Anchors Amidst the Flows: Urban Public Libraries and the Importance of Media Places

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With increased popular and scholarly interest in the impact of digital media technologies on city planning and urban living, the significance of physical places, where people can access material media, is often overlooked. I argue that public libraries play important social roles in facilitating media access for technological have-nots, in remaining as one of the city's few remaining freely accessible public spaces, and in maintaining environments uniquely suited to the access of physical media with distinctive material qualities.

Mobile media have made it possible to distribute the classroom, the office, the boardroom across the city's streets. When combined with locative technologies and the powers of the Internet, these new media technologies promise to bring customized information on-demand to anyone, anywhere. In these new technologies, many presume, lies a new promise of the universal library – although this time in the form of a hand-held computer, rather than a stately civic building recalling Alexandria.

Yet despite many proclamations to the contrary, the library as a physical place has not been obsolesced. Cities across North America, Europe, and Asia, and likely elsewhere, continue to commit vast resources to designing and constructing large, vibrant downtown public library buildings. In this presentation I will draw on my recent research on several contemporary, urban American public library buildings. In the interest of time, I'll offer just a few brief case studies to illustrate how these buildings function as public places and media spaces – how they balance their obligations to house media of various formats and facilitate public access to those media; how they serve a variety of urban publics as one of a city's few remaining free public spaces; and how, in both internal organization and outward representation, they embody the values, the identities, of the cities that host them and the myriad publics who use them. In doing all of these things, these buildings attest to the importance of material civic places within a network of global media and capital.

Figure 1. Unshelvable books at the San Francisco
Main Library. Photo by the author.

Many libraries and architects learned from the mistakes of the San Francisco Main Library (see figure 1), which is notorious for failing to provide sufficient space for the library's book collection. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas recognized that he and the team designing the Seattle Public Library must "devise a strategy where the books are given their place, are given their respectful environment, are given their value, but are also contained" so that space is also reserved for non-book media and public activities.[1] "There is certainty that there will be books," Koolhaas said, "but uncertainty about the varieties of other media. Only by creating a unique space for books can you maintain this tension and do each medium justice."[2]

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1   Robin Updike, "New Library Design Goes Beyond Books," *Seattle Times*, 16 December 1999, B1.
2   Gary Wolf, "Exploring the Unmaterial World," *Wired*, June 2000,
     http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.06/koolhaas.html.

Figure 2. The "book spiral" at the Seattle Public Library.
Photo by the author.

Libraries typically calculate their print collection growth for decades to come and build in more than enough linear feet of shelving to accommodate that growing collection (see figure 2). And they often secure external funding for elegantly appointed special collections and archival resource rooms – reassuring their publics that these precious, and often irreplaceable, material media deserve an appropriately respectful space for their preservation, collection, and access (see figure 3). Despite that fact that so many spheres of activity and kinds of information have been digitized, there remain – and will remain – pockets of the human stock of knowledge that cannot be translated into 1's and 0's. There is a materiality to particular media and artifacts and experiences that cannot be reproduced in a digital environment. There must be a place for this "material knowledge" – a place where people can feel the heft of a book, smell the ink of a newly printed magazine, turn gingerly the brittle pages of a worn manuscript or dig through boxes of historical photographs.

Figure 3. Western History Room at the Denver
Public Library. Photo by the author.

Plus, libraries often save their grandest spaces for print media, integrating reading rooms in myriad flavors of "magnificent," both classical and modern. Seattle's designers recognized the unique experience of being in a grand nineteenth-century reading room and considered

how to translate that experience into a space appropriate for new technologies and new patterns of media use. The designers placed atop the building a huge, vaulting, elegantly but not stuffily appointed reading room that affords views of the city and the sound, and serves as a "majestic space well suited for the noble act of reading" (see figure 4).[3] Within the room are different conditions, from the intimate and informal to the rigorous and organized, from linearly ordered carrels to grouped foam chairs in an arresting red – for all kinds of reading moods, methods, and materials, both analog and digital. Meanwhile, the ground floor offers a more informal alternative: the living room, an "island of Persian rugs and cushy couches" (see figure 5).[4] The space's proximity to the fiction collection, the cafe, and the library store, and its provision of a variety of work areas and seating arrangements communicates this space's commitment to both traditional and new media and its dual purposes as a media-access space and a social space.

Figure 4. The top-floor reading gallery at the Seattle Public Library. Photo by the author.

Figure 5. The "living room" on the ground floor of the Seattle Public Library. Photo by the author.

3   Seattle Public Library, *Rem Koolhaas: Seattle Library Architecture Design Presentation*, videocassette recording; Randy Gragg, "Relax, Seattle: Library Will Work," *Oregonian*, 21 May 2000.
4   Sheri Olsen, "How Seattle Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Rem Koolhaas' Plans for a New Central Library," *Architectural Record*, August 2000, 24.

Seattle recognizes that it's serving multiple urban publics with varied information needs. The children's room and the popular library are on the ground floor, in order to accommodate patrons who cannot or do not wish to traverse the entire building to get what they came for. The foreign language collection is near a main entrance, too, for patrons for whom English may be a second language – and who, therefore, might not be able to follow signs leading them to foreign language resources deep within the building. Another population that the urban public library serves – and which often raises heated debates during public design deliberations, particularly among suburban voters who are averse to using their tax dollars to build what some refer to as a "daytime shelter" – is the homeless: media have-nots, and therefore those whom, arguably, benefit most from having access to a *place* where media are concentrated and freely accessible. Furnishings, finishings, and even media playback devices are often chosen with a mind to security and sanitation as pertaining to this population.

But libraries aren't only about media access; some also serve as places for media production and as outlets for commercial media. Chicago houses a tv production studio and music practice rooms. Inside Salt Lake City's Urban Room, a "foyer" to the library proper, one finds several commercial or cultural outlets, including Night Flight Comics, whose presence attests to the library's support of non-mainstream media and may perhaps attract a countercultural audience who might not otherwise visit Library Square (see figure 6). Then there are tenants committed to the support, exhibition, or production of media: the Salt Lake City Film Center and radio station KCPW, the Center for Documentary Arts and, perhaps in the future, two small movie theaters. This is a library that regards comic book shops and newsstands not as competitors – or commercial interests likely to tarnish the reputation of the pure, benevolent institution (that never was) – but as services that enhance the library experience for its patrons. As project architect Isaac Franco, of Moshe Safdie Associates, explained, the commerce will "be used by people whether they go to the library or not"; it "brings them in contact with the cultural institution" and may even eventually draw them inside amid the books and computers.[5]

Figure 6. The "Urban Room" at the Salt Lake City
Public Library. Photo by the author.

We see in Seattle and Salt Lake City how urban public libraries must balance obligations to old and new media, to scholars and popular media consumers, to information haves and have-nots, to civic natives and new arrivals. They must balance the need to preserve material media and secure media technology, while also facilitating access. They must balance

5   Isaac Franco, personal communication, 29 July 2003.

commercial obligations while also celebrating their position as one of the few remaining freely accessible public spaces – one of the only places where those on the wrong side of the digital divide can cross that divide.

And, borrowing language from this conference's call for proposals, urban public libraries are also "interfaces between physical cityscapes, intersectional identity formations and representations of 'place identities.'" The architectural design process provides an unparalleled opportunity for institutional and civic closet-cleaning and psychoanalysis. What better time to prioritize the institution's and the city's values, to reassess the library's purpose, to reconsider what ideas it embodies, and to refashion its institutional and civic image, than when considering how to physically embody, or *anchor*, these values, to structurally accommodate these functions, to materially symbolize these ideas, and to reflect these images? Through the design and construction of a new home, libraries reassess or reaffirm who they and their cities are.

International starchitects are often commissioned to provide spectacular buildings that will put these cities on the global map. Preconceptions about "contextual" design are questioned, as libraries wonder how to design buildings that reflect the core values of their cities, while also drawing attention – and capital – from outside. New libraries often attract so many visitors – those who intend to use the library's materials or those there solely to gawk at the architecture – it is no surprise that many have argued, as Redmond Molz and Phyllis Dain do, that "libraries are regarded as visible affirmations of metropolitan vigor."[6]

Many of these cities found themselves attending to similar issues, dealing with similar pressures, and addressing similar questions in their public design processes, yet the disparity in their decision-making processes produced an array of results, from stately red brick boxes to crystal speedboats, to stacked boxes, to unwinding Colosseums (sic) – a variety that attests to the specificity of place, and place-based identities, in shaping media spaces. And all of which attest to the continued need for anchors in the sea of digital information.

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6   Redmond Kathleen Molz and Phyllis Dain, *Civic Space/Cyberspace: The American Public Library in the Information Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 208.