

Space, Power and the Public Library: A Multicase Examination of the Public Library as Organized Space

Abstract: This paper reports on a doctoral study in progress which examines the spatial organization of three public library buildings. The paper comments on the materially-embedded relations of power between the library and its users, paying special attention to socio-spatial models of control dating from the age of modern library design.

Résumé : Cette communication porte sur une étude doctorale en cours qui examine l'organisation spatiale de trois bibliothèques publiques. L'auteur commente les relations de pouvoir que l'on retrouve entre la bibliothèque et ses usagers, avec une attention particulière aux modèles de contrôle socio-spatiaux issus du design des bibliothèques modernes.

1. Introduction

Even in today's increasingly digitized world, understanding library buildings and what they do remains an important part of librarian practice and scholarship. Most basically, library buildings give tangibility to the library as an organization and act as a "face" for the library as a civic institution (Wagner 1992). They also contain a wide variety of spaces, some publicly accessible and some not, from storage areas and hidden, "back-of-house" administrative offices, to multi-use community spaces, classrooms and sometimes whole subject departments.

Yet the library building is more than just a storage container for library materials and people. A kind of "information technology" all its own, the library building identifies, labels and orders its space(s) in ways that profoundly affect the experiences of its inhabitants. As library architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck (2007, 211) notes, architecture "plays a central role in shaping the user's experience of the library as a place.... A building's plan determines which interactions—with books, with library staff, with other users—are possible and which are impossible." Indeed, by opening and closing, permitting and constraining, the library as a building is constantly negotiating the extent of access users have to the contents of and activities inside a library. The library building thus constitutes "a sort of stage" that encourages users and staff "to play certain sanctioned roles" (Van Slyck 2007, 221) within the space.

How does this socio-spatial process work in smaller library buildings? Does this process differ at all when library buildings of different ages are compared?

2. Purpose

This paper reports the preliminary findings of an exploratory, multi-case study that examines the spatial organization of three smaller public library buildings currently-operating in the province of Ontario, Canada. The study, a doctoral thesis in its fourth year, seeks to identify and map the materially-embedded relations of power within

library buildings and, most specifically, determine how both physical and conceptual boundaries, from the overall arrangement of rooms, people and groups, to the placement of furnishings, equipment and materials, operate inconspicuously within the experiences of the library's inhabitants (users and staff) as a means of regulating behaviour according to organizational objectives. This vision of the public library building as an agent of control can be traced back to the mid- to late-nineteenth century origins of the free public library in North America, when the institution proliferated as one of several institutions of social stability and control in a time of growing class conflict (Harris 1973; Garrison 1979; Black, Pepper and Bagshaw 2009). The proposed paper, which will be of interest to library practitioners, planners and scholars, will determine the extent to which the selected library buildings' designs reproduce the socio-spatial relations of power between the library and its public that originated with the modern library building "type" around the time of the Carnegie library (ca. 1895-1920).

3. Methodology

The study adopts a multicase approach, the "case study" methodology being an increasingly recognized qualitative methodology appropriate for studies whose objectives require an in-depth, "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin 2003, 13). The study uses three purposefully-selected, mid-sized public library buildings as cases: first, a Carnegie library updated with extensive renovations and additions; second, a library of the late-modernist period containing no additions or extensions; and third, a recently completed library building exemplifying the most current application of library design principles. Special attention is paid to how spatial arrangements affect (i.e., enable, constrain or both) the activities of librarians and users; what relationship publicly accessible spaces (computer spaces, programming spaces, collections spaces, and so forth) share with private librarian spaces; and, most specifically, the extent to which traditional focal points (for example, the librarian's desk) still symbolize power within the library space plan. Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews with library staff and users; structured observations; photography; organizational document analysis; and cognitive mapping exercises.

4. Theoretical Framework: "Organization Space"

Based on Henri Lefebvre's (1974) concept of "social space", organization space theory contends that space is central to organization, and thus organization "is fundamental to understanding social structures, processes and relations" (Dale and Burrell 2008, 4). "The origins of organization," claims Hernes (2004, 85), "are primarily associated with the ordering of human actions and interaction through regulation by physically tangible means. Basic forms of regulation relate to the division of work, introduction of formal rules and hierarchy. These, and others, are material measures that are used to meet needs for predictability and stability." Buildings and their inhabitants, thus, are mutually constitutive: As we construct our spaces, our spaces construct us (Markus 2006; Dale and Burrell 2008).

Not unlike other socio-spatial theoretical models, organization space is structured as a triad: the *enchantment* of space, *emplacement* in space, and the *enactment* of space. Put

simply, *enchantment* explains how certain aspects of architecture (for example, the style, scale, ornamentation and materials of a building) create a spatial “language” that conveys messages to (and elicits certain responses from) that space’s inhabitants. *Emplacement* in space explains how the positioning and fixing of people and things in specific places, through the creation of physical and conceptual boundaries (the enclosing, partitioning, classification and ranking of spaces), permits some behaviours while restricting others. Last, *enactment* of space refers to “the ways that social spaces are lived, are processed through, are experienced through mobility and what power effects this brings about” (Dale and Burrell 2008, 48). It also refers to the construction of identity and roles: “The significance of enactment as a socio-spatial forms of power is the simultaneous taken-for-granted nature of power relations as ‘lived through’ embodied and cultural spaces, and the processes of identity construction that may be facilitated by the narrative opportunities of these spaces” (77).

5. Scholarly Significance

Though recent research has documented in some detail how larger, central public library buildings have changed over the past century (for instance, Mattern 2007), we are largely unaware of how (and if) smaller public libraries in North America have changed the basic concepts of their spatial organization. This study will not only shed light on that research problem but also broaden our understanding of how the two dimensions of the public library (the library as organization and the library as place/space) interact.

The paper will include a brief historical overview and will be accompanied by selected visuals, including (where appropriate) photos, diagrams, cognitive maps drawn by staff and user interview participants, and floor plans.

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