**Economies of Use and Desire:**

**Public Library Design in the Age of Digital Information**


By Devin Higgins

**AT LEAST A PORTION** of the confusion that surrounds the role of the public library in the United States stems from its having rather too many meanings than too few. As an institution, the library serves a variety of functions, and the conclusions one draws about the role of the library can vary greatly depending on the vantage point from which one sees it. Is the library merely a provider of information, to be evaluated on the extent to which it can do so efficiently and cost-effectively? Is the our libraries' role in making information freely-accessible to all of the citizenry a bulwark of democracy? Or does the library accrue more value through its social function, as an institution that brings people from diverse backgrounds and lifeways together in a "civilizing" fashion? Is the library's strength the breadth of its collections, its ability to meet the information needs of a range of users? especially those least well equipped to find information by other means? Is it the role or the library to provide Internet service for those who don't have access at home or work, and may often lack the basic computer skills to accomplish tasks, such as setting up an email account or applying for jobs, on their own? Is breaking down the digital divide a function the public library is suited to fulfill? What do we want the library to be? (Molz)

The questions surrounding the purpose of the library are not merely superficial. The debate is one that extends down to the core of the institution itself, to an existential breaking point between the library's continued existence and its demise, to a point where it can even be asked whether the library was ever useful at all (Savage).

The notion of the library's dwindling usefulness has been broached frequently in the popular press, and as the set of services the library provides has shifted with the surrounding culture, the question of the library's value has reached a point of instability. Perhaps the library's fate will be determined by whomever can deliver the better argument: The Harvard Library has recently sponsored an "Oxford-style" debate (admittedly a somewhat unserious style of rhetoric governed more by "wit and wisdom" than strictly-applied logic) which would submit the motion "Libraries are obsolete" for debate. The question was argued in April 2012 by high-ranking library and university administrators, and decided on a "yea" or "nay" vote by the audience. Without even considering the outcome of the debate (the motion did *not* carry), or the points made therein, the proposition of the library's own uselessness is clearly a part of the public consciousness of the library as an institution, a circumstance that in itself would be enough to affect the future of library planning and funding ("Libraries are…"). Despite the deep uncertainty surrounding the public library, recent years have seen a number of large-scale public library projects carried out successfully in the U.S. This essay will explore the

ways in which the library building itself, along with the unique set of experiences it provides, has figured in this unlikely outcome.

**ARGUMENTS CONCERNING** the value of libraries tend to be oriented around a number of persistent dichotomies of larger scale than the library itself. In *The Age of Access*, Jeremy Rifkin defines one contemporary dichotomy, with prevalent political significance, as between "intrinsic value" and "utility value." Rifkin finds intrinsic value in culture, relationships with others, rituals, and other activities that are valued on their own merit, rather than for some supposed end for which they are the means (257). For Rifkin, the "age of access" is an age in which the commons and the culture (in the most general sense of the term), are being transformed into what might fairly be called commodities—saleable items with value derived from their very saleability, instead of from their usability. The commodification of value is a discourse with a long history that includes the writings of Karl Marx, who famously explored how value was configured in capitalist relations. Perhaps particularly relevant to the current study is the idea found in Marx that the value of a commodity is determined not "by the quantity of labor spent on it," but the amount of "labour-time socially necessary for its production" (306). In a mass-market society, the actual time spent to produce an item is less crucial in defining its value than the least amount of time it can conceivably produced in. Rifkin would find resonance here with his idea that what is currently at play in capitalist exchanges is the actual lived-time of consumers. Experience is no longer valuable for what it means to an individual, but in how its meaning can be socially constructed, and sold. The individual character of experience is judged by the appeal its marketing has generated. Just like the labor of white- or blue-collar workers in an industrial economy, the personal and cultural experiences of individuals in an information economy are commodities being transferred for money, and therefore subjected to, in Marx's terminology, a definition of worth which can only "manifest itself or be expressed" in terms of its "exchange-value" (305). For Rifkin, we have entered an age in which our intrinsic values have been confounded with utility values, and certain quintessentially human cultural faculties are being transformed into "commercial entertainment" (257).

Rifkin even goes so far as to suggest that the transformations of our culture and attitude toward experience have endangered empathy:

> How likely is that members of a generation growing up in front of the screen or inside its virtual worlds—whose communications with one another are mediated by layers or technology and symbols—will be able to empathize sufficiently with others or with their fellow creatures? (246)

Words like "virtual" and "cyberspace" sound vaguely dated to current sensibilities (Rifkin's book was published in 2000), but the transition toward social media over the last decade has only solidified the claim screens stake in the lives of those able to afford them. In short, Rifkin's argument is that human relationships, and human connections to culture, are changing in large-scale ways, and what's replacing empathy in Rifkin's view is a desire for short-term experiential contact. Even if one detects hyperbole in Rifkin's contention that empathy may disappear, businesses and public institutions, such as the library, are inarguably confronting a customer or user with a new sense of community, one not necessarily based on the idea that geographic proximity is the foundation for empathy or intimacy. Curiously, Rifkin never mentions libraries directly. Through an examination of the experiences libraries have historically provided, as compared to the experience they provide today, however, we may discern that the public library has acted as antidote to some of the malignant tendencies Rifkin sees operating through the rapid commercialization of culture.

Where *The Age of Access* sees impending tragedy in the move to a culture of access instead of ownership, to culture as commodity, the authors of *The Experience Economy*, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, see the opportunity for profit. To put it plainly, as Pine and Gilmore do on the first page of their preface, "experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic growth" [emphasis theirs] (ix). Creating a worthy experience, a memory that will persist long after the obsolescence of a perishable product, is the ultimate in value-added profit-making. As the authors point out, a cheaply produced cup of coffee served at the Cafe Florian in St. Mark's square in Venice is worth so much more than the coffee itself: "In the crisp morning air, sipping...steaming coffee, fully immersed in the sights and sounds of the most remarkable of Old World cities," one is content, even perhaps elated, to offer up the $15 for the coffee, since here that price "includes" the experience of drinking it in such a remarkable setting (2). Outside of an experience economy, the price of the coffee would have been arrived at through some computation of the costs to acquire the ingredients, prepare the coffee, and serve it to customers, factoring in the costs of maintenance, labor, and rent. The idea, however, that the customer is not paying for coffee, but for the experience of drinking it, allows a different form of valuation to take place. The cup of coffee in Vienna is indescribably more valuable than the same cup purchased elsewhere. The central tenet of the "experience economy" is that "the history of economic progress consists of charging a fee for what once was free" (67). Thus Pine and Gilmore agree with Rifkin on his central claim that dimensions of human experience, once indisputably "free," have now been exposed to commodification—though Pine and Gilmore bring that premise to vastly different conclusions.

A business or institution can create experiences worth charging for by bringing to life the "work is theatre" metaphor. Pine and Gilmore take the metaphor a long way, and use its terms quite literally to create a handbook for business-runners to use in writing scripts for the "actors" who are charged with sustaining the dramatic conceit for customers (107). The "set" on which these events are played out is also, naturally, quite important. In the end, the goal is to create a seamless and memorable performance for the customer to buy into. To improve the chances for success, Pine and Gilmore create a number of different models for businesses to enact in creating the stage-play of their business: street theatre, improv theatre, platform theatre, and matching theatre (123). Each form of theatre has its own distinctive form of presentation. Some businesses will need a more improvisatory actor/employee for elaborate interplay with customers, while for others a more strictly scripted experience is favored. Acknowledging that instilling drama in some workplaces is more difficult than in others, the authors provide a description of how the seemingly mundane world of the grocery store can be enlivened by actorly flourish:

> The grocery clerk should ask himself how he might scan the canned goods with flair, what dramatic voice and entertaining words he might use when asking for a credit card, and especially how to perform the personal touches that come with exchanging cash, credit card, or receipt (105).

Pine and Gilmore are convinced that any industry can be repurposed to take advantage of the opportunities of the experience economy. Some industries, most notably the business of entertainment, have always taken experience as their substance. Even the word "entertainment" itself highlights the fact that the viewer, listener, or user is the "product," in Pine and Gilmore's sense, since human beings are made of experiences. The company that builds on the promise of the experience economy seeks to change, or manipulate, customers in a way that will lead them to become repeat or even lifelong customers, to continue paying for the memorable or otherwise positively regarded experience they had the first time. The product is thus the customer's satisfaction, not the ostensible good or service being purchased.

**IS THE LIBRARY** more like the grocery store or the entertainment industry? How should the library attempt to build off of, react against, or otherwise regard the innovations of the experience economy? Should the library construct itself as a

**Figures 1 & 2: Boston Public Library**

distinctive place in which memorable experiences can occur? In fact, the library has always been a place imbued with its own distinctive "theatrical" dimension. The early, grand libraries of America, fashioned on European models such as the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, were designed to be palaces of knowledge, dedicated to the ennobling act of reading, and fostering the aspirational learning of the uneducated, the poor, and the immigrant. If this didactic approach to the library would ultimately come to be regarded as condescending, the experience it engendered for individuals could also be profound. Early twentieth-century immigration rights activist Mary Antin writes with reverence of the feeling she had in the "palace" of the Boston Public Library: "All these eager children, all these fine browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books – I and they had this glorious thing in common, this noble treasure house of learning" (qtd in Augst 51). It's hard to imagine a library such as the McKim Building in Boston's Copley Square as being merely functional. The building itself added worth to the pursuits undertaken within. In this sense, the library is an institution, and a form of building, that architects and planners have always considered as "experiential." Library scholar Abigail Van Slyck finds the makings of Romanticist narratives of illumination in the library patron's movement through entryways, corridors, and staircases of the library. In some of the world's most iconic libraries, in fact, one enters through a "relatively dark, single-height entrance," and is then carried toward an "illuminated...grand stairway leading to the second-story reading room" (70). The movement from darkness to light is here configured as a metaphor for the pathway to a more transcendental, and less literal, form of enlightenment. The grandeur of the reading room, with its high ceilings, elaborate ornamentation,

Figure 3: Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève

including at times carvings and frescoes, induces a heightened sense of meaning to the act of selecting and reading books.

The ways in which we understand the aesthetic experiences encouraged by the library and its architecture fluctuate over time, and some versions of experience can become obscure, or lost. In his book on the architecture of France, David Hanser describes the "drama of entering the reading room" at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève as "exhilarating" (37). These effects notwithstanding, much of the history of library design has, in fact, been driven by a balance of functionalism. Even Labrouste's Sainte-Geneviève, with its enlightenment drama unfolding around the visitor, is described by Hanser as having been considered at the time of its construction as "sober to the point of austerity," and regarded by contemporaries as having "no style" (36). Labrouste's intentions, it seems, were that the library's "functions and its real, undisguised structure [would] order the building" (36). That a functionalist building could still support this theatrical notion of the journey of enlightenment is a testament both to the library's power to build mythology, and of the radically changing appearances attributable to certain epoch-spanning concepts, such as "functionalism," which reappears in different guises over the course of decades and centuries. Often the very traits we take for granted, and are deployed in the manner of assumptions—that is, thoughtlessly—are the ones which characterize us most strongly.

More familiar in our current age as the icons of functionalism are the

modernist, at times utilitarian, structures of the mid-twentieth century. Interior space was designed to be modular, available for a variety of uses with little work or redesign. The International Style loomed large during this phase of library design, according to which three principles were put into practice: "frivolity and elaboration were avoided[;] design was ordered through regularity and repetition rather than symmetry[;] an emphasis on volume as opposed to mass" (Black 78). These design principles, acting in support of a new minimalist aesthetic, led to the construction of libraries in Great Britain in the 1960's that "were a fresh departure, emblematic of a time of social, cultural, economic, and technological hope." (104). That optimism that supported modernist library design has also, of course, been modulated by changing attitudes in the decades since it rose to prominence. Some of the less artistically rendered "buildings themselves—with consistent ceiling heights, large floor-plates, and artificial lighting—tended to become monotonous," in the views of some (Dahlkild 32). The landmark Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, D.C., designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe has, as the result of inadequate maintenance, become the subject of debate as to its worthiness for survival, as some have wondered whether it is better described as an "eyesore," than a "masterpiece" ("Mies Library"). Yet the modernist alternative to the grand, perhaps elitist, libraries that preceded them, were certainly at that time (and could still be so considered) democratic, progressive, and futuristic symbols of new forms of life. The experience of using well-designed modernist libraries was distinctive, and memorable, certainly an experience apart from those available in a Carnegie library, or in a glass-surfaced contemporary showpiece. Even creating functionalist libraries, a purpose that has driven many past and present library designers, ends up creating through some mix of intention and fortuity, a library that houses a distinct set of experiences, not just determined by the form the building takes, but by the materials it contains and the behaviors it encourages.

The acts of seeking information, of checking out materials, of reading a book, can all be shaped into experiences by the environment in which they happen. One recent library design that aims to transform mundane experience into
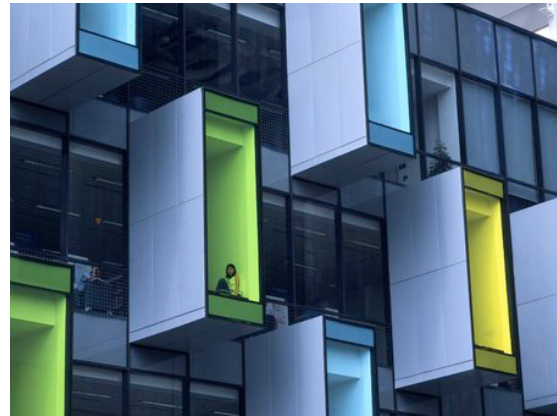
**Figures 5 & 6: Bishan Public Library**

something rather more evocative is the Bishan Public Library in Singapore, completed in 2009. A description of the design project is worth quoting in full, as it very precisely describes a set of experiential design motivations:

> The metaphor of a tree house was invoked from the onset of design conceptualization to create an environment for learning via a journey of discovery and play. The use of skylights, trellises and colored glass transforms incoming daylight into a myriad of shades and colours, creating an intriguing dappled light quality within the library that simulates light filtered through the foliage of trees. 'Pods' cantilevered off the main building façade exude a distinctive charisma on the exterior and create suspended alcoves at an intimate scale from the building interior. The library is raised above the anonymity of its mixed used neighborhood and sets out to stir the curiosity of the community. ("Bishan Public Library…")

The description here evokes experience by using words such as "play," "discovery," and "curiosity." It should also be noted that the building is not created to resemble a treehouse, but to behave like one. No part of the building looks like leaves, or branches, or a tree trunk, but the nature of the light and the intimate space created by the specialized "pods" metaphorically create a treehouse-like environment for users to explore and enjoy. The design operates on the level of experience, not just appearance.

The idea of encouraging a sense of discovery is especially appropriate for a library. The experience of using a library often begins with a search, and continues, hopefully, with the successful encounter with a sought-after resource. The library

Figures 7 & 8: YOUmedia Chicago

building may promote this experience to something memorable through the use of design, as in Bishan, or through other means within the library. In a number of case studies with architecture students at Carnegie Mellon University, Martin Aurand describes ways in which the use of library materials can be turned into a process of discovery (12). In collaboration with teachers and librarians, Aurand used a variety of means to enhance the students' experience of the collections, including using lighting and other spatial effects to "gently eroticize" the collection (14).

Beyond the appearance of the "gently eroticized" collections at Carnegie Mellon, students were encouraged to explore rare and unique items, to handle physical objects, and to enjoy the library as a *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities. The goal of such an approach was to help students see the narrative process inherent in library usage, experience the library in a tactile way, and promote a sense of wonder about the library's collections. The experience the architecture students had in the library was shaped both by the physical space of the library, and by the materials contained within it.

The idea of "eroticizing", that is building pleasure into libraries, has also been explored by Abigail Van Slyck, in an article with section headings such as "Visual Delight and Bodily Comfort in Social Libraries" (223) and "Promiscuous Access to Books in Postwar Modular Libraries" (230). Van Slyck explores the ways in which users interacted with libraries and the books contained within to emphasize the possibilities of physical pleasure. Her article traces a path through the early history of library architecture to find how the potential for pleasure in libraries has been carefully restricted, or permitted, by library designers. The idea of the library as a specific place, with specific architectural features, is seen as integral to the library as an institution.

The emergence of more elaborate, and more socially engaging, "media creation centers" builds on the idea that the library can be a new interactive venue

for creativity. The YOUmedia center of the Chicago Public Library provides space for patrons, in the parlance of YOUmedia's Web site, to "hang out" and "mess around," using library-provided digital cameras for still and video photography, recording equipment for music and podcasting, and laptops for gaming and other uses ("YOUmedia"). In counterexample to Rifkin's notion of the disappearing commons, where culture is losing the battle to commercialization, libraries are now generating spaces for a wide variety of genuine experience to occur, at no charge.

**THE PARADOX** of contemporary library design at play here is that advances in digital technology have not caused libraries to shrink and disappear, but rather to become more significant pieces of the physical landscapes of cities. A number of prestigious public library projects have recently come to fruition across the United States and the world. As Nan Dahlkild puts it:

> The development of new media and digital information technology has challenged the traditional library with the notion of the "the library without walls." Strangely, this has not weakened, but has apparently heightened, international interest in the library as a physical space. New possibilities of digital design have made possible audacious and spectacular architectural experiments. (33)

Strange indeed that the rise in prominence of online information should coincide with an era of creativity and ambition in the design and construction of information's *physical* storehouse, the library. Artist and professor Lowry Burgess has theorized that it is the very "cyberization" of media that encourages people to renew their connection to the library as a place. For Burgess, in a digital world, the library becomes a venue for "direct social and sensory contact," " a place of direct … interaction with people, ideas, and multiple library objects and systems" (Burgess). The repeated use of the word "direct" here illuminates one appealing aspect of non-virtual interactions: their immediacy—"immediate" used here not in the sense of "right away," but as in "not mediated." Whereas we understand digital resources to provide us with contact to a wide world of information, we perhaps do not yet experience this world as real in itself, but as a simulation of something actual and familiar that is still only found in "real" places, and with real people, in a place like the library.

At least part of the unexpectedness one feels at this renewed focus on physical libraries in the face of widely available digital information, can be explained away by the move to the experience economy discussed above. Just as consumers are posited to be no longer satisfied with mere goods, without an envelope of memorable experience to surround them, information is no longer the final goal for many patrons. The sought-for fact, book, or research agenda is just one piece of that

total experience that includes the finding of it as a possible occasion for pleasure. For the digitally well-connected segments of today's population, information feels cheap, easily accessible, and something to take for granted—where once information was filtered by the gatekeeping mechanisms of publishers, and subject to the cost limits of distribution, those fetters have in many arenas fallen away:

> Not so long ago, we worried about the small number of people we could teach, pages of scholarship we could publish, primary sources we could introduce to our students, and documents that had survived from the past. At least potentially, digital technology has removed many of these limits: over the Internet, it costs no more to deliver a journal to 15 million people than 15,000 people; it costs less for our students to have access to literally millions of primary sources than a handful in a published anthology. (Rosenzweig 314)

Certain types of information resources are now widely, even blindingly, available, but the experience of finding them can still be felt as something new and exciting.

Yet the experience provided by the library is not something new, as we have seen. The library seems to rate rather highly on the scale of memorable-ness. In fact, it is possible to draw on the term of art created by Greenhalgh, Landry, and Worpole, "libraryness," to describe a feeling the library has provoked in patrons across history (qtd in Dahlkild 12). Memories of libraries seem to be particularly strong, especially reminiscences drawn from those formative years of early childhood. Abigail Van Slyck quotes memoirist Susan Toth, who recalls vividly the experience of entering the public library of her youth:

> I could feel its compelling power immediately. Inside the front doors a split staircase climbed elaborately to the main entrance on the second floor, and trudging up the marble steps I was enveloped by the cavernous space. A chilly breeze always seemed to be blowing up my back. The library, and the [World War I Memorial] Union Hall, seemed to be places where things lay precariously at rest, just below the surface, waiting to be summoned up again (208).

This recollection, no doubt, recalls a high degree of libraryness. Toth's memory is informed by the actual structure she was entering, "the front door," "the marble steps", the "split staircase," yet also seems to have captured her imagination—the entrance and staircase are imbued with the tropes of an adventure story. The building, and her memory of it, has activated Toth's ability to fantasize. This adventure is not limited to the experience of entering the library and climbing the elaborate steps of the building. Toth also recalls a certain mystery evoked by the contents of the library, which were laying "precariously at rest," "waiting to be summoned up." The browsing of the materials themselves inspires Toth, conjures

images of an encounter with import, of access that goes beyond the information contained within books, and reveals a mystical force being reawakened. Her connection to the books themselves, via the building of the library and her own imaginative spirit it engages, speaks to something of the "libraryness" that is present in every building of its kind.

Thomas Augst's essay "Faith in Reading" builds on this notion in his evocation of the spiritual, sacral quality the library has held in civil society: "Libraries helped to sacralize public space by altering the aesthetic perceptions of ordinary people, lending to the experience of otherwise common existence moral direction and spiritual consequence" (167). This sort of uplifting library experience took place through a "substitution of environments more congenial to the transcendence of individuals" for the "mundane, quotidian facts of one's actual existence" (167). The library thus presented what might even be called an escapist fantasy, a world apart from the real world, one in which other identities might be activated, developed, and perhaps then brought back to re-enliven the mundane world outside the library's walls. The implication of an immersive other world within the library lives up to the potential Pine and Gilmore see for the experience economy. The library here figures as just the sort of memorable place it would be worth paying admission to. As Augst points out, however, the drama of the public library's escapist potential left it open to the observation that "such declarations of civic faith" were "evidence of how effectively libraries were used to propagate a conservative social and economic ideology of reform" (151). The library, under this view, was a means of managing the lives of individuals, of controlling and directing the motivations and aspirations of the underclass—a very similar complaint, in fact, to Rifkin's: the library Augst describes is seen to be manipulating the lives of individuals, not through corrupting their experience with assessments of monetary worth, as Rifkin sees today, but by turning the pursuit of knowledge or pleasure at the library into a means of preserving the power of those who held it.

Thus the faith or fantasy the library held for the public in the early twentieth century was open to the claim of social control. Early large libraries were operated with an eye toward regulation and categorization: "To bring mass use under control, users were categorised by age, gender, the seriousness of the material read and, later, in larger libraries at any rate, by the subjects they were pursuing" (Black 10)[1]. The free movement of library patrons was inhibited by methods of separation, creating individual rooms for men, women, and children, or for the perusal of certain types of media, such as newspapers or magazines. Likewise, the organization of space within the library controlled the patron's interactions with the librarian

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[1] Page numbering here refers to the pre-publication Word documents, not published material.

and with the books, all in certain, well-planned ways that would tend to increase librarian oversight.

Even if there was no conspiracy behind these operations of control, from a perspective of today's experience economy, we can certainly see that the library patron's experience of place would have been influenced by the modes of separation and bodily control enacted by the library. Yet as the experience of Mary Antin attests, the rigorous policies and procedures of early big-city public libraries to regulate and control users on a social level were simply the other side of the coin of the possibility, created by the library, for a richly rewarding individual experience within its walls, despite the restrictions. As Augst finally concludes, these library "buildings suggest that one of the primary social functions of the public library remains symbolic: the staging of freedom in the local, often mundane struggle of individuals to craft a meaningful identity for themselves amidst routine paths and standard choices of mass society" (183). The individual results achieved by library patrons are anecdotal claims that even within a milieu of social control, the library presented the opportunity for an experience of democratic aspiration from within the "palace" of knowledge. While from the social control perspective, one sees the library as strictly controlling parameters *of* the user's behavior, the experience economy perspective would see the library as creating experiences *for* the user. And just as the machinations of social control could not stop the library user (in certain cases) from being inspired to find ways of life outside of those offered by "mass society," an analogous argument is possible today; that despite the routinized operations of capitalist encroachment on cultural values, the library offers a "free" space for individuals to explore interests and use their time for pursuits not necessarily subjected to commercial valuation.

In a world where information is plentiful and constantly generated, at a pace which defies our ability to reason logically and inhibits our pleasure (Schwartz), the concept of "place" has become increasingly a topic of debate, and most such debates include a discussion of how to define the term. A group of researchers from Washington state and Toronto set out to examine what place means to users of one of the more significant recent public library constructions, the Seatte Public library designed by Remi Koolhaas. Using Ray Oldenburg's idea of the "third place," elaborated in his popular book, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, the authors conducted surveys of Seattle library users to see how well their ideas about their library fit into Oldenburg's framework. The study found that the library
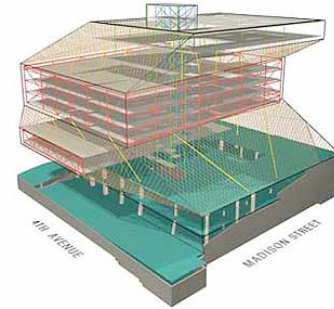
Figures 9 & 10: Seattle Public Library, Central Branch

matched several of Oldenburg's key criteria for place-hood, by "offering such personal benefits as novelty, perspective, spiritual tonic, and friendship via its collection, staff, services, and clientele," by being "highly regarded...as a societal good in terms of its political role, habit of association, recreational spirit," and through its importance in preserving the public space for public use (152). The Seattle library did not meet all of the "third place" criteria, not fulfilling key roles as a space primarily for conversation, and for meeting acquaintances. Since the Seattle Public Library building by Koolhaas did not seem particularly intended for these roles to them, the authors argue that the library meets the criteria of the third place, and suggests a further criterion of its own: an "'informational' component" that would broaden the notion of the third place to include the function of knowledge acquisition. The study thus suggests that "libraryness" does involve something unique to libraries, a certain combination of "third placefulness," as Oldenburg defines it, and the library's own function as provider of information.

Koolhaas's library is an example of a building designed to draw attention and visitors—both local library users and tourists. Koolhaas also intended the project to take a grandly conceptual scale. His public proposal for the project "situate[s] his design within the entire institutional history of the library, within a global geographic and economic context" (Mattern 74-5). The Seattle library proposes to design from degree zero, to reinvent the idea of the library's usefulness, and to create a new version of public space that locates the library at its center.

**TODAY'S LIBRARIES** often do exist as the embodiments of lofty proclamations about the meaning and function of the library as an institution, and much has been written on the topic. In an effort to elaborate on, and even answer, questions of the type posed at the beginning of this essay on the role the library has to play in the world, media scholar Shannon Mattern's has written *The New Downtown Library*. In

what amounts to an extended meditation on the role of the library in our digital, or perhaps "post-digital," age, Mattern investigates how the expanding set of services libraries are expected to provide, along with changing notions of what the library should be, has led to divergent library projects across the American city's public landscape. Never the result of a singular vision, these projects are necessarily the confluence of a variety of forces, some of which collide more placidly than others. The New Downtown Library explores in detail the issues of design and construction that surround today's American big-city marquee public libraries.

Consensus in library design may be elusive simply because so much is at stake. Mattern sees the library building as a physical representation of our idea of the library, and as we've seen, it is also possible to situate the library debate at the heart of questions much larger than it. The building and design process are a chance to question and change:

> What better time to prioritize the institution's values, to reassess its purpose, to reconsider what ideas and ideals it embodies, and to refashion its image than when considering how to physically embody these values, to structurally accommodate these functions, to materially symbolize these ideas, and to reflect these images? (Mattern viii)

In short, the library is a chance to take something immaterial—an idea, a set of values—and give it material form. Instead of arguing over libraries—that is, mere buildings—designers, librarians and the public are often disputing something much deeper and more nebulous. In her detailed examination of public library buildings, and the public policy meetings, personnel wranglings, library designs and redesigns from which they were wrought, Mattern never finds an indisputable central thesis driving any one library outcome. Any overarching idea must always be interpreted in the language of its local geographical, cultural, political, and economic environment. Mattern uses the ideas of "type" and "character" to highlight the different levels of meaning on which a library building operates: "type is a universal, a paradigm, whereas character is an expression of a specificity of function, place, time, mood" (58). "Type" is the grand idea, the firm outline of a project, "character" is the color and shading that fills it in. The difficulty of matching a big idea to a local context is just one of the obstacles in the way of building the "statement" library— one that would express a contemporary yet abiding vision of the library's role in society.

Another is formulating that statement itself: The library type that would address the current information climate is perennially up for negotiation. The Carnegie library template may no longer do the job. Mattern quotes Joshua Ramus, project director for the Seattle Public Library, on the subject of designing for

particular communities: "Why build a library that looks like a rich white person?...A kid from Laos doesn't know what a Carnegie Library is" (56). It seems possible in the library case-studies Mattern presents, to see as integral to the debates that surround library design, a deep-seated conflict between a sentimental attachment to the library forms of yore, and a visionary approach that would seek new forms to accommodate the information culture of today, and its speculative future. The nostalgic attachment to the libraries of the past represents the interests of a certain segment—the rich, white segment, perhaps—of the population. Mattern argues that "in light of the multiculturalism in today's U.S. cities...adherence to a singular Western historical style betrays the very nature of a public library" (56). Thus at a basic level, Mattern contends, the public library should represent its constituents. To be successful, and even worthy of the marker "public," the library should adapt to changing times and changing sets of patrons, and formulate an evolving concept of the library that would suit these changes.

Since large public libraries have more information functions than ever to perform, not limited to the list that opens this essay, there are also more visions of the ideal library to embody, from the classic image of the library as monument to books, intellectual culture, and reading, to the digital-age library as a social hub of numerous information flows, both "real" and virtual. Both ideals imply certain design goals, and certain user experiences. Under this second vision, the library forms an information-dense node in a network of connections. But if the information takes a digital form, how should the library space be arranged? How should the need for storage be balanced with the increasingly urgent call from some, to envision a library as primarily something other than a storage facility? Mattern records both successes and failures in this attempt at hybridity. The San Francisco Public Library is a building, and a building plan, caught between the two worlds—the world of the physical, where the storage and care of books is of paramount importance, and the world of digital delivery, where the library stands poised to transform into a socially-integrated commons of information mediation. These are not just differences in architecture, but in different user experiences, each the expression of a wholesale vision of the library's function and future.

San Francisco bet too heavily on the digital vision, according to Mattern's argument, and wound up building a new library without space for its collections (101). Some critics, including Nicholson Baker, pointed to "a wasteful institution caught up in, and deceived by, the promise of a utopian digital future" (102). But Mattern's approach is to delve into the details that will explain such an error: Are we dealing simply with an ideological mistake, or were there other confounding factors which prevented something like an ideology from even being realized? In fact, the San Francisco Public Library may indeed have been designed to give short shrift to

books, but a series of design accidents helped push the point further than any planning did. Changes that limited book space had to be made when, during construction, "it was discovered that more space was required to house the heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system" than had been previously imagined. Designs that had to be altered to meet the specifications of the Americans with Disabilities Act also took away shelf space (101). Accident or conspiracy? According to Mattern, some saw the latter. Either way, most agree that San Francisco ended up with a "schizophrenic library[,] one committed simultaneously to closed stacks and open access, reserving space for books while preparing for their demise" (105). The library today must deal with conflicting motives, and concessions to either side can feel like betrayals, or deceit.

Mattern's reporting gives us an idea of how it came to be so. Her critical response is informed by her focus on the design process from its origins in the desire to rebuild or remake a library. Rather than simply studying buildings as completed texts, and "reading" the building from a user or librarian perspective, Mattern traces buildings back through time, through blueprints, proposals, and public meetings, to delineate the forces that shaped the final built libraries. This approach gives the reader a good sense of the actual exigencies in play as libraries are being built, including the material limitations of time, space, and money that prevent idealized buildings from emerging unaltered from the minds of planners and architects.

Instead, any idealized, or utopian, vision is surrounded by other competing utopias, each with its own set of adherents. Creating a truly "public" library, in Mattern's sense, for example, one that would reflect the variety of opinion embodied by a diverse public, one that neither privileged the rich, white perspective, nor catered exclusively, say, to the Laotian youth, represents in itself an unachievable goal. There are simply too many rival notions at work of what being a public library plan should entail, and these rival notions themselves are constantly shifting with changing demographics (Molz 19).

Not surprisingly, many have argued that the library itself faces the danger of losing a sense of purpose in the rush to embrace variety: Since "the library is unsure of its own identity, the public might be similarly confused...What can the public think of an institution that simultaneously hosts story hour for preschoolers and investment workshops for bankers?" (89). Charles Robinson argues that attempts to cover too much ground have been "pathetic attempts to be all things to all people— pathetic because our limited financial resources assure us of failure in any one area of service as a result of trying to be successful in all" (quoted in Mattern 89). The library that attempts to merge its own concerns with those of commercial enterprise also faces the prospect of public confusion and existential uncertainty.

Even establishing on this broad level which goals are properly the library's own, has proven difficult. The library thus faces a dialectical challenge—it must conserve its own sense of self while taking on board public ideas that could radically alter it. The library must continually negotiate internal and external claims on its existence.

Yet Mattern's book is by no means pessimistic about the possibility of large-scale public action. As we have seen, major building projects have been increasing in recent years, despite the move toward digitization. Mattern neatly sums up the case for large centralized city libraries (as opposed to a system composed entirely of smaller branch outposts for the use of mostly local communities): The main library is a central storehouse and distribution center, a technical support headquarters, a hub of events and services for children especially, a home to specialized researchers, and the head office for the library system (12). It's important to note that these functions fall, for the most part, outside of the most widely-held public views about the role of the library: as lender of books or provider of access to electronic content.

The library is many things to many people. To return to the problem outlined at the start of this essay, all discussion of contemporary public library seems to return to the existential: What is the library? What needs should it answer, and whom should it serve? Mattern's interest in using recent library designs to answer these questions, is equaled by her concern to investigate the source of these answers: city officials, librarians, the public, big name architects, and various interest groups have all had their say in the construction of libraries. But in her conclusion, Mattern takes a step toward providing an interpretive lens that will answer the problem on its broadest level. She finds a way of understanding the library that eliminates contradiction: Instead of being a center of conflicting opinions, and a space of mutually exclusive competition, the library itself is the "interface" at which the diversity of opinion can meet. The building is no longer a text to be deciphered, under this notion: "[a]rchitecture as interface, unlike architecture as text, is capable of incorporating multiplicity and paradox, liminality and transitional ideologies" (144). The interface perspective is appealing in that it seems to "solve" the issue at hand—the library need not conform, or attempt to conform, to any particular ideological stance, since it already embodies several, at least.

Any fair-minded view of the metaphor of architecture as text, however, must concede that multivalence was already there, in the notion of text itself. A text is not monolithic, and may already contain a multiplicity of meanings not necessarily in harmony with one another. But if replacing the term "text" with "interface" does not ultimately change how we interpret libraries, it does usefully focus our analysis on a new level: Instead of being mired in contradiction, the interface idea allows one to move one level up, and see the creative potential inherent in the contradictory

forces. The virtue of Mattern's argument is that it highlights this productive feature. The library-as-interface approach is simply an appropriately sophisticated reading of the building as a text. The contradictions that exist in library design don't have to be self-defeating—they can rather be self-creating. Library buildings are the sites of widely different functions, and the subject of widely divergent speculations on the form they should take. Envisioning the library as a conjunction of such competing forces may be a route toward solving our theoretical conundrum—instead of viewing the library as an arbitrary compromise between values systems, we can view it as a productive collision.

**IN FACT**, if the library is a place where competing arguments about not just libraries, but broader topics about public space and services, of urban planning, collide, then the notion of a unique library *experience*, would bring these forces to light in a directly physical way. The experience of being in a library could be seen to manifest the interconnectedness between people and the culture they create, including the disagreements they face. In the decades following the Great Depression, the South Branch of the Chicago Public Library acted as a site for the confrontations "between political forces trying to conserve the existing structures of society and the forces of opposition" (Latham 322). One of the main grounds for confrontation was adult education, and what the library's role in it should be. A variety of competing forces faced off on this issue, including reformers, socialists, and guardians of the status quo. In the end, many saw the collaboration that ensued in the building of the library as a great achievement, with one speaker at the library's opening "heralding the event as a great accomplishment by African American and white workers lobbying together" (335). In the years following its opening, the library continued to pursue an initiative of integration, creating outreach programs to unite "millions of industrial workers with the 'middle classes'—white-collar workers, professionals and shopkeepers—in powerful urban alliances" (337). The author concludes that the "emergence and development of the South Chicago Branch Library is one institutional marker on the social map of this transformative cultural change" (339). The library at that particular point in history had a profound role to play in some of the most prevalent antagonisms of the time. Today's libraries also sit at the juncture of powerful debates about issues larger than the libraries themselves, including most notably to this discussion, the value of public space and experience amid social and economic changes that aim to commodify it.

In the form of the library, the experience economy may have value that extends beyond creating scenarios of diversion for consumers. Perhaps the public library has the potential take key terms such as "experience" and "memory" for all

they are worth, and define a library experience that speaks to the conflicts of the age. In this view, the library could be seen as an institution that counteracts the commercialization of public space and experience. The library is a place where culture is certainly in trade, through the experiences users have at the library, and through the range of knowledge contained in the works it houses, and lends. But the library is a vision of the world of exchange without charge, where value can still be equalized across a range of cultural encounters, judged for the value these experiences hold in themselves, since a monetary value has not been assigned. The hidden potential of the novels, news, films, essays, music, and poetry the library offers is that they are offered in public space, free of advertising, as experiences that can resound in memory. Library buildings can often serve to amplify this resonance through the architectural and design effects they manifest. If traditional goods and services are worth a certain price on the market, one that is computable in traditional economic terms, while experiences on the other hand offer something invaluable, like a good memory or an improved life, the public library counters the trend of offering these experiences at higher and higher premiums, by offering them for free.

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