which to spend time, stimulating conversation (programs), and an invitation to return. Emphasizes collection development with a diversity of content and format, that is responsive to community demographics and interests; publicity and public relations to advertise the value of the library to the community; the role of the library to humanize information; and the role of the library as a desirable destination.

Schull, Diantha. (2004). The civic library: A model for 21st century participation.

Advances in Librarianship 28, 55-81.

Applies a practical perspective to the philosophy of civic librarianship, an idea that is not new to the profession but rather is rooted with it. Notes the need for a service model: for all the talk in the discipline about libraries as community centers and as institutions essential to democracy, little has

been done to make the idea concrete through professional development, library administrative structure, or planning and evaluation. Uses the "Libraries for the Future" Civic Library Model as a starting place, illustrated by examples from the field. See her References for further readings I didn't have time to explore.

Sivulich, K. G. (2001). So, design me a box—Part One. *Public Library Quarterly 20*(1),

3-8. Retrieved October 4, 2005, from

http://www.haworthpressinc.com/store/product.asp?sku=J118 (accessed through

Indiana University Libraries).

Intentionally humorous statement given by the Director of the Jacksonville Public Library (Sivulich) to firms participating in the Architectural Design Competition to build a major new downtown Central Library. Sivulich outlines the requirements of the library, with a list of do's and don'ts for its design. His opening and concluding stipulations: it has to be a rectangle (which he defines). Parts Two through Four (tracing the competition rules, the designers' questions and challenges, and the final presentations) follow in subsequent issues, authored by Richard L. Waters (Principal Consultant, PROVIDENCE Associates Inc, Library Planners Consultants). And yes, like Chicago, they chose the most classical-looking design (go figure). Completion was originally expected for 2003 or 2004; checking the library website (http://jpl.coj.net/U_ENG_iFiles/hours.html#main), one finds that it is now scheduled to open on Nov. 12, 2005. Other branches built or renovated as part of the same "Better Jacksonville" plan are generally more interesting and inviting architecturally, at least from the exterior.