Your third place or mine? Public libraries and local communities

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It is in the interest of any society, and any government, to minimise inequalities, to maximise learning opportunities, and to stimulate both diversity and cohesion within local communities. Inequalities are socially expensive, educational under-achievement is wasteful. Both can be re-enforced by closed, tight-knit communities that are culturally insular; or by fractured communities that fail to offer networks of support to those who need it. Social policy therefore needs dependable infrastructures that contribute to these values, and which help to situate these values in a rapidly changing ecology – the network society. One problem here has been a demonstrable preoccupation with new technologies in any discussion about what sort of information and communication infrastructure is desirable, at the risk of overlooking the importance of *place*.

So it is hugely reassuring to find in the government's recent 'strategic vision' for public library services, *Framework for the future*, an emphasis on the role of public libraries as 'shared spaces in which people can choose from any number of activities.'[1] Over the next few years the effective public library will need to demonstrate a role in community cohesion and the generation of social capital. To that end, there is a familiar requirement for indicators of social, cultural and behavioural effects, some of which are fairly indirect. There is also, I suggest, a need to appreciate more clearly the role of the library as a place to which people can go, without obligation, threat or constraining expectations. In this paper I want to explore what that means and try to get at a more nuanced understanding of what we mean when we talk about 'the library in the community.'

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[1] (DCMS 2003)

Third places

In 1989 Ray Oldenburg published his passionate study of 'hangouts at the heart of the community' - local places 'that help to get you through the day.'[2] These he terms 'third places,' distinguishing them from home and workplace, and he stresses their neutrality, the fact that visitors are not encumbered by the role either of host or of guest.

> 'Such an environment is well described as casual because the elements of accident and informality are strong within it... Without having to plan or schedule or prepare, those who move about in a familiar and casual environment have positive social experiences.'[3]

Oldenburg's sub-title lists 'cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons,' but he does not put forward libraries as an example of third places. His analysis was a major contribution to the assessment of the decline of social capital in America, drawing attention to the need for a public context in which informal affiliation and serendipitous encounters are facilitated.

A fundamental point here is that, for most people, neighbourhood networks are not the same as friendship networks, comprising typically less intense relationships and making quite different demands on people. For Oldenburg, the two blend together and a third place is typically more predictable in its clientele at given times than most local libraries – more like a pub or sports club with regulars at the bar. But all societies need places that allow informal interaction without *requiring* it, places that are rich in the possibility of safe, mundane encounter and in which the notion of 'being public' is overt. Libraries, I suggest, belong at the less interactive end of the third place spectrum, but they have an under-appreciated role in providing local support and generating trust.

So part of the argument here has to do with the need for a *variety* of third places. If you don't like smoke, you won't go to pubs; if you don't like coffee you may not use cafes, and if you have uncertain citizenship status you may find libraries off-putting. Libraries may need to be flexible in finding their place in relation to other local provision. We will return to this point later.

Given Oldenburg's emphasis on *commercial* third places, we should note the public policy potential of those that are not. Thus in Northern Ireland there has been significant investment in village halls that provide 'neutral' meeting spaces in spite of the very visible social divisions. And in India we are told that 'if you want to mobilize people, go to the public toilets' -

> 'Public toilets are community centres where people meet to exchange news about what is happening in the community...'[4]

My intention is not necessarily to associate libraries with toilets but, allowing for cultural differences, the point is not entirely trivial. The growing recognition of third places in relation to social capital and community cohesion suggests an appropriate role for the public library movement seeking to reaffirm its place in the network society.

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[2] (Oldenburg 1989)
[3] (Oldenburg 1989, p289)
[4] (Arputham 2002)

Public space and social interaction

So I am seeking to reassert the importance of *libraries as local places*, while recognising the fluidity of many of the issues which influence that role. Our context includes, for example, the increasing mobility of work and leisure, the relentless Starbucking of bookshops, the permeability of the household to electronic media, the reported if exaggerated disappearance of street life, and what David Chaney calls 'the fragmentation of culture' in everyday life.[5]

At the same time, we should be alert to the emerging political salience of the 'connectedness' of citizens. Emphatically, this is not just about citizens as online consumers of products and services. To some extent, the e-government agenda risks trivialising the notion of a connected society because of its consumption model that overlooks the contribution of internet technologies as social technologies. It is of interest to note here that The National Consumer Council in its recent work on 'essential goods and services' identifies *social interaction* as a key life requirement, alongside the utilities, health maintenance, and financial and household management.[6] The point is that in order to feel secure about where we live, with minimal stress, and to be informed about options and opportunities, we need connections to others. Those connections are strengthened by trust, which itself is reasserted by informal interaction in 'neutral' contexts - in the street, in shops, parks and other public and civic spaces.[7]

Let's look at this a little more closely. Zygmunt Bauman has offered a brief analysis of spaces that are *public yet not civil*. They include places that inspire awe but discourage staying; 'non-places,' typified by airport lounges; and places that encourage action but not interaction. Indeed, Bauman stresses that the main feature of such places is '*the redundancy of interaction*' -
> 'Public but non-civil places allow one to wash one's hands of any truck with the strangers around and avoid the risk-fraught commerce, the mind-taxing communication, the nerve-breaking bargaining and the irritating compromises.'[8]

This seems to be a valuable context for our understanding of the way in which the relation between public and private is being amended. Similarly, Victoria Nash distinguishes between situations in which people are just exposed to the presence of others, and situations in which they are required to interact and co-operate with others. She notes that both are required for a healthy public realm and for building diverse local social networks:
> 'Without the everyday mundane encounters of passing people in the street, queuing together in shops, talking to the man who runs the post-office, it is impossible to imagine how any level of generalised trust can arise.'[9]

[5] (Chaney 2002)
[6] (NCC 2003)
[7] (Harris 2003)
[8] (Bauman 2000)
[9] (Nash and Christie 2003, p43)

Elsewhere I have suggested that we may be experiencing an increase in coordinated, scheduled encounters and a decrease in serendipitous encounters, partly due to the power of the mobile but also due to pressures on our public spaces and places.[10]

We might ask, in this respect, how 'public' is the use of public libraries compared with, say, supermarkets, burger-bars, or high street building society offices? Here, after all, are the kind of stops that people make in their everyday lives, against which libraries might measure themselves in terms of pertinence. Most compare favourably of course, and offer more – they encourage staying and most do not discourage interaction. Those are attributes of places that are both public and civil, and where the citizen's presence can be informal and casual. As Oldenburg puts it:

'Third places thrive best in locales where community life is casual... The streets are not only safe, they invite human connection.'[11]

Furthermore, in a library, there's always something to be looking at, something to be occupied with. The user need not feel vulnerable to unwanted approaches. The flip-side of this is that the purpose, the occasion, of a visit to the public library is usually personal and there may be little to stimulate or facilitate serendipitous encounters.

In addition we have to be alert to confusions in our thinking about public space and community space. For example, many commercial places are very communal, while many community and public spaces are exclusive or off-putting. Thus shopping malls are widely regarded as homogeneous and 'inauthentic,' but this is challenged by Jennifer Light, who notes their communal function.[12] Jane Jacobs famously challenged assumptions about the communal nature of city parks;[13] and Greenhalgh and Worpole report how people use parks 'to be private in a public place.'[14] Lieberg has pointed out that, unlike adults, many young people have little access to backstage space.[15] For many, the local street has been taken away or its use as a third space severely modified. Lieberg distinguishes 'places of retreat' and 'places of interaction,' once more implying the need for more than one kind of third place. Other researchers have shown that many young people do indeed still have a street life, of necessity, since they have nowhere else to go.[16] Further research will be needed to ascertain the extent to which 'mobile space' now constitutes backstage space for young people, and what that implies in terms of their use of physical space.

[10] (Harris 2003)
[11] (Oldenburg 1989, p210)
[12] (Light 1999, p115)
[13] (Jacobs 2000)
[14] (Greenhalgh and Worpole 1995b)
[15] (Lieberg 1995)
[16] (Skelton 2000), (Matthews, Limb, and Taylor 2000)

Community and individual

Public space then is still in demand, if it is not always civil or community space. There are distinctions that need to be made in our understanding of the local social context – between 'the community' and the support networks which people depend upon; between civic places and those that are public-yet-not-civil; and between *occasions* which call for interaction and those where we are comfortable with anonymous co-presence. A final distinction emerges, which has been part of the querulous ontological insecurity of the public library movement for too long: the dichotomy of individual and the collective.

In an influential essay on the politics of difference, Iris Marion Young argued that those motivated by 'community' 'will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify.'[17] Young places community and individualism in mutually-exclusive opposition, pointing out how the desire for unity (the 'totalizing impulse') generates dichotomies and exclusions. In its simplest form, if we posit an 'us' we imply a 'them,' and we get a light shock from the crackling tension between diversity and cohesion.

The distinction between community and difference is neatly illustrated by Liff and Steward in their work on local online centres ('e-gateways'). They draw attention to the contrast between places that suit 'regulars' and those that might appeal to people who prefer anonymity and privacy.

> 'While the existence of a group of regulars does create a strong, user-focused, sense of place, which is obviously part of its appeal to the 'in-group', it may make it less appealing to those who approach as outsiders, particularly if they are demographically different from the regulars. Successful e-gateways seemed to be *either* very open to new users *or* to develop a supportive group of regular users, but found it difficult to do both.'[18]

Many libraries present familiar examples of this distinction. It lies at the heart of the 'libraries and social exclusion' problem, because people who experience exclusion have good reason to seek out a reassuringly cohesive context for their everyday lives, including communication and information behaviours. Thus Myria Georgiou describes groups of Greek Cypriots in north London gathering at specific times in their community centre to watch the news from their home country, in collective silence.[19] That is an instance of *community* cohesion that we would not expect to find in *public* libraries.

Finding a place among third places

All of this serves to reinforce the point that just having civic amenities and facilities is not sufficient for what we would recognise as 'community life' to flourish. A pertinent example comes from Morris Janowitz's seminal study of

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[17] (Young 1990)
[18] (Liff, Steward, and Watts 2002, p88)
[19] (Georgiou 2000)

community newspapers, in which he found that commitments and local involvements were moulded by '*interpersonal contacts around the use of local facilities* and not mere *use* of local facilities.'[20]

Public libraries are often seen as retaining some of the vestiges of formalised behaviours. It is still common for people to imply and assume that near-silence is *de rigeur* in public libraries. To deride this notion as old-fashioned is to miss the point: people cling to notions of acceptable behaviours in public places because minimising unpredictability is important in our social lives. Formal conventions generate security, and their disappearance can be alienating and disturbing.[21] Hence the familiar challenge, for the culture of the public library to accommodate those expectations of civicness, and at the same time to accommodate informality and the casual, which we have identified as essential components in appropriate third places.

This challenge has to be addressed from the local context. One of the recognised strengths of public libraries, as the *Framework* document asserts, is their sense of local connection while reflecting a national – indeed global – model. The logic of what I have been exploring would seem to be for libraries to take some cues from the characteristics of other third places at local level. As Victoria Nash stresses, 'The quality of the public realm can have an enormous impact on local social relations,'[22] and local social relations are crucial to the quality of community life. It's obvious that libraries have a role to play in supporting well-functioning local relationships, and I would argue that their civic style needs to be fashioned in harmony with other third places. In many cases, that role could be tweaked, depending on what else is flourishing and what is needed in the locality. I am not aware of any mapping or profiling exercise of this kind that has ever been carried out, and it may be time to develop some. If we find, for example, in a given locality, a proliferation of low-interaction places ('places of retreat,' of being publicly private) and a deficiency of places of congregation or interaction, could the library's style be adapted accordingly? Understanding the range of third places and their different social roles could be the basis for action by agencies such as, in England, the local strategic partnerships. Taking a lead in this respect would help place libraries appropriately in the local social capital agenda.

In my view, the essential characteristic of libraries is not their local connection but their 'publicness.' In a discussion of what is meant by 'public,' in their seminal 1995 study, Greenhalgh and Worpole note:

> 'it can be argued that one of the most important functions that the library fulfils – unknowingly - is actually to create the "public" as a recognizable constituency.'[23]

Craig Calhoun makes a related point when he notes how settings such as churches, PTAs and workplace cafeterias provide the context for significant discourse about public issues.

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[20] (Janowitz 1967, p197, emphasis added.)
[21] See (Misztal 2000). In this respect, studies of other third places give us insights into the nature of informal interaction in semi-formal contexts. See for example (Laurier, Whyte, and Buckner 2001)
[22] (Nash and Christie 2003, p47)
[23] (Greenhalgh and Worpole 1995a, p28)

'We need to recognize the importance of intersections between the larger public discourses that are predominantly dependent on mass media... and these smaller discourses on the boundaries between community and public life. These intersections are one of the crucial ways in which our separation into enclaves can be overcome.'[24]

The first quotation might provoke the response that of course, it is possible to 'create the public' by re-enforcing power structures and lending gravity to the status quo – as the education system, libraries, the BBC and other institutions have done in the past. But Calhoun's observation prompts us to ask if it is not also possible to create a kind of third place that meets local needs on an interpretation of public as 'local public'. Libraries are crucial because they provide the hyperlinks to the wider world, while *being there* in the local one. Impotent awareness of the global, through broadcast media, can be profoundly disempowering, especially for people whose lives are highly localised. Libraries can counteract this effect by contextualising the local in the global – not just local information, but local issues and the messy tumble of local life. The availability of such a public context is fundamental to quality of life.

This is a hugely difficult role to play. At a time of widespread concern over the representativeness of our democratic structures and processes, with the public realm not waving but drowning, do public librarians feel this to be a fair and worthwhile objective, and one to which they are contributing?

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