

## **The Library**

Interior Urbanism as a Layered Experience of Public Space

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### **Introduction**

Public space is often represented and interpreted in a binary way: solid/void, public/private. However, library spaces are often experienced as environments encoded with varying degrees, expressions, and feelings of “publicness.” This chapter will discuss a few significant material and historical conditions that contributed to the unique spatial character of libraries, and then look at the New York Public Library to develop an argument that interior urbanism is characterized by a layered experience of public space.

Drawing upon library examples, the layered character of interior urban space is theorized in three related registers. Iain Borden’s conception of the urban landscape, understood through skateboarding as “a constant layer through the city,” suggests interior urbanism be considered as a boundary-less condition. The work of William Whyte and ideas of “place” help frame interior urbanism at the scale of human interaction. The idea of “mapping as a generative process,” articulated by both James Corner and Denise Scott Brown, allows us to understand interior urbanism as a way to conceive (or re-conceive) spaces as public.

### **Library Histories<sup>1</sup>**

The history of libraries is marked by the innovation of various writing mediums as well as a number of social developments. Libraries in the western world date from antiquity when information was written on clay tablets and papyrus scrolls, and collected and stored by rulers to display their power and promote their culture;<sup>2</sup> however, these early buildings and artifacts have largely been lost.<sup>3</sup> The library as a repository for books traces its history to the development of parchment as a medium for writing, and its subsequent assembly into bound volumes around 50 AD.<sup>4</sup>

Around 400 AD Christian monasteries began efforts to preserve and copy sacred texts, including Saint Catherine’s Monastery in Egypt which is the oldest library still in existence. These monasteries would typically include a workroom (scriptorium) for monk copyists, a cupboard (armarium) to store books, and lectern desks upon which the large volumes could be read. By 1200 AD Europeans learned paper-making, which replaced parchment because paper was cheaper and could be bound into thinner and lighter volumes. Around the same time, universities began to replace monasteries as centers for learning and culture in European cities, and books were produced (by hand) that advanced secular knowledge of law, history, and commerce.<sup>5</sup>

The expansion of knowledge during the Renaissance, fueled by the invention of the printing press in 1440, greatly increased the number and size of book collections. Universities, the church, and individual patrons commissioned and collected books. The expanded availability of books led to changes in the way they were stored and used. While the previous hand-copied

codices were heavy, rare, and expensive—stored flat, with metal clasps to keep them closed, and frequently chained to the casework—the new press-printed books were comparatively light, common, affordable, and could be stored on open shelves. If the old lectern system could store approximately 3 books per yard [See 1, 2], the new layout with books on stacked shelves, could hold 200 or more volumes in the same space [See 3, 4]. Despite growing collections, these places were virtually private and accessible only to their owners or select scholars.

Collections continued to expand and many libraries were founded during the Enlightenment, but the next major shift came about as part of the Industrial Revolution in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Advancing production techniques made books cheaper and plentiful, but the more significant developments for libraries were due to changing social attitudes. Victorian values and social reform efforts, coupled with wealthy benefactors led to the widespread establishment of *public* libraries. The public library system in Britain began with the Public Libraries Act of 1850 (following the Museums Act of 1845), and by 1900 there were 300 British cities with public libraries. Public libraries represented a major shift in who had access to books, and grew out of three previous trends in libraries: 1) Social libraries initiated the sharing of books and a focus on quality content, 2) Circulating libraries introduced the inclusion of novels and popular materials, and 3) School district libraries were publicly funded.<sup>6</sup> The Boston Public Library, considered the first American library founded on the principles of public funding and education of the general public, opened in 1854. Between 1880 and 1930, Andrew Carnegie funded over 2500 public libraries throughout the English-speaking world<sup>7</sup>, most of which remain in use.<sup>8</sup> Public libraries in general, and Carnegie libraries specifically, established the spaces and functions that are familiar today—open stacks, reading rooms, children’s collections—transforming libraries into centers for community life. [See 10, 11, 12, 13]

This trend of library as social hub continued into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and accelerated with the advent of digital media and the internet, which reduced the need for space for collections but increased the demand for connection: “connections between different groups of library users, connections between library users and library staff, connections between library users and resources.”<sup>9</sup> Libraries emphasizing these new connective aims used architectural strategies of dislocating book stacks from the main library functions, and creating spaces for interaction. [See 15, 16, 17, 18]

Libraries are now in the midst of ongoing debates about what their role will be in the coming decades as their major historical function as an archive for knowledge changes in the information age. Current discussion centers around libraries as “anchor institutions” that are “enduring organizations that remain in their geographic locations and play a vital role in their local communities and economies...and align institutional objectives with place-based, economic, human, and intellectual resources to better the welfare of the community in which the anchor resides.”<sup>10</sup> Libraries have always played this role, but with their transition into public institutions and the great expansion under the Carnegie program, libraries rose in prominence as hubs of social and cultural activity. Today, libraries are designed as places that people want to connect, and even as information technology makes their role as repositories obsolete,

libraries seek opportunities to bring in new patrons and use library space in different and innovative ways. [See 18, 20]

### **Library Spaces**

Here it is worth considering a number of notable features that characterize the varied history and use of libraries. While libraries may serve any number of grandiose aims—repository of knowledge, marker of status, uplifter of masses—these buildings basically conjoin two functions: storage and study space. Most of the earliest libraries, as well as many small or recent libraries, integrate these functions. [See 1, 2, 18] Some libraries with very large collections don't allow patrons to access the books directly, and the public areas are comprised mainly of study spaces. [See 10, 12] Conversely, some libraries make the stacks available to patrons and the feeling of these spaces tends to emphasize the storage of books. [See 5, 7, 9] In any case, the specific furniture and fittings designed to serve the functions of storage and study make libraries distinct.

Perhaps the most recognizable feature of libraries, especially compared to virtually every other building type, is their quietness. Between social cues, supervising librarians, and an abundance of books to soak up sound, libraries have historically been quiet spaces that encourage solitary activity and contemplation. Further emphasizing the quiet, contemplative aspects of libraries, lending them an almost sacred quality, is the processional movement through space. The process of finding a book typically entails a sequence of actions that move a visitor through the library. Furthermore, the architectural spaces of early libraries were arranged in a way to get them off the ground to avoid dampness, and the structural support that was required for later collections meant that reading spaces were located above storage spaces. As a result, a visitor experiences moving through a series of spaces that take them progressively upwards. This sequence was codified in a number of large public libraries through the idea that visiting a library should give one the sense of being uplifted and enlightened. [See 8, 10, 11, 12]

Quality of light is another notable aspect of library spaces. While the storage stacks don't require much lighting—and some libraries leave them dark until a visitor approaches—the reading spaces require good quality and carefully controlled lighting. Early libraries insisted that no candles be used in library spaces and often had the best windows available to allow light for reading. Later libraries used clerestory windows, sunken courtyards, or other ways to bring natural light into reading spaces indirectly. [See 13, 14, 16]

The qualities of light and quietness contribute to another main feature of library spaces, that of vastness. The reading rooms of large public libraries are among the largest urban interior spaces. The size of these rooms is a reflection of the grandiose attitudes of the benefactors, but they also serve a large number of visitors—it is somewhat startling to walk into these vast rooms and observe so many people quietly working.<sup>11</sup> Some libraries are also designed to show off the vastness of their collections. Libraries of the Rococo period often aimed to compose a room to embody the full collection in one space in order to demonstrate the breadth of knowledge of the owner (and the fantasy that everything could be known and collected in one place). Larger later libraries were sometimes arranged on the principle of surveillance that all

books should be visible to the librarian. In any case, the experience of library spaces is one that promotes a sense of one's place in the vastness of history and knowledge. [See 5, 7, 9]

\*\*\*IMAGE 1 INSERT HERE\*\*\*

\*\*\*IMAGE 2 INSERT HERE\*\*\*

\*\*\*IMAGE 3 INSERT HERE\*\*\*

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### **Spatial Study of the New York Public Library**

The New York Public Library, completed in 1911 by the competition-winning firm Carrere and Hastings, is a principal example of many of the spatial experiences described above. The configuration and layout of spaces, with the reading room on the top, was determined in advance by the librarian John Shaw Billings who saw the building as an efficient system for storing, retrieving, and reshelving books. Around this requirement, the architects designed a highly refined and orchestrated sequence of spaces leading up to the main reading room.

Figure 1 diagrams the main public spaces within and around the NYPL produced through an architectural field survey and observations of activity.<sup>12</sup> Visitors to the exterior terraces and interior rooms of the library traverse a series of thresholds, bringing them into spaces that, though still very large and fully public, are experienced as increasingly more quiet, private, and intimate.<sup>13</sup> This experiential conflation of public and private leads to further consideration of how space is experienced as layered, and how specific social and architectural thresholds create boundaries and provide definition for these experiences.

With its Beaux-Arts symmetry and hierarchical arrangement of spaces, the NYPL is relatively straightforward to map the thresholds and spatial layers. Three short steps up distinguish the library precinct from the main sidewalk on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Moving through this threshold brings a visitor to a level barely removed from the sidewalk, yet separated from the busy flow of pedestrian traffic. Another layer of space is identifiable in the main terrace area, five steps up, covered by trees, and surrounded by a stone balustrade. Here, tables and chairs are provided and a number of activities—sitting, eating, reading, talking—occur that start to define the community function of the library. From here a visitor can enter by ascending three segments of stairs leading to a portico and the doors of the library.

After moving through the small entry door, a visitor finds themselves in the expansive marble space of Astor Hall. Flanking sets of stairs, interrupted by a mezzanine level that affords views down into Astor Hall, give the visitor symmetrical opportunities to move upwards toward the main reading room. Once at the upper level, a visitor passes through the wood paneled Rotunda into the Catalog Room, before finally gaining access to the Main Reading Room. The reading room is characterized by a feeling of quietness, lightness, and vastness, and the sensation is enhanced by the processional experience. The layered quality of spaces is articulated through changes in elevation and direction, a sense of compression at doorways and thresholds, and a gradual quieting of activity.

A very successful library. But here it is worth inquiring further about the ways we conceive of this space as public and how it relates to the questions of interior urbanism as articulated by Denise Scott Brown: “As ‘interior urbanists’, we find we must work with categories of function beyond those of the brief. These relate to the building’s role in the community, and may concern the size and volume of movement or activity. Particularly important are categories that differentiate between public and private activities or spaces, and help to define the character of each and the relations between them.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Making and Remaking “Public” in Interior Urbanism**

A type of radical reworking of “function beyond the brief” happens every day by skateboarders. In his 2003 book, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body*, Iain Borden builds upon ideas of Henri Lefebvre, suggesting, “Space becomes a uniform entity, a constant layer through the city that can be utilized, in this case, as a surface on which to skate... Skaters follow the homogeneity-fragmentation contradiction of abstract space by oscillating from this macro conception of space to the micro one of the architectural element; they move from the open canvas of the urban realm to the close focus of a specific wall, bench, fire hydrant, curb, or rail.”<sup>15</sup> The shift from macro to micro—from the large-scale surfaces of streets and sidewalks to small scale furniture and railing details—is an important reference in considering how the continuous landscape of urban exterior and interior space is experienced and navigated.

Another important point of reference in theorizing the experience of interior urbanism is the work of William H. Whyte and other advocates of place. Whyte engaged the city through careful study of the character and amenities of public spaces, especially at the immediate scale of human experience. His work, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, continues to guide design efforts toward making actively used places that provide elements for seating, shade, and access. Curb cuts, trees, and street furniture contribute to a layered experience of urban space that allow people to find themselves comfortable and at home within the public realm. This sense of place articulated by Whyte parallels the conflated feeling of public and private experienced in the library and other spaces of interior urbanism.

Theorizing interior urbanism as characteristically public relies upon 1) the idea of space as a continuous landscape, and 2) recognition of places that are comfortable for social interaction. Addressing the political aspect of public space draws upon a third point of reference: generative mapping. In “Agency of Mapping” James Corner declares, “the function of mapping is less to mirror reality than to engender the re-shaping of the worlds in which people live... Mapping unfolds potential; it re-makes territory over and over again, each time with new and diverse consequences.” Later he continues, “Reality then, as in concepts such as ‘landscape’ or ‘space’, is not something external and ‘given’ for our apprehension; rather it is constituted, or ‘formed’, through our participation with things: material objects, images, values, cultural codes, places, cognitive schema, events and maps.”<sup>16</sup> This technique of mapping as a way of re-making territory suggests how it possible to consider library spaces, and all of the various terrains of interior urbanism, to be part of the public realm.

## **Conclusion**

Considered within the context of interior urbanism, libraries exhibit a number of characteristic features including an integration of functional spaces, a vastness of scale, and a sequential experience of space. At the NYPL the sequencing of space begins at the sidewalk (if not before) and continues from exterior to interior, up to the reading room. This continuous landscape exemplifies the condition of interior urbanism, especially in the micro-experiences of place afforded by the various rooms, niches, and perches of the library. What is implicit in the surface and detail encountered by the skateboarder (or pedestrian) moving through space becomes explicit in the designed sequence of the library. The nuance and refinement of materials, details, and views makes every step unique and continuously frames and re-frames ones' sense of the space.

Mapping this experience allows for insight into the meaning and conditions of library space as public space. In this case, the method of mapping and analysis was intentionally simple: demarcation of the architectural thresholds and boundaries of social activity. But in so doing, the layered character of the spaces reveals that "public" is a varied experience and does not exist as a binary condition with "private." This allows agency. Spatial boundaries can be created to differentiate areas of use and access. Thresholds can be employed to create specific transitions (smooth, disjunctive, etc.) between layers of space. Features can be designed to afford opportunities to rest, change pace, or take a seat in spaces designed for public use. Mapping can be employed to understand and re-make these conditions.

## **Libraries of Note**

- [1] Biblioteca Malatestiana, 1452, Cesena, Italy
- [2] Library of St. Peter and St. Walburga, 1555, Zutphen, Netherlands
- [3] Escorial Library, 1585, San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Spain
- [4] Trinity Hall Library, c. 1600, Cambridge, England
- [5] Bodleian Library, 1612, Oxford, England
- [6] Wren Library, 1695, Trinity College, Cambridge, England
- [7] Biblioteca Angelica, 1765, Rome, Italy
- [8] Bibliotheque Sainte-Genevieve, 1850, Paris, France
- [9] Peabody Library, 1866, Baltimore, United States
- [10] Bibliotheque Nationale, 1867, Paris, France
- [11] Boston Public Library, 1895, Boston, United States
- [12] New York Public Library, 1911, New York City, United States
- [13] Stockholm City Library, 1928, Stockholm, Sweden
- [14] Beinecke Library, 1963, Yale University, New Haven, United States
- [15] Berlin Staatsbibliothek, 1978, Berlin, Germany
- [16] Bibliotheque Nationale, 1996, Paris, France
- [17] Utrecht University Library, 2004, Utrecht, Netherlands
- [18] Seattle Public Library, 2004, Seattle, United States
- [19] National Library of China, 2008, Beijing, China
- [20] Helsinki Central Library, 2018, Helsinki, Finland

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<sup>1</sup> Excellent scholarship on libraries and their histories include *The Library: A World History* (2013) by James W.P. Campbell and Will Pryce, and *History of Libraries of the Western World* (1999) by Michael Harris.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest archive of written materials was in the ancient Sumerian city-state of Uruk around 3400 BCE; a library in Nineveh was founded by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (ruled 668–c. 627 BCE); a large library also existed in Babylon during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (c. 605–c. 562 BCE); in Greece, the first major library was founded in the sixth century BCE. The Great Library of Alexandria, Egypt founded around 280 BCE, was arguably the largest and most significant library of the ancient world.

<sup>3</sup> The survival of books and libraries (even today) was impacted by political battles and ideologies, which sometimes entailed massive destruction of books, difficulties in obtaining materials necessary for book-making, or long-term deterioration of books and facilities due to lack of support.

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<sup>4</sup> Papyrus only grew in Egypt, making it very expensive and sometimes impossible to obtain. Parchment, made from the skin of sheep or cows, was developed as an alternative. However, parchment didn't work well to make scrolls because it only came in the size of an animal skin and was comparatively heavy. This led to the development of the book-form, which held together sheets of parchment cut to a standard size. For more information, see "Parchment and the history of books." By K.E. Carr, Quatr.us Study Guides, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Most monastic collections up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century had fewer than 100 volumes. By 1338 the Sorbonne had the largest collection in Europe with 338 books for consultation and 1,728 books in its register, of which 300 were marked as lost.

<sup>6</sup> See *History of Libraries in the Western World* by Michael Harris.

<sup>7</sup> The funding of these libraries typically covered the cost of construction of the building and acquisition of books, but required municipalities to provide the land and guarantee a revenue stream (taxes) for staffing and maintenance of the library and the collection.

<sup>8</sup> A 1992 New York Times report noted that 1,554 of the 1,681 original buildings in the United States still existed, with 911 still used as libraries, of which 276 were unchanged, 286 had been expanded, and 175 had been remodeled; 243 had been demolished, while others had been converted to other uses.

<sup>9</sup> Latimer, Karen. 2011. "Collections to Connections: Changing Spaces and New Challenges in Academic Library Buildings."

<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, Karen Brooks. 2018. "Anchor Arts Institutions: What Are They and How Can They Enrich Communities?"

<sup>11</sup> The main reading room of the NYPL, at 78 ft wide by 297 ft long and 51 ft high, is one of the largest rooms in the United States, and seats 624 patrons.

<sup>12</sup> Further diagrams and documentation of the observations are available at [wmangold.org](http://wmangold.org)

<sup>13</sup> Archival research supported the observations. In *The New York Public Library: A Beaux-Arts Landmark* (2003) Ingrid Steffensen states that design of the New York Public Library was "guided by the idea that the architectural progression of the spaces should follow a logical, hierarchical sequence from the most easily accessible and public spaces, to the most removed, scholarly retreats...Today most visitors begin a tour of the Library by proceeding through a series of ever more enclosed spaces: from the exterior steps, past the lions, through the sheltering portico, and into the gracious space of Astor Hall." In *The Library*, Campbell and Pryce write, "When the doors of the New York Public Library open, the readers have to climb huge sets of staircases and pass through a series of grand marble-lined halls to reach the reading rooms above."

<sup>14</sup> Scott Brown, Denise, and Maurice Hartevelt. 2007. "On Public Interior Space" in AA Files 56

<sup>15</sup> Borden, Iain. 2003. *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body*. p. 187

<sup>16</sup> Corner, James. 1999. "The Agency of Mapping," p. 213, p. 223