The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which ideology and pragmatism inform public library practice. The research includes literature related to a variety of topics (i.e. public libraries, sociology, and economics) in order to establish a context for the current public library. Includes a discussion of library philosophies, changing information needs, patron expectations, and recent trends.

Headings:

Libraries and society.

Libraries—Aims and objectives.

Digital Divide.

Libraries—Automation.

Library Science—Moral and ethical Aspects—United States.

Library Science—United States.
SERVING THE PATRON: TRADITION, IDEOLOGY AND CHANGE IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

by
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I. Introduction

The only true equalizers in the world are books; the only treasure-house open to all comers is a library; the only wealth which will not decay is knowledge; the only jewel which you can carry beyond the grave is wisdom. (Richardson, 216).

- J.A. Langford

The public library has long represented the possibility of the individual. It is free, open, and allows the mind to wander and supports it when it pauses. It provides a classless shangri-la for seekers of knowledge. It is not bound by fees, admissions, or socio-economic connections. While it is a model currently bound by financial imitations, lured by corporate partnerships, and changed by the increasing demands and possibilities of technology, it is the most equitable of all social institutions. The public library is unbound by operations of class, race, and the rigidity of bureaucratic convention. The mission for public librarians is service, but this service rests upon knowledge; in this case, knowing the needs, wants, and expectations of the patron.

In the words of librarian Andy Barnett in Libraries, Community, and Technology, “It is clear that libraries as we know them will be extinct in twenty years. Libraries as we knew them twenty years ago are obsolete today” (Barnett, 2). Recently and increasingly, technological resources provide much of what the patron needs, wants, and expects from the library. The variety offered by these innovations has added a sense of novelty and limitless possibility for the modern information seeker. Additionally, the public library
needs to cater to its mission as a physical community center in a climate that is increasingly electronic and ephemeral. By combining its civic status with contemporary proclivities, the public library can expand upon its traditional role to become a singularly indispensable part of the community. This paper explores the philosophical and empirical traditions of the public library, and the ways that public libraries can best be shaped to meet contemporary demands.
II. Serving Patrons

Genuine politics -- even politics worthy of the name -- the only politics I am willing to devote myself to -- is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community and serving those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action, to and for the whole. (Flanagan, 135)

- Vaclav Havel

The litmus test of any public library is its ability to serve the people of the community. As such, serving the modern patron includes thinking about their quotidian pursuits. As a society enamored by consumption and increasingly kaleidoscopic amusements, the traditional idea of the library is somewhat of an anomaly. While the public library has changed rapidly in recent years to keep up with technological innovations and patron demands, it is an increasingly incongruous entity. Its continued success and presence depends upon the ways in which patrons understand and take advantage of the services it has to offer.

That said, the conversion of the library from a keeper of books and a bastion of the community has been rapidly transformed by the societal demands of and personal interests in technology. According to a recent study by the American Library Association and the Information Institute at Florida State University’s School of Information titled
“Libraries Connect Communities,” 99.1 percent of public libraries currently offer public internet access (31). The same study sites that, “[o]nly 21.9 percent of public library branches indicate that the number of workstations they currently have is adequate to meet patron demands at all times” (35). Roughly one-third of the population does not own a computer, and applying for jobs has become increasingly dependent on the internet, with 16 percent of positions now only accepting online applications. The increasing necessity of the computer has spelled greater popularity for the public library, especially as 73 percent of libraries report that they are the only resource for free internet services in their community (35). Visits have grown 4.6 percent annually since 1994, with public libraries in the United States counting 1.3 billion visitors in 2004 (3).

Demand in the face of limited supplies changes the atmosphere of a library, as patrons have become clients that need to sign-in, and then are singed-out when their thirty to sixty minutes have expired. The wait periods combined with the time limitations have made the library more of a busy terminal than before the internet became such a focal point of the library’s offerings. Irrespective of patron needs, (which quite likely involves employment searching or apartment-hunting), and less urgent desires (meandering online daydreams, perfecting the Tahiti itinerary), there is a definite endpoint to the services the public library can provide due to the relative scarcity of resources. While there are certainly many other items to be used and enjoyed, it is safe to say the tacit use of the library has evolved for many users. Instead of it being the quiet sanctuary of the past, it is now fully wired and designed to be interactive—albeit with a computer. Libraries must accommodate the instant gratification model because providing computers and internet access has become an essential part of information service. While
it certainly has its purposes, placing an automated tool at the center of a varied institution seems reductive, if not wholly unwise. In order to identify the best ways to proceed with an institution that can give pause and encourage learning, one must understand the society in which it lives.

Libraries must react to change in order to be able to perform the task of providing for the information needs of the people at that particular moment. Abraham Kaplan related the task of the librarian to that of the philosopher, his own vocation.

Like your profession, mine also has thrust upon it, as its appropriate domain, the whole of knowledge, the whole of culture nothing is supposed to be foreign to us, and we ought to be prepared under suitable circumstances to be helpful with regard to any and every corner of human concern. Like you, we cannot even begin to occupy ourselves with the substance and content of this endless domain, but only with its form, with its structure, with the inter-relation of its various parts. (Gorman, 27)

Librarianship is about service, and while one could argue that the forms, structures, and relations of its various parts discussed by Kaplan are integral to the profession’s infrastructure, they are merely reactions to informational demands at that particular moment, organized for maximum expedience. The librarian is in the business of implicit understanding, much like the library is in the business of supplying items deemed necessary from a particular patron at a particular moment. It is an institution characterized by wants—wants based on necessity, strategic planning, and evanescent daydreams. All of these impetuses, though, should result in a physical object. It is the expectation of physical manifestation that keeps libraries focused on tangible goods. Librarians truly are materialists in the strictest sense; and what good are libraries without their materials?
However, the library is not immune from philosophical musings. Any sort of implemented philosophy will have to provide enough rigidity to account for its presence accompanied by enough flexibility to keep it relevant. The public library world is defined by its variety—of both materials and the diversity of the people being served. Librarian Ernestine Rose summarizes the problem with philosophical underpinnings in the library world with this quote:

To define the principles underlying a profession concerned with human beings and with living issues is a curiously elusive business. How to escape the morass of generalized statement and not fall into the hopeless abyss of the pontifical! Yet not to have fundamental principles is to be without objectives and means aimless diffusion of effort--the kind of walking in circles than which nothing is more calculated to lead to disillusionment and slackening of effort in the performance of life's tasks. I have heard it said that this is just what ails library work and librarians. Others protest that in dealing with the imponderables of culture, of thought and mental bias, standards too must be fluid, not static; still others assert that to define principles tends to standardize and freeze them, whereas the chief asset of the library, they say, is its individual approach, readily adaptable to different people and conditions. (Rose 48)

In order for an entity such as the library to function and function well, then, it is in our best interest to be loosely guided, in other words, aware enough of the discipline’s guiding principles to know when to amend or eschew them. While it may seem contradictory to balance the rather rigid organizational demands of the library with the flexible spirit necessary for helpful service, a pragmatic approach involves both. Certainly, fluidity cannot take place if there is not an underlying system of organization. However, as the Age of Information multiplies information possibilities and novel questions exponentially, the librarian will have to grow accustomed to more and more improvisation to accomplish the daily feats of the vocation. The technological advances of the last decade have necessitated a sort of revolution. Principles and even organizational systems are likely to be obsolete or somewhat of a hindrance to these
changes. Yet, as Rose points out, the complete absence of a unifying philosophy leaves any institution unable to take stock of its current strengths and weaknesses and unprepared to make future changes in order to better fulfill its mission.

Finding the best approach to being both philosophical and pragmatic has been an ongoing discourse. Published in 1931, Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* provides a spare, amenable, but rather complete guide for librarians. They are: 1.) Books are for use. 2.) Every book its reader. 3.) Every reader its book. 4.) Save the time of the reader. 5.) The library is a growing organism. (Gorman, 19)

While Ranganathan could not have foreseen the radical changes that awaited the library, if his books were joined by information and his readers also become "information seekers" to meet today's specifications, the underlying philosophy of pragmatism, service, and flexibility presents a workable model for today's library. In fact, Ranganathan's treatise was intended to bolster the idea of the librarian as something of a kind and generous shepherd of learning, with unlimited patience for the adrift patron. Though it is somewhat taken for granted in the library world, being and remaining pragmatic about patron needs and the uses of the library is an ongoing challenge—a challenge encapsulated by the final law. In the words of Lee W. Finks, Ranganathan’s “Five Laws can fill an other-wise empty spot as a foundation for reflecting on our mission. As I said in that earlier article, they are just right for such a purpose: simply stated, obviously wise, somehow romantic and charming in an exotic sort of way, and with the intellectual strength to stand alone” (Finks, 2). While the lucidity of Ranganathan's laws is rarely found in the realm of budgets, traditions, and divergent opinions, they do provide the objectivity necessary to determine the wants and needs of today's patrons.
III. Technology

Technology is a way of organizing the universe so that man doesn’t have to experience it. (Keeler, 83)

- Max Frisch, Swiss architect, playwright, and novelist

The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life, it is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action. (Lambert, 171)

- Marshall McLuhan

Ranganathan’s final law, which neatly summarizes innovation and its oft-accompanied growing pains, addresses the tremendous growth of the library beyond its physical space. The library of today reaches far beyond the physicality of the building, books, and computers. It—or, more precisely, its representative—is available in the home, office, or airport all day, every day online. While this representation allows patrons to browse the library’s holdings at will and utilize some of them in the location of their choosing, the implications of such free-floating information is somewhat troubling to those wedded to the idea of traditionally organized information. Of course, the library’s contribution to this newish information galaxy is rather minimal. Everyone with a computer and an internet connection has constant access to the world’s most invigorating,
expansive, esoteric, trivial, demeaning, and parochial collection of resources. The extravagant resources provided by the internet have been criticized by those unenthusiastic about the informational anarchy created when quantity greatly exceeds quality. For the information professional, structure is paramount to substance, and the naïf setting sails amongst so many contradictory tides will surely be rendered confused, if not apoplectic. Michael Gorman, former president in the American Library Association, voiced his cynicism in *Our Enduring Values*:

"The 'stuff' that the net has added to 'traditional' recorded knowledge and information is unorganized and largely unretrievable according to the most minimal library standards. I know of no one who believes that anything but a small fraction of the world's recorded knowledge and information now available in print will ever be digitized (for a variety of financial, technical, and copyright purposes). I know of no one who believes that the authority control and controlled vocabularies that are essential for good retrieval will ever be applied comprehensively to the swamp of digital 'stuff.' Then there is the question of unmitigated interaction with digital documents. If you doubt that there is a great need for assistance in the use of digital documents, just ask any modern reference librarian." (Gorman, 44)

Certainly, much has changed since Gorman wrote these words in 2000. The University of Michigan and Google announced that, as of February 2008, they had digitized one million of the 7.5 million books found in the University of Michigan's library system (“Millions”). Google’s flirtation with copyright infringement are legion, as they have scanned every book that has not been the subject of a letter of disapproval from its copyright holder. That is one of the many reasons the project has been criticized so roundly, as others have complained about the lack of quality control that has led to missing paragraphs and pages, and Google’s brazen and secretive behavior surrounding the project (Goldsborough, 14). While Google has enabled ostensibly easy, though not necessarily reliable, searching for everyone with internet access, Gorman's reaction to the presence of computers and electronically available information was something closer to
fear than disbelief, and it certainly looks provincial from this vantage point. Here, Gorman states that:

The mission of the library today and the broad tasks of the librarian have far more in common with the libraries and librarians of the nineteenth century than they do with a computer center, The waning 1980s fad for combining libraries and computer centers in the basis that they are both concerned with “information” is waning precisely because the premise for those mergers was, and proved to be, unsustainable. (14)

Though Gorman is usually more evenhanded in his general acceptance of technology, in this instance his comments seem myopic and disconcerting given all evidence to the contrary. Though his circumspection evinces his belief in quality information and the belief that “[l]ibraries are different from other entities […] and it behooves librarians to recognize their unique identity and mission”, perhaps he could have foreseen an amiable intersection of this history and innovation as well as a broader role for librarians and other information professionals beyond the walls of physical libraries.

His notion of the library as a place and a presence is rather traditional. He writes that a library should exist for the "indefinite future" in the following senses: as a place to hold physical materials; for study and research, and to "read, view, and listen; to provide internet access and computer assistance; to house video, music, and other special collections; to provide community meeting places, and places in which people and classes can be helped by information professionals. (Gorman, 45)

Gorman embraces the fine and noble idea of the library as community center with healthy resources, generous hours, and enthusiastic patrons. Gorman is essentially describing an extravagant and intellectual living room. Such libraries do exist, and exist beautifully, but others have not been so lucky due to inadequate funding. Also, the PC revolution has radicalized the individual's appetite for information in such a way that can
be supported by the public library, yet much of this may take place in an actual living room, with a laptop and a cup of tea at two in the morning. It is a different world than the golden era of the late nineteenth century Gorman is fond of gilding, and his somewhat gauzy dreams seem to resist modern-day temperaments and proclivities.

The library can be the information locus of the community, but it must make amends with the fact that the patrons comprising these communities are varied and unable to be neatly categorized. The 24-hour globalized economy means that the time and location of work cannot be presumed, and that a nine-to-five job is something other than a presumption. In addition, the library should be hospitable to all members of the community it has long served. Since people have become more transient and both more and less flexible to the few places to go during the day, one of the exceptions being the public library. The library can be the community center that Gorman dreams of, just perhaps more obliquely.

While Gorman previously voiced his discomfort with technology’s infringement on the library, even he concedes that the need for computers and technology is necessary for the library to be a community center. Here he writes that:

Members of minority groups, the poor, the less educated, and disadvantaged children, particularly those who live in rural areas or in the inner city, are denied access at a time when the general is joining the information age in droves. The answer, of course, is to use libraries, particularly public and school libraries, as centers of access to the [i]nternet and places in which the public can obtain instruction and assistance in the use of electronic resources. (47)

There are innumerable issues to be addressed here: illiteracy, the educational system, and de facto segregation to name a few, and access to information and the acquisition of technical skills can hopefully help stem them. Yet, providing these resources by compromising one’s values on the suitability of technology within the
public library presents a bit of a challenge, and such concessions do not usually provide much in the way of thoughtful service or expertise. If Gorman or anyone else is to believe that the library is a progressive tool for change, it needs to anticipate trends and needs, not respond to emergencies.

The public library should provide resources and access to information. These more traditional resources and electronic resources can complement each other. Since it is Gorman's stated belief that these amateurs will eventually need a professional to guide them, and he admits that the public library should provide access in the face of need, this sort of begrudging admission of changing times does not tend to be successful. While Gorman touts the promise of technological instruction and expertise, his previous statements betray his sentiments. Providing help once it becomes a widely accepted problem, yet he combines his misgivings regarding the recklessness of autonomous information-seekers with the decidedly more fractious issues surrounding the Digital Divide. The implications of the injustices represented by the Digital Divide are quite serious, but they should not be utilized to stem the information revolution, particularly one that was—even in 2000—a foregone conclusion. It stands to reason that most people will need and want libraries for a variety of resource needs that were probably spurred by their wanderings on the internet. In the words of Barnett, “Even though people have access to millions of pieces of information, there is no reason to suppose that makes them well-informed. Such access usually turns out to involve a multitude of very brief factoids. This is a catastrophe, no matter how convenient” (Barnett, 10). The public library can cater to these interests, since the internet has rendered nothing too esoteric nor outré, and the public library can cater to a population that knows, or at least wants to know, about
everything. That is not a problem, and if Gorman is, in fact, an advocate of the library, he needs to see possibilities instead of barriers.
IV. Novelty

Novelty has charms that our minds can hardly withstand (Hamilton, 55).

- William Thackeray

“Stretching his hand up to reach the stars, too often man forgets the flowers at his feet,--so beautiful, so fragrant, so various, so multitudinous” (Bentham, 52).

- Jeremy Bentham

Perhaps Gorman's grievances are due to the increasingly elusive notion of community. While past generations wrestled with youths leaving the farm for the city, people are increasingly peripatetic--skipping states, countries, and continents within a lifetime, or even a decade. Stemming from the globalized economy and wanderlust-inducing technological innovations, a renewed sense of Romanticism has manifested itself. According to literacy advocate and humanities scholar Mark Edmundson:

A Romantic, says Nietzsche, is someone who always wants to be elsewhere. If that's so, then the children of the Internet are Romantics, for they perpetually wish to be someplace else, and the laptop reliably helps take them there — if only in imagination. The e-mailer, the instant messenger, the Web browser are all dispersing their energies and interests outward, away from the present, the here and now. The Internet user is constantly connecting with people and institutions far away, creating surrogate communities that displace the potential community at hand. (Edmundson)

While this abundance of possibility certainly has its merits, the incessant sizzling of the brain is unprecedented, and does not lend itself well to accepted notions of
diligence and scholarship. It is understandable that a paucity of studied thought and foresight is so prevalent in a world in which so many things—everything, really—are nominally, superficially available. It stands to reason that the relative haves are unaware of the have-nots because they are blinded by unceasing distractions and acquisitions. The mind is neither rested nor quiet enough to see outside of its own protean appetites. It is not mature behavior, but the promise of the shiny and virtual is still a new one, with many current and future tricks up its sleeve.

Barnett expounds upon this phenomenon as it relates to the role of the librarian, “Even though people have access to millions of pieces of information, there is no reason to suppose that makes them well-informed. Such access usually turns out to involve a multitude of very brief factoids. This is a catastrophe, no matter how convenient” (Barnett, 10). Though this information may find itself without an appropriate context, a thoughtful person will most likely take it upon themselves to learn more, and learn well. Even if that is not the case, sparked interest—no matter how incomplete—is much easier to feed with the help of the internet.

America’s interest in the fleeting at the expense of intellectual gravity has been a vocal concern and popcorn-hobby among the tweed crowd since the 1950s. Beginning with Richard Hofstadter's revered *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), and continuing Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Morris Berman's *Twilight of American Culture* (2000) and *Dark Ages America: The Final Phrase of Empire* (2006), and the recent *Age of American Unreason* (2008) by Susan Jacoby, intellectuals and the people who love them have railed against American culture and its obscurcation of the life of the mind. The
traditional culprits are the ineffective educational system, the suffocation of critical thinking by religion, and the general encouragement of an unending adolescence encouraged by rampant consumerism. Yet works of this kind have started to feel somewhat formulaic if not completely hackneyed, as picking on the rube-like nature of the average American has been a global affair for some time—and one that is silently steeped in classist aspersions. One cannot help but feel the books have grasped onto one of the last refuges of criticism—intellectual elitism—at the expense of examining the complex social conditions that fail to foster intellectual ambition. Regardless, these writers are in good company; the mental habits of others have been a thorn in the side of serious intellects since Plato, who was concerned about the maverick implications of the written word:

The fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it. They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written, calling things to mind no longer from within themselves by their unaided powers, but under the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves. So it’s not a recipe for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered. (Shane, 3)

The visual revolution, though, just keeps going. Mass media spreads its message with the seductive and soporific help of beautiful imagery, replacing ideas with the incessant advertising memes and twenty-two minute plots. It is an easy target, but it is also a permanent fixture in the lives of most of the world's people. Michael J. Wolff paraphrased its effects in 1999's The Entertainment Economy:

From its formative years, the evolution of media impacted the development of this generation and was in turn influenced by wants and desires of this new informational colossus--a whole generation of consumers who were socialized by what they saw on the tube. A common consumer culture leapfrogged national and cultural boundaries and then, as boomers had children and now grandchildren the process has, if anything, accelerated. (Shane 14).
Yes, the human brain has endured a torrent of change in the last fifty years. The information obtained by the television is completely passive, allowing everyone save the catatonic to receive its message. It is an omnipresent feature in many homes, restaurants, and stores, providing an instant dialogue for the lonely and brain fodder for the bored. From this vantage point, it looks like the internet on training wheels. This inanimate companionship is ubiquitous, and it now manifests itself much more dynamically online.

Life can be difficult, human relationships can be fraught; technology is cheaper and easier. While the human race has struggled mightily, life was regulated by the need for family and community camaraderie. These needs have been replaced by a more primitive struggle: that of the individual. One cannot be blamed for partaking of this promise and all forms of distraction--books, film, television, surfing the internet--give one the impression of perceived engagement with minimal effort.

This type of isolation, though, is oddly comforting, and has given rise to a new brand of individualism. In the words of Anthony Elliott and Charles Lamert in their book entitled *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*:

> Modernity’s new individualism is not only in its accelerating globalism, proliferating fast-food outlets, increasing use of international travel and tourism, or infernal transnational pollution problems and urban traffic jams. It is in the expansive emotional literacy and cultural cosmopolitanism of its people who, in their diversity, have developed ways of living that are more open, experimental, and privatized than was the case in the past.” (Elliott and Lemert, 15)

Seismic cultural disruptions have occurred in the last fifty, twenty, and ten years--and everyone knows they will keep coming. Things that used to give meaning to people's lives—namely family and different forms of community—have been either systematically or casually compromised. The 1980s featured the strategic disavowal of
the community in the name of Reagan and Thatcher's ideas and policies, a conservatism that favored privatization at the expense of the collective, summed up by Thatcher herself, who said, "there is no such thing as society" (Barber, 117). While the political tides have turned a bit, the rampant consumerism that complements this self-interest so well has been on the upswing since, though not without a considerable amount of dissent. According to Benjamin R. Barber, these conditions have created a certain psychological profile for its denizens:

Privatization turns the private, impulsive me lurking inside myself into an inadvertent enemy of the public, deliberative we that also is part of who I am. The private me screams "I want!" The privatization perspective legitimizes this scream, allowing it to trump the quiet "we need" that is the voice of the public me in which I participate and which is also an aspect of my interests as a human being. All the choices we make one by one thereby come to determine the social outcomes we must suffer together, but which we never directly choose in common. (Barber 128-9)

It is difficult to hear the soft, long-term lull of the "we" when the "me" is screaming. Yet, this is the foundation of maturation. Though this very well may be the golden age of self-interest, it eventually dawns on most people that there is something to be gained from compromising their impulsive desires for the farther-reaching. While community is a somewhat loaded word, approaching life more systematically—or karmically, if you prefer—will ultimately be more beneficial to the individual. It should not be difficult to convince people that they will, in fact, reap what they sow, but it is considerably more difficult when the present is easy, welcoming, and amusing.

This is a mission that the public library is uniquely able to address. The library has historically served the good of the individual for the implicit betterment of society. More specifically, public libraries need to essentially embrace the surrounding community. This is a technologically-rich and consumerist society, and we need to learn
to speak its language effectively. There are a number of ways in which the library has embarked on this mission. The first is through a splashy refurbishing of the library brand. Public libraries in Seattle, the Atlanta suburb of Buckhead, and San Francisco have employed high-profile architects to find a way to communicate the possibility of the library in the twenty-first century. Most auspicious is the Seattle Public Library, designed by Pritzker-winner Rem Koolhaas. After touring libraries around the country, assembling a pastiche of local corporate pashas, and taking counsel from experts in culture and urban planning, the planning community concluded that, “people are not ready to give up on books and that they are not ready to give up on libraries, but that they find most libraries stuffy, confusing, and uninviting. Patrons wanted a more user-friendly institution, and librarians wanted one that was more flexible” (Goldberger). The solution then resulted in an eleven-story web of steel and steel filled with chartreuse and red imaginings sitting somewhere between Georgia O’Keeffe and Toulouse-Lautrec with sponsorship by Boeing, Microsoft, and Starbucks. It has been a hit with the public, having hosted 2.3 million visitors in its first year (Kenney, LJ). It is a confident, conspicuous building that has made a point about the possibility of libraries and, perhaps even public buildings, in American life.

There are, however, naysayers. In the words of an architecture critic Lawrence Cheek it is: “raw, confusing, impersonal, uncomfortable, oppressive, theatrical and exhilarating.” It is a spectacular place to survey, but a miserable place in which to read—with cackling noises seeping in from unknown spaces, and a scarcity of small nooks conducive to reading. Much of the space that a library of thirty years ago would have reserved for reading is dedicated to computer work stations. The building’s fifth floor
features 120 work stations in regimented rows, with the spatial imperative offering little in the way of privacy for the patrons. All told, the necessities of modern informational needs have left little room for the type of curled-up reading of which Cheek is so fond. Though the building has elicited strong reactions from either end of the spectrum, it has offered up a reinvention of the public library and has forced people to question both its utility and possibility.

There are many facets to ponder regarding the Seattle Public Library, and the domino effect it has had on its rather staid world. Highly unusual libraries designed by bold-faced architects are popping up in England, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Mexico, and Japan. While perhaps these buildings underscore the value of information in society and its renewed appreciation at large, they seem to make statements that favor flash and ambition over more practiced forms of functionality. While it is certainly exciting and encouraging, where did competent if demure buildings go wrong? If they, indeed, have become passé, it is somewhat puzzling to imagine the library stalking the same territory as a shopping mall that constantly changes its inventory, diversions, and store lineup to avoid the same fate. It would seem that libraries would offer more than steely slickness and novelty to patrons. Even if these buildings garner initial attention from those who had not been patrons before, it is difficult to imagine that the new building would inspire loyalty. In fact, the Buckhead Library, constructed in 1989 of considerable pedigree and fanfare, has been fighting for its very survival for some time, and the Seattle Public’s pull on the public’s imagination could be fleeting unless such a grand building can turn tourists into readers (Blumenstein). If the public library needs to rebrand its persona in order to remind those who had deserted it for Borders or Amazon,
constructing attention-grabbing buildings is the boldest and most obvious route. However, not every municipality is equipped to cough up the necessary millions, or $166 million in Seattle’s case, to build it, nor can every city guarantee the required future funding to keep such a monumental project going, as is the case in Buckhead. While the ambition of these projects is admirable and raises the profile of libraries everywhere, every library has its own set of community considerations and financial limitations.
V. Community

I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as the discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and the search for community is the search for reason (Norris, 2)

- Stanley Cavell

Adventurous architecture, innovative promotional campaigns, and the use of the computer have effectively reintroduced the public library in recent times. Yet the library could continue to transform itself into a true community center by utilizing familiar models integral to contemporary life; namely the habits of commerce and social networking. By incorporating greater interaction—between patrons and staff, staff and community leaders, and between fellow patrons—the library could be the community locus that binds the modern impetuses for instant communication, informational exchange, and novelty in a rooted and systematic manner.

While consumerism has its flaws, it has become so ubiquitous as to have become neutral; rather, its absence has become remarkable. While many public libraries shrink from corporate sponsorship for a variety of reasons—particularly the threat to autonomy and the inherent ideological betrayal for some—certain tenets of the consumer experience
can be embraced for the benefit of both patrons and libraries. One of the reasons the consumer experience is welcoming is the fact that, well, it is intended to be an easy and hospitable experience. Public libraries have started to utilize these devices in order to attract patrons. Partnering with coffee shops has proven to be a popular option (Bert). One of the earliest adopters of the in-house coffee shop was Stamford Connecticut’s Ferguson Library, who allowed for a Starbucks to set up shop just inside its front doors in 1999. The motivation for Ferguson was simple: user-friendliness. Including Starbucks was a simple way for the library to continue its legacy of providing items of interest and convenience for its patrons. This arsenal also includes items such as sculptures and writing utensils. In addition, the Ferguson staff was trying to encourage the attendance of younger patrons who referred to Barnes & Noble as “the library.” While some, primarily older, patrons were critical and somewhat confused by Starbucks’ presence, the library staff was pleased by the attention that Starbucks would draw, in addition to the $43,000 it would pay to the library annually (Allen).

Certainly, elements of the shopping experience have been utilized by public libraries in order to make the collection more searchable and visibly appealing to patrons. A library in Rockford, Illinois, has gone one step further by purchasing a Barnes & Noble and keeping much of its infrastructure intact, including the coffee shop, in order to serve a newer generation of patrons less inclined to search monochromatic spines and esoteric Dewey numbers to find what they need. In addition, the public library will reach more people, as they will be able to cash in on Barnes & Noble’s market research as they move from a marginal strip mall location to the town’s main shopping mall (Pinkowski).
Utilizing capitalism’s tricks in order to attract new patrons and serve loyal patrons more effectively have proven to be beneficial for other libraries as well. In the Phoenix suburb of Gilbert, the Dewey Decimal System has been eliminated in favor of Barnes & Noble’s subject-oriented searching in order to serve the habits and proclivities of their constituents. The library’s staff is pleased with the results, and has taken on the elimination of Dewey as their cause célèbre (Lynch and Mulero).

While such a system would certainly prove trying for more traditional librarians and patrons, libraries should be able to exercise choice in order to best serve their patrons. Libraries have long been pigeon-holed as being dusty protectors of atavism, with librarians bearing their secret codes of enigmatic organization with a certain sadistic pride. Though this image is rather cartoonish, the public library could certainly do more to establish itself as a community center, one person at a time. People like comfort, and they want choices, and they need familiarity to orient themselves. Humanizing the library or, rather, making it friendlier to the humans that might haunt it could do more than any neon promotional campaign—more, even, than a distressed steel cube.

Throughout the day nearly every day, the patron is surrounded by choices with seemingly no coherent system save appetites. The library, though, is highly systemized, and seems to speak its own language. It is a language that requires the patron to adapt, wait, and abstain. For example, the idea of checking something out—particularly something as potentially meaningful as a book—with the promise of returning it simply has no contemporary counterpart in this society. If a patron checks out an item, he or she should be presented with the option of purchasing the item from the library. Most libraries have a long-standing physical and emotional presence in their communities, but
in order to further reap the benefits they should meet patrons halfway between their mission and contemporary expectations and practices.

In addition, they could take fully realize the extent of their purchasing power by directly making the orders through the publisher. Libraries are second only to Barnes and Noble in terms of purchasing power. Instead of utilizing distributor Baker and Taylor, who then reaps the benefit of an influential and cozy relationship with the publisher, libraries need to know their needs and those of their patrons well enough to develop effective and cost-saving communication with the publishers. In such a relationship, publishers could send their authors on library book tours, serve up their latest offerings to library patrons, with the patrons providing feedback and receiving complimentary reading materials. Dynamic partnering based on choice, interest, and independence could recreate the notion of the library as the people’s university.

In addition, libraries can take advantage of its tech-savvy populace to promote itself while providing information for patrons and the community. The website could list upcoming releases and reviews, area interests, and emerging trends as part of the Library 2.0 ethos. Librarians, support staff, and patrons could review and recommend books, films, music, blogs, destinations, parks, hikes, restaurants, wine, tutors, etc. While plenty of social networking sites—including the literacy specific Good Reads and LibraryThing—can recommend a good book to online passerbys, they take place in a void. Libraries are about neighborhoods and community, there is a venerable and tangible context in which one will receive this information. While the quiet history of the library is largely responsible for its somewhat ill-defined role in today’s society, bringing people together through shared interests could provide the missing link. The library has long
served as an informational hub for the community, and technology can now make this information come to life in a way that is vibrant, viable, and ubiquitous. Such a service would allow libraries to accommodate patrons’ interests, utilize money efficiently, plan for future trends, and cultivate programming and special events in accordance with the needs and interests of the patrons.

While every library serves a community with certain demographics, and each demographic can be individually served with a willing and attentive staff. For example, the Chelsea, Michigan, library ably serves its community’s microniches with innovative pragmatism. It partnership with the local senior citizen center produced book and movie discussion groups based on both current issues and historical events, an oral history documentary featuring interviews about the seniors’ educational experiences in local one-room schoolhouses, and Wii video game nights featuring the pleasure of bowling without a twelve-pound ball. In addition, the library energetically serves children ages six through eleven years old. According to youth and teen services librarian Karen Parsello, “Libraries are really big on programs for preschoolers and even babies.... But as soon as [children] get to school, we seem to forget about [them] for a while. I decided to target kids age six to 11. They have a lot of energy and a lot of interest” (Berry). In order to appeal to this mysteriously neglected demographic the Chelsea District Library’s projects included Egyptian Pyramid building, reading to seeing-eye dogs, and meeting with elementary school teachers in order to facilitate projects and the allocate books to avoid the capturing of all oceanic books by one lucky and greedy student at the expense of everyone else.
While the Chelsea District Library has energetically and creatively responded to the needs of the community, nearly every public library has the elderly and six-year-old amongst its constituents. This particular library though, noted its demographics and arrived at solutions by asking patrons what they wanted and needed. Paying customers vote with their money, and library patrons vote with their feet; they also vote for library funding, and are much more likely to vote in favor of it if they see that their needs are being listened to and served. (Berry, Library Journal)
VI. Conclusion

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can (Our Own Selves: Meditations for Librarians, 79).

- John Wesley

If the library is to be the center of the community, it will have to be munificent to the needs and interests of its patrons. Regardless of funding, the library can exercise its generosity by understanding patrons’ needs and allowing for an interactive experience. Allow patrons to purchase books, allow them to buy coffee within the library, allow them to adjust to their surroundings by being patrons whose needs we can customize to a greater degree due to the latitude of the 21st Century and its attendant enthusiasms. Such activities do not cheapen the intellectual mission of the library, but echoes the dialect that everyone understands without hesitation. Libraries have a rich and unique tradition that is based upon their encouragement of the individual to test the waters and make their own way. By adapting a more protean model as a place of discovery, individual thought, and cultural relevance, we are celebrating the spirit of Ranganathan and raising a fist in celebration of a promising, if unforeseen, future.
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