

Designing for Community:
Roles for libraries online and off

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LIBR 200: Information and Society
Professor Schmidt
November 26, 2002

Local libraries can consider how new and innovative designs can help these institutions reassert their spatial and electronic presence in the community... To devise innovative new electronic and physical digital places, this process would need to include a range of partnerships with other community resources such as museums, schools, and community centers. These community resources can become important 'third places' ... (Horan 2001)

In the increasingly digital world, some fear that libraries may be at risk of being overlooked or taken for granted, yet surveys show that within most communities, the citizens think of the local public library as “*their* library” and place value on the roles the library plays in their communities (Marcum 1996) . New information technologies have transformed the library in many ways, but rather than fearing new technologies or going to the extreme of completely virtual libraries, libraries can best serve their communities by intelligently combining their strengths in both the physical and technological areas to provide services, create public spaces online and off, and encourage community building and dialogue.

Despite predictions to the contrary, the growth of the Internet has actually prompted an increase in library use which, in turn, has led to a boom in the construction and renovation of libraries (Friess 2002). This boom has provided new opportunities for libraries to examine the design of their physical and online presence and community activities in order to stake out a strong role in the community and maximize the potential for building social capital. Because public perception of the library is so important for funding and other concerns, many libraries have developed innovative strategies to assert their place in the community.

Libraries have an important role to play in building social capital and supporting local communities. By combining the library's unique strengths in both the physical and online spheres and working to combine the two areas to further capitalize on the advantages they can offer, libraries can embrace the opportunities that new technology is bringing to the institution while standing their ground against critics that argue for the obsolescence of the physical elements. Rather than choosing between models that view the library as either a collection of materials or as a gateway to the world of resources, libraries can continue to serve both functions while also staking out a more critical role to the community.

Communities need public libraries for something more than just data and more than just electronic connections. In many places, the public library continues to be the symbolic center of the community, the place where people come together, the place where an information nexus occurs – an information exchange, if you will, that must offer access to past knowledge as well as linkages to the electronic wonders of the future (Marcum 1996).

This paper looks at how libraries can work to reinforce this role – creating physical spaces conducive to community, fostering online community networks, and working with other community groups and resources to enhance social capital.

LIBRARY AS THIRD PLACE

In his book, *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg stresses the importance that “third places” – separate from the first (home) and second (work) – have to community and social capital (1989). Generally, third places are accessible, welcoming places where people can meet people, see old friends, discuss important (and trivial) issues, and temporarily escape home and work. Third places make it possible for people to be

involved in an “informal public life” which has “important psychological, social, and political implications.” (Kloby 1999) While Oldenburg’s examples center more on pubs, cafes and even barbershops, today’s libraries can also serve as lively public community spaces and are in fact “one of the few remaining truly public spaces and institutions” that we have (Toivonen 2002).

An important benefit of third places is that they allow for the creation of social capital, the connections people make between one another that lead to networks of communication, reciprocity, and trust, essential elements of community. Social capital allows people to rely on one another, to come together to work towards common goals, and to develop a sense of group identity. Social capital is vital to healthy communities.

Libraries can contribute to social capital in many ways - providing public space where citizens can work together on personal and community problems, providing notices of local events, and offering other services such as free access to the Internet. Simply the presence of a public library in a community “reflects social capital because it requires community members to work together for a common good.” (Northern Forest Center 1999) Much discussion has centered around the characteristics of online communities that also make them effective third places where social capital can be built. Because conversation is at the heart of these places, online communication can enable strong bonds between participants in virtual communities. Libraries can design their online presence with an eye towards building community.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam examines America’s declining social capital. He found evidence that in today’s society we are less connected to our communities – exemplified by the shift from popular league bowling to the increase in people bowling

individually. In these conditions, the potential for libraries to nurture social capital is increasingly important to communities.

Deanna B. Marcum, President of the Council on Library Resources and the Commission on Preservation and Access, writes that the neutrality of public libraries within communities is one of the great advantages of the institution (1996). Libraries can provide neutral public spaces where people can learn on their own about any subject without review or control, and these spaces – both real and virtual – “have the capacity to provide a perceptual and functional meeting grounds for friends and strangers alike.” The connections people make there – whether in person or online – “can help transform a sense of place into a sense of community.” (Horan 2001) Libraries have an advantage over many institutions because of their ability to “create these commons in cyberspace as well as in public buildings.” (Kranich 2001)

Marcum found that the library “is taking on a new life at the very center of so many communities and is becoming a force in drawing communities together. In this sense, if Americans are ‘bowling alone,’ as Putnam maintains, they are also coming together at the library- the real one and the virtual one.” (Marcum 1996) Both the physical structure of the library and its online presence can be designed to optimize that ability to bring people together.

By leveraging their physical and online aspects, libraries can help maintain those local place-based community ties while also providing access to the global opportunities, building up social capital online and off, and finding ways “in which Internet technology can reinforce rather than supplant place-based, face to face, enduring social networks.” (Putnam 2000)

PHYSICAL STRUCTURE

In “Weatherproofing a Great, Good Place,” Steve Cisler, former head of the Apple Library of Tomorrow program, writes that, “the library is certainly one of the more important of these so-called Third Places, and it is crucial that we reaffirm the value of its corporeal existence to the communities that support it.” (1996) To do this libraries can work to make their corporeal, physical structures conducive to community building and designed with the essential qualities of third places. Because the degree to which and the kind of community that will flourish is so influenced by the physical design of places (Conservation Economy n.d.) it is interesting to look at some of the trends in library design which impact this area.

Libraries provide spaces to a variety of different type of people. In addition to providing books and resources, they are considered a safe space that kids can go to after school, a place for seniors to gather and spend time, and increasingly a place where jobseekers or telecommuters can come for social contact. Families can come together and individuals can feel comfortable sitting and working alone. In addition to being seen as a safe place, libraries represent tradition and stability to many in a community.

Even just being open can lend a normalizing comfort to a community facing the aftermath of something like 9/11 or a local community trauma. (Conwill 2001) Community members often are in need of safe gathering places and look to the library as a place “where people of all ages can share interests and concerns, find information essential to civic participation, and connect with fellow citizens.” (Kranich 2001) The

design of the library can provide those spaces and create that safe, comfortable environment that our communities are looking for.

In many towns, the library building offers a sense of elegance and refinement few other buildings can offer and provide a source of civic pride and awe. The tremendous spurt of new construction over the past few years has resulted in some impressive structures which carry on that tradition. A classic example of library design along those lines is the Humanities & Social Sciences Branch of the New York Public Library in Manhattan.

The Project for Public Spaces describes the New York Public Library building as almost “intimidatingly elegant” but credits the space's design and management with making everyone feel welcome there. (Project for Public Spaces n.d.) Inside and out, the physical structure of the library affects the experience.

Inside, the Library boasts a gorgeous reading room that would make anyone feel like royalty - indeed, it rivals the ballrooms of European palaces. But out in front, along the street, is where this illustrious institution truly connects with the city around it. A series of well-linked spaces - steps, plazas, little nooks and pathways - provide innumerable places for sitting, meeting, eating and chatting.

The front steps are famously known as a meeting point, drawing “as many eaters and people-watchers as readers and researchers.” It is described as having a “palpable sense of good will and well-being that comes from the welcoming surroundings. Even loners and loiterers seem becalmed.” (Project for Public Spaces n.d.) The library is alive with people using the resources, studying, viewing exhibitions and attending meetings and functions. The building itself, with its distinctive lion statues, is a proud landmark for the city.

Today's library designs now increasingly incorporate additional community areas, technology infrastructure, cafes, meeting rooms, open spaces, and other features.

From the selection of new furniture for the children's room at a small neighborhood branch to the construction of an auditorium wired for live satellite feed at a bustling metropolitan library, architects and designers worked at every level to provide new areas for people to gather, listen, and learn, and to enhance existing spaces. (American Library Association 2002)

These elements are a shift away from simply maximizing the available shelf space in a library facility and can go a long way towards creating spaces for community building.

Thanks in a large part to the availability of community meeting rooms and local information in library buildings, "libraries have often been perceived as community centers." (Rubin 2000) Many libraries have spaces where community groups could hold meetings or events, helping to make "the library the center of civic activity, especially in rural areas where it is often the only public building open every day." (Friess 2002) These spaces play an important part in the library's community-building work.

Although the idea of food and drink in a library may seem radical to those trained to carefully protect their library materials, another trend within library buildings is the presence of a café. The availability of food and drink are seen as critical components for successful third places and many libraries have found cafes to be a way to compete with major bookstores which allow eating and browsing, as well as a way to make the library more social and welcoming. Howard Rheingold, famous for his work with virtual communities, commented that a café "helps maintain the 'third place'ness of a library" (Rheingold 2001).

A 1996 ALA Conference session entitled "Espresso and Ambiance," noted that library cafes "create an image that will draw customers in and make them want to come

back." (Pierce 1997) In fact, additions such as cafes to library buildings can completely transform the image of a library:

The new San Francisco Public Library, complete with a cafe, gallery, and music center, was recently described in the San Francisco Chronicle as aesthetically "a building to be inside of simply for the pleasure of being there." It features a garden terrace lunch area and meeting rooms for library users to gather and interact in a comfortable setting. (Pierce 1997)

The library building is viewed as a place offering much more than the sum of its collections.

Incorporating areas where the public can have access to the Internet and online resources is another way that libraries can help to build social capital:

The experiences of the public library in the digital age corroborates the evidence that technology strengthens social relationships. The urban public library is seeing a tremendous amount of use by new constituencies because of new technology resources: seniors who come to use e-mail, teens who come to surf the 'net and complete homework assignments, and small business owners who come to use expensive finance and business planning databases. (Milam 2001)

Offering these resources does have an impact on the physical structure of the library as designers need to account for wires and outlets, furniture appropriate for computer use, the rearrangement of shelving, and other changes. Richard E. Rubin, in a chapter entitled "Redefining the Library: Impact of Information Technologies: the 1990s and Beyond" stresses that new technologies require "major redesign of the library's physical environment." (2000)

Whether retrofitting older libraries or designing new facilities, an important area of the physical structure to examine is how new technologies should be incorporated. As Steve Cisler points out, "One logistical problem is that you need to have a certain level of noise [in community spaces and cafes] that does not work in a place where people are

doing research or just reading a magazine for fun.” (Cisler 2001) Incorporating these more social and technological elements into the traditional library settings can often be a challenge.

An example of a relatively new library designed to keep the needs of community and technology in mind is the new main San Francisco library, opened in 1996. The library was envisioned as a place to serve and foster community and includes designated spaces for a number of community groups.

The building is designed to bring people into contact with each other as much as with librarians, information, and knowledge. It will be the city’s real and virtual-community communications center as well as an access point to other communities in the region and around the globe. It works as a magnet, bringing in thousands of people who never thought of using a public library before. For countless others, the library is their first introduction to the new world of digital resources. (Dowlin and Shapiro 1966)

The design, however, was not universally popular. Opinions included the charge that the “design wasted space and crowded out books” and that “the library was hostage to the new technology.” Critics complained that books were discarded in the move and that they should not have taken away the old card catalogs. (Molz and Dain 1999) The San Francisco Library experience showed some of the challenges in designing libraries that stray from traditional notions of what libraries should be and look like.

There are thousands of decisions to be made in designing the physical structure of a library which impact the sense of place and community that the building can foster. Because of the emotional associations people have with their libraries and their sense of community ownership, there are tremendous opportunities to cultivate public spaces where social capital can develop. “The library as a locus, or gathering place, where information may be obtained and exchanged in a sociable atmosphere, is a logical goal

for public library managers intent on expanding their library's influence in the community and thereby thwarting the threat of library obsolescence.” (Pierce 1997) Viewing the library itself as a place with much more to offer than only the books on its shelves opens up many new areas of consideration.

Far from disappearing into a digital cloud, more than ever the physical library has an important role to play. In fact, “the infusion of technology-based products and services has enhanced the library’s role as a safe place and neutral ground,” (Milam 2001) creating an environment that lays the foundation for the building of social capital and community.

VIRTUAL PRESENCE

The importance of the library as a physical place should not completely eclipse the ways in which the library can serve the community online. It is clear that valuable social capital and public space can be created online, and studies have shown that “electronic networks, especially when augmented by face-to-face networks, can strengthen communities by serving as ‘free spaces,’ by fostering dialogue and deliberation, and by enhancing the bonds of trust, reciprocity and connectedness that make up social capital.” (London 1997)

Because of the library’s established role in the community – in particular its established physical presence -- it is in a unique position to be able to foster online community networks and public spaces through its presence in cyberspace.

The new technology allows for building a community among individuals who have not found a common meeting ground with others in a physical place. The key to this expanded definition of community depends upon public librarians realizing that the institutions for which they have

responsibility offer a physical as well as a virtual meeting place. Both types of space are important and must be nurtured. Funding for the two must not be separate but interdependent, just as the two types of space are mutually reinforcing. (Marcum 1996)

The library can benefit from on its image of being a trusted resource and serve many of the same goals online. “America’s public libraries are capitalizing on recent advancements in information technologies and foundation support to design and deliver innovative digital community services.” (Durrance and Fisher-Pettigrew 2002.) Many libraries are providing services which range from providing sophisticated community information systems, offering courses on Internet use and development, to digitizing local special collections and other materials and coordinating local job databanks. (Durrance and Fisher-Pettigrew 2002) Their web sites today are filled with helpful features, community information, recommended and screened resources, live or synchronous help from librarians, and often some remote access to the collections.

These web sites are effective tools that can be used to increase access to civic and government information. (Durrance et al. 2001) This information has always been kept by the library – can now make it more accessible and available by putting it on the library’s web site and by working with other local groups to coordinate town calendars and other shared community information. From the start, public libraries have played a strong role in the creation of online Community Networks (CN). The Community Connector at the University of Michigan defines a community network as “a locally based, locally driven communication and information system designed to enhance community and enrich lives.” (Durrance 2002) It is a natural outgrowth of the library’s position in the community matched with the newly available communication medium.

[Community Networking] initiatives reflect the leadership taken by these public libraries in increasing access to the community's information about itself. These projects virtually depict the community with information by and about local non-profits and other organizations, health and social service agencies, libraries, museums and educational institutions, some businesses and employers, and local and state governments. By bringing information created by a number of organizations including, but not limited to, the library together in one place the CN provides one-stop shopping for community information. (Durrance and Pettigrew 2001)

Since the early 1970s, public libraries have been providing community information and referral services, and “organizing and supporting community-wide information initiatives with local service providers” in order to facilitate access to important community information. (Durrance and Pettigrew 2001)

A library's online presence should tie in closely with its physical resources – providing hours and directions to the facilities, allowing patrons to check for information at home before coming to the library, and other support. By providing Internet access and instruction at the library, the virtual presence is also reinforced from within the library building.

CONCLUSION

An important way that the library can leverage both its online and physical spaces as well as continue to play a larger role in the community is by working with other groups:

Instead of doing their work independently, libraries are collaborating with telecommunications and corporate partners, other libraries, community organizations and agencies, and others to provide new services, increase public access to information, and create community-based information resources. The collaborations have helped libraries establish new constituencies, build wider support, and, in some cases, broaden and diversify sources of funding (Marcum 1996).

Libraries also often organize community-wide projects and activities – again leveraging their online and offline presence to draw awareness and participation. Many libraries have even organized entire cities or towns to read the same book and then participate in online discussions and meetings together in the library and cafes and other spaces around town. Libraries also work with other groups on outreach programs to underserved populations like new immigrant groups or other segments of the community.

Nancy Kranich, past president of the American Library Association, argues that “Libraries and librarians have a unique, if fleeting, opportunity to carve out a new mission as creators of social capital for their communities.” She writes that particularly since 9/11, “Americans have a renewed need to connect and rebuild trust” and that “Librarians have the place and the resources to enable the connection.” (2001) Through their physical and virtual presences – and particularly by capitalizing in the strength that comes from building communities both online and off – librarians do indeed have an opportunity to assert the library’s position in the community. “There is no mistaking the continuing community role that these institutions play, and the role that digital technology can play in enhancing their effectiveness.” (Horan 2000)

By providing information about local events and organizations, libraries allow their patrons to “get vital information not only about what’s going on in the community, but about participating as a citizen.” (Durrance et al. 2001) They help to increase the social capital of the communities they serve, expanding the webs of connections and conversations and providing the public spaces where community can be built.

The increasing use of the Internet has shown to have increased library use and having the physical library infrastructure increases the effectiveness of online community

networks organized by local libraries. The more that libraries do to foster community and build social capital by taking advantage of these resources and working with other members of the community, the more the library will be tied into the strengthened community it serves.

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