

The Rise, Fall and Rise of the British Public Library Building

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ABSTRACT

Focuses on recent developments and controversies surrounding public library buildings noting that despite predications of the death of the library due to the information revolution and the availability of digital resources, library buildings are attracting renewed attention and, generally, increased use. Suggests that the public library building may have an important role in the new local government philosophy of “place shaping”, and particularly in the “community engagement” agenda which is part of this approach. Explores the debate about the nature of the public library space and whether policies which emphasize the role of the public library as a welcoming community space run counter to many people’s idea of the library building as a quiet place for silent contemplation and study. Suggests how public libraries may take forward the community engagement and user consultation agendas through use of the public library space, focusing particularly on the potential of reader and reading development activities for bringing people together and encouraging their contributions and ideas about public library services. Concludes with a discussion of how an emphasis on the role of the public library building in community engagement activities may impact on the ideals of community librarianship.

KEYWORDS: public libraries; public library buildings; place shaping; community engagement; social inclusion; community librarianship; reader development; user consultation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reports of the death of the British Public Library Building have been greatly exaggerated, or so I will argue in this paper. Despite the technological imperative leading to the digitisation of vast swathes of information resources which people can now access from the comfort of their own homes, the British public library building is alive, well and thriving. In fact, technological development and its impact on the public library has provoked a new debate about public library space

focusing on what it should be used for, how it should be organised and managed, and how it could be developed to fulfil a range of local and national government policy priorities.

This paper will consider discourses relating to the British public library building, suggesting that recent developments within the framework of local government services (of which public libraries are a part) may mean a new and active role for the physical public library space, in contrast to many reports of its demise in the face of the onslaught of digital information sources. It will draw on a critical analysis of relevant literature, texts and documents, supplemented by interview data from a study on public library discourses funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (Goulding, 2006)¹. The paper develops themes presented in a key note presentation given to the Bobcatsss symposium held in Budapest in 2005 which reviewed developments relating to public library space in the UK and suggested that the public library was being positioned as a key resource at the heart of the community (Goulding, 2005). Since 2005, further developments have again focused attention on the public library building and its role and some of these will be explored in this paper.

2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

“Place shaping” and the related concept of “community engagement” are currently prominent discourses in the context of local government services in the UK. The role of modern local authorities or councils, according to Sir Michael Lyons who chaired a government enquiry into the future of local government (Lyons, 2007), should be place shaping; the “creative use of its powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens” (Lyons, 2007, p. 3) which involves:

- “building and shaping local identity;
- representing the community;

- regulating harmful and disruptive behaviours;
- maintaining the cohesiveness of the community and supporting debate within it, ensuring smaller voices are heard;
- helping to resolve disagreements;
- working to make the local economy more successful while being sensitive to pressures on the environment;
- understanding local needs and preferences and making sure the right services are provided to local people; and
- working with other bodies to respond to complex challenges such as natural disasters and other emergencies” (Lyons, 2007, p. 3)

Themes of community engagement emerge from this description of the role of local government. In particular, bullet points two, four and seven above suggest that local government should work to empower local people so that they have more of a say about local services and the decisions affecting them.

Community engagement has been defined in many different ways but an accepted definition is: “Community engagement encompasses a variety of approaches whereby public service bodies empower citizens to consider and express their views on how their particular needs are best met. These may range from encouraging people to have a say on setting the priorities for community safety ... to sharing decision-making with them in relation to defined services.” (Rogers and Robinson, 2004, online resource). It is hoped that this kind of approach will improve services as well as invigorate local democracy. Community engagement has become a key concept for local government and its services including public libraries, therefore, and libraries have been experimenting with methods of involving local people and their representatives in activities which bring the public library closer to its community of users. Many of these (citizens’ panels, youth juries, partnerships with local voluntary and community groups, reader development work etc.) take place within public library buildings, suggesting that they could be important sites for community engagement activities and have the potential to bring local government closer to the citizen (for a more in-depth discussion of public libraries and community engagement see Goulding, 2009).

In the paper for the 2005 Bobcatsss Symposium noted above, discourses relating to social capital and community development and how public library buildings might facilitate these were shown to be increasingly common in policy documents and research reports emerging from central and local government (Goulding, 2005). The paper concluded, however, that public libraries faced a number of obstacles before they

could truly claim to be at the heart of the community and accepted as focal points by local people. In particular, they needed to move beyond merely providing space for community activities (important though this function is), and explore how they might become involved in advocacy and community capacity building. The remainder of this paper will consider developments relating to the role of the public library building within the community since 2005, focusing particularly on whether and how public libraries can contribute to the place shaping and community engagement agendas and the implications this may have for the public library building and the services it provides. The next section explores some of the recent debates and development surrounding UK public library buildings.

3. SILENT TEMPLE OF CULTURE OR COMMUNITY MEETING PLACE?

Pepper (2006) explains that the years from 1890 to World War I represented a construction boom for public libraries, following the passing of the first Public Libraries Act in the UK in 1850. He describes how Victorian and Edwardian public libraries were imagined as, “secular cathedrals, storehouses of knowledge or lighthouses to learning ... which endowed them with significance that went well beyond the efficient storage of books and the provision of controlled surroundings for different kinds of improving reading” (p. 585). Despite, or perhaps because of, their formal, classical design and appearance, early public libraries, such as those funded by the Carnegie foundation, have retained a place in some people’s hearts as one respondent in the AHRC study explained:

“I must admit I’ve got a sneaking fondness for the old Carnegie libraries but you can see that they don’t really entice people into them. It’s just nostalgia I think.”

While seemingly regretting the passing of the Carnegie library style, this interviewee acknowledges the barriers to entry it can represent. As well as being expensive to maintain and, therefore, often falling into disrepair and looking shabby, this style of library is also not considered socially inclusive with its suggestions of authority, municipality and formality, qualities that are perhaps unlikely to encourage those with little experience of public libraries to connect and interact with the service, one of the prerequisites for good community engagement.

While the exterior of the Carnegie library and its ilk is generally considered forbidding for some members of the community, particularly the socially excluded, an impression of the interior often summons up an image of the lone scholar, which is perhaps the predominant representation of library users generally, both historically and modern day. There would seem to be little scope for community engagement in such a paradigm and yet a

number of commentators have written of the value of studying or reading individually within company. Black and Crann (2002, p. 154), for example, write of how, while the public library provides a social experience in public space, it also offers “intimacy and seclusion for the self: a ‘sanctity of place’ for the individual”. For the isolated, in particular, the public library can play a hugely important role, providing opportunities for members of a community to socialise and make contact. Although users may not, in fact, talk to others, the mere fact of being in other people’s company is sufficient for some to appreciate the public library as a community space: “It’s just a nice sort of space, you know: plenty of space and no one hassles you or anything. You can sit down and look at books if you want a nice quiet place to sit” (Insight Research, 1999, p. 29). This aspect of “social reading” is an interesting one; the public library providing social space for “private contemplation in company with others” (Molz & Dain, 1999, p. 206). Public library users are undertaking personal activities in a public setting surrounded by others from the local community doing the same and individuality is thus combined with communality, arguably laying the foundations for positive and successful community engagement activity.

Other have argued, though, that this potential is unlikely to be realized when so many public library buildings are “tatty, dark, dingy places”, in the words of one respondent in the AHRC study. In 2005, Macnaught wrote of the “chronic building problem facing the services (Macnaught, 2005). Similarly, a Select Committee enquiry into public libraries in 2005 reported that “shabby buildings” were a significant barrier to use (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2005, p. 31). The report condemned the poor condition of the physical infrastructure as “a scandal that must be rectified” (p. 32). Three years later, it is still true that many public library buildings are run down and do not offer a particularly welcoming face to visitors but despite problems with funding capital projects like new library buildings, many library services have had building and refurbishment programmes over the last few years and some have been successful in obtaining funding from a combination of sources. Recently, £80 million worth of funding has been made available through the *Community Libraries Programme* to enable libraries to enter into partnerships with their local communities and give local people the opportunity to become actively engaged in shaping public library services². Focusing essentially on upgrading public library buildings, the programme aims to fund improvements in consultation with the local community, making libraries exciting and accessible community spaces. Development is taking place, therefore. A search for ‘public libraries’ on the Designing Libraries website in October 2008, for example, shows that 269 UK public libraries, which have been built, developed or

refurbished, have been added to the database since it was first developed in 2004³. Details on the records held in the database reveal that the new or redesigned/refurbished public libraries listed include features such as group study spaces, meeting rooms, cafes, exhibition areas, audiovisual/multimedia area and the hosting of other agencies, suggesting that local councils are trying to improve the public library building stock for the benefit of the community and encourage community engagement.

Despite, or perhaps because, of these developments, disagreement about the role, function, management and arrangement of the modern public library building shows no sign of abating. On the one hand, adherents to the “silence is golden” school of thought protest that modern public libraries are alienating for many (often older) users as “the quiet of the reference library and reading areas compet[e] with the clatter of keyboards” (Seered, 2004, online resource). The grandeur of many Victorian municipal libraries testify to the pride with which these institutions were founded and, as Black comments, “In some respects, indeed, it appeared that buildings were more important than they books they contained” (Black, 2000, p. 225). Similarly, the testimonies of many of those who used public libraries in the 1940s and 1950s suggest that the environment within the public library was the key to its success. Greenhalgh and Worpole (1995, p. 140) give examples of what they term “the mythology surrounding the public library”; accounts eulogising the quiet of the reading room, the severity of the librarians and even the smell of the fixtures and fittings all of which seemed to have endowed the public library with a quasi-religious aura, giving it mystique and adding to its charm but also perhaps giving it an intimidating air.

For some, the introduction of computers and modern design ideas and concepts which tend to favour a more relaxed style are an anathema. The recent announcement of a modernization of England’s public library service provoked a wave of protest when the Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, suggested that he wanted more “joy and chatter” because libraries are currently too “solemn and somber” (Hanley, 2008, online resource). He questioned the reasoning behind a ban on mobile phones (which some public libraries are now modifying) and said that the review will look at the key issues facing public libraries, including whether libraries should be “silent places for reading? Or social places for people to meet and discuss, perhaps with coffee shops or internet cafes” (DCMS, 2008, online resource). In response, several national newspapers ran Editorials, features and letters pages protesting at the supposedly planned abandonment of the silence rule. A leading article in *The Independent* newspaper, for example, made a plea for libraries to “not sacrifice the peace and quiet. Amid the noise of the 21st

century, the old-fashioned library remains a welcome repository of calm.” (The Independent, 2008a, online resource). Similarly, Tim Hobbs, a libraries campaigner and dogged critic of many developments taking place in public libraries, commented that the planned library review should focus on books and reading “not about turning libraries into fish and chip shops” (The Independent, 2008b, online resource).

Dewe (2006, p. 23) comments how easy it is to dismiss concerns about the relaxation of rules and the impact on the atmosphere inside the public library, such as those expressed above, as “an ‘oldie’ rant” but cautions that libraries should make efforts to meet these criticisms “rather than seeking to favour a new audience over the old”. Some of the respondents to the AHRC study also expressed concern about the impact of the “noise and bustle” created by some of the activities now taking place in libraries on the atmosphere of the library, one stating that it was important “to keep our traditional users happy”. The implication here is that some of the more established public library users will be driven away by developments in the use of the library space. Others, though, were concerned that these core users were in older age groups and that if public libraries were not made welcoming and attractive to younger people, the service would lose its purpose and most of its users within a couple of decades. One AHRC study interview participant commented:

“People get upset that [the library is] not the quiet, studious, temple of culture that they want it to be. But in this day and age, if you provided that then nobody would come through the door”.

And people do continue to come through the door of the public library. CIPFA public library statistics show how visits to public libraries have recovered from a low of 275,660,000 in 2000/2001 to 337,315,984 in 2006/2007 (although this is a drop from the previous year, 2005/2006 when the number of visits was recorded as 342,168,484)⁴. So can public libraries capitalize on the large numbers of visitors still finding their way into the public library, despite the onslaught of digital technologies and electronic resources? And how might they do this to encourage and build community engagement?

4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDING

Goulding (2009) explores the concept of community engagement in a public library context, explaining that a toolkit designed to assist public libraries with their community engagement activities highlighted seven aspects of community engagement which libraries should focus on, namely:

1. the library as a space for community activities;
2. partnership working with voluntary and community sector;
3. partnership working with other public services towards community engagement;
4. involvement of volunteers;
5. community involvement in one off decision making;
6. community involvement in relation to projects;
7. community involvement in relation to boards/strategic decision making (CSV Consulting, 2006).

The first of these, library as a space for community activities, would, at first sight, seem the most obvious way in which libraries could engage with their local community. In fact, the CSV toolkit makes it clear that simply providing space for community activity does not automatically lead to community engagement, although with the right kind of intervention it could. Community engagement requires more meaningful interaction between individuals or groups within the community and local service providers than the mere provision of space in which people can meet. Although, as outlined above, the public library space plays an important role in providing social space in which people can sit in “companionable silence” (Hanley, 2008, online resource) and, increasingly (although somewhat controversially), sociable space in which people can meet others from the local community purposefully or by accident, community engagement has the clearly defined purpose of promoting meaningful interaction between citizens and the local public services which they pay for and use. It is unclear of the extent to which community activities based in the public library facilitate this. Although public libraries play host to a huge range of community group-based activity, they do not necessarily lead to meaningful community engagement, therefore, and so libraries need to seek alternative ways of connecting with local people so that they feel genuinely involved in the development of services.

Points 5, 6 and 7 in the list above indicate that libraries can create the opportunity to consult local people about major decisions affecting them and Goulding (2009) gives a range of examples of public library consultation efforts, including the involvement of individuals and groups from the surrounding area in discussions about library buildings and their interiors, books and materials provision and the needs of specific sections of the community (typically young people and those considered socially excluded). The interviews for the AHRC study suggested that many library authorities were trying to find ways of engaging local communities in service development. One participant explained:

“We have customer focus groups for every area of service delivered: adult, children’s, local studies,

reference, ethnic services and customer focus group for every branch library and they are quite active”.

Although this participant insisted that these groups helped the library service identify needs that perhaps might not have been identified otherwise, it could be argued that this is essentially user consultation, rather than community engagement and public libraries have been criticized in the past for emphasising market research and quantitative measure of customer satisfaction rather than more participatory methods which would involve public service users in real discussion (Needham, 2003). There was a general recognition among the study participants, however, that libraries’ consultation measures had to change so that the focus was on non-users rather than users as one interviewee explained:

“I think that libraries have always been focused on users not customers, and users have always been the minority ... rather than non-users, the majority, so the focus is wrong”.

Another participant agreed:

“It’s fine to ask your users and if you ask your users I’m sure you’ll get 99 per cent satisfaction rates because people who use libraries, generally, are very happy with their use of those libraries. I’m much more interested in the non-users. So certainly I think we’ve got an obligation to go out there and look for new audiences”.

Community engagement activities can help public libraries reach out to those who perhaps do not use them currently and get them involved in the planning of services with the aim of developing a more inclusive service. Some public libraries have been experimenting with new methods to engage those who are not regular users of the public library and involve them in decision making, including arts-based activities which take place outside the library walls (Keane, 2006). Others are considering how naturally occurring and/or regular library-based activities can be used as the basis for community engagement and how this might be achieved. Within this context, work with readers through reader development activities such as reading groups may be a positive route to involving local people in service planning and delivery. Hicks (2008), for example, suggests that libraries’ work with readers can be a powerful springboard for involving communities in shaping public services while Peoples and Ward (2007) describe how reading activities in libraries could be used to tackle sensitive issues and engage target groups. Similarly, the *One Book, One Community*⁵ programme in the United States aims to promote community dialogue through a reading programme in which people from the same city, state or county all read a common book. The

goal of the *Mayor’s Book Club* in Austin, Texas, for example, is “To promote literacy and foster community and discussion” (ALA, 2003, p. 5) while in Allegheny County, the aim is to “build a better community through reading and civic discourse” (Allegheny County Library Association, 2008, online resource).

These examples provide evidence that a shared reading experience can promote community discussion and engage local people and communities. For libraries, then, reader development work can help them serve the community better, develop the library audience, raise their profile, challenge stereotypes and deliver on a range of policy agendas including literacy, learning, creativity, community cohesion and healthy living (The Reading Agency, 2004). Many library-led reading groups in the UK serve a specific demographic audience of readers focusing on, for example, families, gender-based groups or groups defined by ethnicity. They can be comprised of readers with specific reading needs such as listening groups, those reading large print or Braille, people with basic skills or those with dyslexia. By catering for a wide range of needs like this, library reading groups can target hard to reach groups and engage them in discussions about the service to help make the library more inclusive. Peoples and Ward (2007) also suggest that these kinds of activities can promote public library buildings as inclusive and welcoming environments.

5. CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY LIBRARIANSHIP

Most of the examples of public library community engagement activities outlined above take place within the public library building which is increasingly being positioned as “the natural place to meet” and “the perfect place to provide a convenient, safe public space to bring people together” (Burnham, 2008) and involve them in activities through which they can express themselves about the library service. The emphasis is decidedly on the library space, therefore, as a means of bringing people of the community together and bringing them into contact with the library service so that they are involved in the planning and delivery of public library services which meet their needs and reflect their aspirations. So where does this focus on the public library building leave the concept of community librarianship which, in the UK, has tended to prioritise outreach work and the services provided to communities outside the library walls? Black and Muddiman (1997) explained how the early 1980s marked the zenith of community librarianship in the UK when public library services experimented with innovative new services directed at a range of “disadvantaged” groups which often involved new methods of service delivery including taking services out to people rather than expecting them to come to the library. By the late 1990s, however, Black and Muddiman (1997, p. 141) highlighted “a strong sense of

the institutional identity of the library” and “a focus on the improvement of library buildings for all kinds of community use”. They conclude that, at the end of the twentieth century, there was a new consciousness “of the significance of the public library as a place and of the need to justify its claim to be a ‘community asset’” (p. 142).

The developments relating to public library buildings outlined in sections 2 and 3 above, make it likely that this trend has intensified over the last decade. In 1997, Black and Muddiman feared that this would lead to a retreat from innovation and community involvement and yet the evidence as presented above suggests that the public library building is being used to try to build opportunities for engagement with communities and encourage their involvement in decisions about service design and delivery. This is not to say that public libraries are abandoning all their outreach work in their efforts to provide a stimulating community space within the public library building. The borough of Sandwell (in the West Midlands), for example, lays down its outreach vision and strategy in a document explaining that outreach services are essential “to ensure the most excluded groups benefit from the public library experience within their own local communities” (Sandwell Library and Information Service, no date, online resource). The document also notes that outreach services provide additional routes for community engagement. Of course the two methods of delivery (outreach services and building-based services) should not be mutually exclusive and, in fact, should complement one another. As Forrest (2002) suggests, “The purpose of outreach and social inclusion work is to attract people in to the library” although he also notes that too many outreach programmes do not “complete the loop”.

The importance of the physical library building in giving a community a sense of place and involving users in decisions about services was emphasised by many of those participating in the AHRC research interviews and the documentary, policy and empirical evidence suggests that the public library building has the potential to support community engagement, leading to a new era of library-based activity. As emphasized in section 4 above, community building must be more proactive than merely providing a physical space for local people to use, but the presence of a library in the neighbourhood was considered an important way of fostering community capacity building among the AHRC study interviewees. Although there have been encouraging signs that the rebuilding and refurbishment of public libraries are becoming a higher priority at both local and national government level, a large number of library buildings in the UK continue to suffer a number of problems that must be rectified. Nevertheless, there appears to be a growing groundswell of opinion that libraries should act as public, community spaces where people can meet and interact

with representatives of the library with the aim of facilitating more positive engagement with the services provided.

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4. NOTES

¹ Direct quotes from the study are given in italics.

² For more information see: http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/pr_301007_eng_cl_modernising_makeover (accessed 24/10/08).

³ Designing Libraries, <http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk/> (accessed 24/10/08)

⁴ Cipfa (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting), *Public Library Statistics: Actual and Estimates*, London: Cipfa.

⁵ One Book reading promotion projects <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/onebook/> (accessed 28/10/08).