

# OVERDUE – TIME TO RETHINK PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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# Overdue – Time to Rethink Public Libraries

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## Author

Dr Katherine Robinson

Katherine Robinson is a lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research explores issues in urban public space and everyday life in organisations.

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Public libraries are unique, vital and valuable – offering a non-commercial public space which is open to all. At the same time, their value is systematically under-recognised, making them vulnerable to financial cuts.

In this paper I share findings from recent research in public libraries to foreground the value of the public library. I argue that while the scope and potential of public libraries is still founded on their fundamental principles of openness, circulation and connection and that today's library buildings would be recognisable to visitors from the 19th century, contemporary public libraries interpret these principles in new and innovative ways. I show that public libraries can be highly responsive to their local communities in the range of services they offer and thus "add value", and I give examples of the ways in which public libraries work collaboratively with local initiatives, interventions and community strategies.

I argue that it is difficult for evaluation tools to capture the value and variety of the public library service and throughout the report, I make recommendations which seek to recognise the value of the connections and capacity that contemporary public libraries provide in their communities.

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## The research

My research (Robinson, 2015) was carried out in small, neighbourhood libraries in areas of London and Berlin. In this paper, the London library is referred to as Grove Library, and the Berlin libraries are given the names Buchholz Bibliothek and Klemperer Bibliothek. These names are pseudonyms. I interviewed over 30 librarians, library managers, architects and library users and participated in library activities to gain a close-up and ethnographically grounded insight into of the everyday life of the contemporary public library. My research deliberately focused on branch libraries, parts of the library service that are vital to its functioning but given little attention, and that, under a logic which prioritises centralisation as a way of increasing the efficiency of the delivery of services, are particularly vulnerable to cuts and closures.

## Rethinking libraries

Since the inception of a comprehensive, publicly funded library service in the late 19th century, the fundamental tenets of the public library have remained consistent: the circulation of material, knowledge and information sharing, self-directed participation, public openness, and the provision of a calm and welcoming space in which to read, write and think.

“Even though the library means all sorts of things, the word library is still the best at conveying what it does – a public space dedicated to reading, writing, and learning – it seems so simple, but it’s key.”

*Grove Library Architect, London*

This paper is constructed around the core values of the public library; its openness, its role in brokering forms of circulation and connectivity, and its spatial qualities, and shows how these long-lasting ideas provide the foundation for approaches and activities which make libraries suitable for and relevant to 21st century life. I highlight the value of public libraries as a vital community resource, a site of social connection and engaged work with people, as well as a unique and vital form of public space.

Public libraries are based on a principal of free universal provision, which, in England, is laid out as a statutory duty of local authorities in the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act:

“ It shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof, and for that purpose to employ such officers, to provide and maintain such buildings and equipment, and such books and other materials, and to do such other things, as may be requisite.<sup>1</sup> ”

The right to a library is highlighted by a recent campaign by CILIP, the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals. Called “My Library By Right”, the campaign seeks to foreground the responsibility of government and local authorities to provide a quality library service. CILIP state that “public libraries in England provide a lifeline for millions of people every day.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75/pdfs/ukpga\\_19640075\\_en.pdf](https://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75/pdfs/ukpga_19640075_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [cilip.org.uk/advocacy-campaigns-awards/advocacy-campaigns/my-library-right](https://cilip.org.uk/advocacy-campaigns-awards/advocacy-campaigns/my-library-right) (last accessed 06.05.16).

This campaign is the latest response to the closure of hundreds of public libraries in the past five years, and what CILIP describe as a broader “hollowing out” of the library service. There are currently 3,917 libraries in the UK. In the financial year 2014/15, 106 public libraries were closed, and since 2010, 463 libraries across the UK have closed.<sup>3</sup>

In Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s book, *The Spirit Level*, the circulatory model on which the public library is based is held up as an exemplar of inherently efficient public investment: “Once the capital cost has been incurred, the more people sharing the benefits the better” (2009: 266). However, in the climate of austerity measures and threats to all council run services, this foundational logic of circulation and sharing is no longer a sufficient demonstration of the public library’s good value.

Libraries are placed under particular pressure to demonstrate that they are worth their local government funding; while the library is not founded on a profit making model, it is increasingly assessed as if it were. The value of the library has to be made visible through modes of measurement and evaluation. However, their explicitly non-profit structure makes it difficult to demonstrate the public library’s “value” along purely economic models. Libraries must engage in complex forms of accounting for themselves, demonstrating that they are fulfilling their strategic aims and meeting targets.

Since their beginnings, public libraries were subject to forms of monitoring and evaluation (Greenwood, 1886) Public libraries have been subject to the same kinds of demonstrations of accountability undergone by other locally-funded services. However, in the context of uncompromising austerity measures, libraries are not only having to demonstrate that they provide comprehensive, efficient and good value service, they find themselves having to demonstrate the value of offering a public library service at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Public Libraries News – [publiclibrariesnews.com/](http://publiclibrariesnews.com/) (last accessed 06.05.16).

While the public library service faces very real threats, public libraries continue to provide a much-loved service that is valued by its users. The public library is a unique membership organisation. The library is often the first institution that children, even babies, become members of, and can be a place to which people have a lifelong connection, as is emphasised in the Independent Library Report, which described them as “a golden thread throughout our lives” (DCMS, 2014: 5). The capacity for the library to offer relevance to people throughout their lives is a powerful argument for recognising the inherent value of the public library. In this report, I argue for ways in which the value of the work done by public libraries might be better recognised.

In rethinking the ways in which public libraries are portrayed and imagined, I show that they offer an exciting space of radical potential. Libraries’ core principles of openness, circulation and connection, situated in a dedicated local space provide the bedrock for this work. Public libraries are working in deeply engaged ways with their communities – responding to user need and feedback, delivering on local authority agendas and connecting users to information and facilitating social connection. Public libraries are vital spaces, responsive to need, reactive to change, and adaptive to changing habits. Thus, compared to their 19th century counterparts, contemporary public libraries work with an expanded interpretation of their core activities to increase their scope and capacity, and to make community spaces. I use examples from my own research and highlight particular instances of innovation and best practice through several case studies.

Public libraries are working in deeply engaged ways with their communities – responding to user need and feedback, delivering on local authority agendas and connecting users to information and facilitating social connection.

## Theme One: Radical openness

“ The fact is, that libraries aren’t for one type of person; there’s no barriers, it doesn’t matter what age you are, what your background is, what your race is, your age, it just – it doesn’t matter. I mean – everyone is welcome here. And OK, we might target certain groups specifically, certain age groups, or certain target audiences, but the doors are open to everybody. It really is the one free community space. ”

*Librarian, Grove Library*

The public library is open to all – it is free to enter, and it costs nothing to become a member. The latest available figures produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy show that in the last year, there were over 265 million visits to libraries across England, Wales and Scotland.<sup>4</sup> While this is a decline on previous levels of visits, this figure, roughly equivalent to three library visits per person, per year, shows that visiting the library remains a popular activity.

Above, the librarian from Grove Library highlights the negotiation between catering for all, and encouraging participation from particular targeted groups. There is now a significant history of library outreach and community work, as Janet Newman (2007) outlines. Librarians work creatively to engage particular groups of people.

<sup>4</sup> [cipilip.org.uk/news/latest-public-library-figures-reveal-alarming-depth-uk-wide-library-losses](http://cipilip.org.uk/news/latest-public-library-figures-reveal-alarming-depth-uk-wide-library-losses) (last accessed 06.05.16)

In Berlin, Klemperer Bibliothek, in collaboration with the local adult education college, developed a series of special library introductory sessions with participants who were part of a German language and family skills course. In London, Grove Library worked with local authority social services in order to reach out to vulnerable families housed in short term accommodation near the library.

Much of this highly targeted intervention takes place in ways that are not publically visible. In Berlin, specially organised sessions were held in rooms separate from the main library or during times of the day when the library was closed to the general public. Initiating and co-ordinating partnership and outreach work is behind the scenes labour. Librarians were at pains to describe how their understanding of openness meant creating and maintaining links locally:

“ You have to be part of the area, and that can only happen when you take part in the area, and not when you say, ‘OK, well, I’m here and you can just come.’ That’s not enough, I think, not really. ”

*Librarian, Klemperer Bibliothek, Berlin*

As this librarian shows, the public library’s openness goes beyond simply being available to people. In Grove Library, users were encouraged to become involved in library committees and steering groups. On a large plastic banner outside the building, the library advertised their provision of computer skills classes. The library manager described how she encouraged her staff to be pro-active in explaining the range of services offered by the library, including a job club and support for people thinking about setting up their own businesses.

These examples show that the library's radical openness is not inherent to it but rather has to be made to happen. Librarians are active in building up contacts in multiple agencies, highly aware of what is happening locally, and invested in developing networks of engaged and proactive partnership and outreach initiatives. However, because much of this network development and communicative labour takes place behind the scenes, there is little recognition, both of this work but also of the "added value" that the development of an engaged network around and through a local public library can bring.

### Case study

Grove Library was located close to temporary accommodation for asylum seekers. The library had an arrangement that people living in the accommodation could join the library, with the accommodation provider writing a letter as proof of address. This meant that people in highly stressful circumstances, could become full library members. They might only be in the area for a few weeks, but during that time, they would use the library computers, borrow books, and enjoy the library space as a respite from the cramped accommodation centre. For many people, their membership of the library, however temporary, represented their first positive encounter with a UK institution. This example shows how the library's pragmatic response to a local need balances an interpretation of the spirit of the rules (the necessity of a proof of address to join) with a commitment to providing services to a broad public.

### Recommendations

That the library is recognised as a key actor in ameliorating forms of vulnerability and inequality. That the openness of the library is extended and supported by commitment to partnership work with other organisations, joining up library capacity with the services that other organisations provide.

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## Theme Two: Connection and circulation

“ We get people coming in here asking about anything and everything. If people don't know where to go for something, they come to the library. [...] It really is a place where you don't know who's going to walk in the door and what they're going to ask, or expect. ”

*Librarian, Grove Library, London*

The librarian presents the library as a local landmark, a place to go for help and information. At the same time, she hints at the stress of “not knowing who's going to walk in the door”. This relates both to personal safety – librarians in all libraries described occasional disruptive and distressing encounters with members of the public – but also to the inherent uncertainty of the enquiry desk. In a short shift at the desk, librarians are faced with a huge range of enquiries and requests, which reflect the widely different needs and expectations people bring to the public library. Librarians are skilled at interpreting requests, searching for half-remembered book titles, and giving people their full attention. Often their help is demonstrative – they walk over to the shelves with people, helping them to locate material, and they patiently support users with simple IT tasks; repeatedly showing how to log on to computers or print out documents, and solving minor technical issues.

This engagement with users' requests highlights the continuing importance of one of the public library's fundamental purposes: the circulation of material and information. Eye-catching displays highlight material relating to particular themes or showcase newly available bestsellers, but libraries also work to communicate material to readers in more innovative ways. Grove Library in London hosts a wide variety of activities and events based around different genres of books, offering reading groups on crime fiction, black interest, teen novels, and graphic novels, and regularly screening films from their DVD collection.

Frequently, library staff worked as facilitators in these activities; leading book group discussions and introducing film screenings, talks and events. Librarians are not only knowledge professionals, but social intermediaries – curating a friendly and trusted social space in the library.

However, while they are aware of the importance of their role in supporting social contact in the library, this can be difficult to prioritise, as this Berlin librarian commented:

“ I see a huge queue of people at the desk, and there's my pile of circulars I need to read, and here comes Mrs Schmidt, and she just wants to have a chat, and I simply don't have time for that! But what if this chat [...] is more important than these other things that seem more pressing? But then how do I tell this to my funder, that this is also important? ”

**Librarian, Buchholz Bibliothek, Berlin**

Librarians are not only knowledge professionals, but social intermediaries – curating a friendly and trusted social space in the library.

The library can provide important social support to people in difficult positions. However, as the librarian at Buchholz Bibliothek describes, this is difficult to capture as an outcome. Librarians at Grove Library described helping library visitors write letters about their housing or their benefits, while things they felt they should help people with, as “going beyond the call”. This reflects concerns that such support goes beyond the library’s core functions. However, I argue that engagement with the library is so inherently social that public libraries should not be reluctant to claim the library as a having a broad social mission, as a space of care and wellbeing. In a context of savage cuts to public budgets, and the withdrawal of other support services, I suggest that the library needs to emphasise its capacity to provide additional forms of support and to actively present itself as a social facilitator.

## **Case study**

Libraries are increasingly exploring the potential offered by different forms of social media to communicate with users and to promote their events and services more widely. However, in order for them to use social media effectively, there needs to be a streamlining of IT policies. Grove Library encountered problems in setting up a library Facebook page because of concerns about how this could be managed in relation to IT policies at the council. There is a need to update existing guidance and policies to both promote safe and consistent use of social media but also to provide libraries with the flexibility to benefit from its potential. Libraries are becoming more adept at engaging with users on social media platforms, and having an active digital presence that is regularly refreshed. One branch library in Lambeth tweets a “book of the day”, just one small example of how public libraries can use social media to circulate library material out beyond the library.

## Recommendations

These recommendations focus on the importance of recognising the social capacity and social value of the library. It is important that the skills of librarians as social facilitators is recognised and supported within a context of increased pressure on all public services. This should be accompanied by the provision of increased guidance to support staff to work with people with a range of complex needs. There is a need to develop mechanisms such as more differentiated or flexible reporting tools that enable libraries to communicate their role as community hub and social facilitators to budgetary decision makers. Related to this is the need to support people working in libraries to more effectively communicate the breadth of the public library's offer through social media.

## Theme Three: A public living room

“ People [here] seem to lack space to work at home – they really come here in droves just to spend time [...] and I think, my God, how can you work here, when it’s so loud! Or they come to read a newspaper, and sit there for hours, where it’s so shabby! Or perhaps it’s still nicer than round at theirs; I don’t know... And this ‘Wohnzimmer Deutschlands’ that’s always being talked about, [an idea that the library is the living room for Germany] we see it more and more; people really come and spend hours here. ”

*Librarian, Klemperer Bibliothek, Berlin*

If there is inadequate space and insufficient quiet at home to read or study, then the public library offers an alternative space. The library can even be understood as something like a living room; a place to work and a place to relax. This librarian conveys a sense of the domestic legitimacy of the public library and refers to it being a national public living room, a familiar and comfortable space to which everyone can lay claim. People are free to use the space in the way they please, and will often make slight adjustments to furniture and seating arrangements in order to suit their purpose. This feeling free can be a response to the library offering “unpackaged” space, which is open to the possibilities people bring with them.

The library can even be understood as something like a living room; a place to work and a place to relax.

In large libraries, library space is highly differentiated, with different floors of the library building allocated different levels of activity, and therefore sound. This is known as “‘acoustical grouping’ or hierarchizing of sonic spaces” (Mattern, 2007: 289), zoning library space into specific sections, so that different activities can be offered simultaneously. In Grove Library, a lively baby and toddler group meets for a singing and playing session in the children’s library in the basement. Here, children can sing, make noise and play without users upstairs being aware of the activity.

In small libraries, the entire library becomes a multi-purpose space that is reconfigured for different uses throughout the day. In Buchholz Bibliothek, space was less available and less defined; during a weekly reading aloud session the children spill out of their allotted area to occupy the adults’ section; they sit on the floor in small circles, almost hidden between bookshelves, and clamber over the sofa. For an hour every week, the library becomes blanketed in the sound of children’s voices and movements.

While libraries are often noisy, and noise can even be appreciated as a sign of the library’s vitality, of its resonance (Mattern, 2007), the level of noise in these children’s sessions far exceeds that which is usual, but the session is tolerated. Other readers move away from noisy areas, or put in headphones if they are working, tolerating the activity and recognising the library’s limited space. This shows that the flexibility of the library space is also reliant on the library’s rules, both explicit and tacit. It is not inevitable that libraries are pleasant – staff work hard to mitigate potentially stressful and dangerous situations and to make sure that people aren’t crowded out by others. As Lyn McKechnie has observed, the relationships of staff and library users to rule observance and rule breaking are complex, resembling “a carefully constructed dance” (2006: 8). Librarians are curators of the library space, maintaining an overview and making sure that the different uses of and activities in the space clash as little as possible.

## Recommendations

The public library offers a space that is welcoming and comfortable, a place just to be, like a living room, as well as sorely needed space for people, especially young people, to work. Libraries must prioritise creating additional space where possible, particularly workspace, which is in very high demand. Where space cannot be permanently freed up, movable shelves and furniture could be used to make more flexible space available, and to “zone” library space into different purposes at different times of the day.

### Recommendations: Re-valuing

This report, based on my PhD research, has argued that much of the work undertaken by public libraries is not publically visible, or is under-appreciated. Libraries count the number of people who come in, and track books borrowed and returned, but these processes of accounting are unable to capture the value of what contemporary public libraries provide. This means that much of the value of the work done by libraries is not publically accounted for. In response to this, the recommendations in this report have focussed on points where this work might be better recognised or made visible. Fundamentally, the openness of the public library, with very little tracking of its users, has a significant impact on the kind of success that it can claim. As a librarian quoted in Anne Goulding’s research says: “you can’t actually say: ‘This person came here, they did this and they progressed to that.’” (2006: 89).

If the value that libraries might make to an “outcome” for a person, an effect on that person’s life, cannot be accounted for, then it is necessary for the value of the library’s intervention to be made visible more imaginatively in processes of library accounting and evaluation. Imagining a more radical form of accounting for public libraries is needed to make the value of the space, activities, connections, and social interaction that they offer more evident and legible.

## Conclusion

The fundamental values of the library service remain core to the work of public libraries. In considering these values, of openness, circulation and connection, and the library as a specific spatial form, this report has shown that these core values are being re-interpreted in a context of digital material and new forms of communication, and alongside contemporary needs and expectations.

Throughout the report I have sought to highlight aspects of public libraries which are currently under-recognised. I have shown that the perception of the library as a pleasant and welcoming social space requires acute facilitation, interpretation and negotiation by library members of staff. The openness of the library to all requires that particular attention is paid to certain groups of people. This targeted work is often carried out “behind the scenes” and in collaboration with other local actors and institutions. It is important that these forms of highly invested partnership are recognised as ways in which the public library can “add value” as a local community institution, supporting and strengthening connections and initiatives.

I have highlighted the inherent value and efficiency of the library's circulatory principle – the ways in which borrowed material flows between people and library branches, and through digital forms of circulation, but also how library material can form the basis for social connections between people, through reading groups, events and activities. Related to this is the importance of recognising the value of the public library in offering a space of social contact and social support. The support offered to people by librarians should not be under-estimated as a threat to or a dilution of the “real” work of the library but should be recognised as integral to the library offer. In tandem with this, librarians need to be recognised as social mediators and facilitators of a complex social space, working with people with hugely varying needs and expectations.

Both the values of the public library system, and its ability to add value to communities, represents a radical challenge to the current marketised logic of public service delivery and their normal accounting in performance measures. Because of this, the valuable capacities and possibilities offered by the public library are vulnerable. It is essential that more creative ways are found to account for and to communicate more powerfully, the value and values of the public library.

Librarians need to be recognised as social mediators and facilitators of a complex social space, working with people with hugely varying needs and expectations.

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The Institute of Public Affairs  
The London School of Economics  
and Political Science  
Houghton Street  
London  
WC2A 2AE

Tel: 020 7106 1247  
Email: [IPA@lse.ac.uk](mailto:IPA@lse.ac.uk)

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