

Redefining an Institution

History of the Social and Urban Role of the Library

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The library as an institution has had a rich history over the past three millennia. It has been fundamental to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge alongside an ever-changing social and urban role. This paper uses a review of the history of the library as a tool to investigate the changing role of the library, both in isolation and in relation to the urban environment.

The library began as a guarded place of papyrus scrolls only for the learned, however, over the centuries, the library developed to symbolise democratic access to knowledge and be an active contributor of cultural centres. With the recent move to digital resources, the public library appears to be evolving into an even more significant social urban gathering place which provides connection to the digital world. This shift has increased the social and urban role of the public library while removing some of the requirements for preservation and dissemination of knowledge. In order to anticipate and understand the potential future role of public libraries, this paper will shed additional light on the historic, social and urban role of the library.

Echoing the words of Ken Worpole (2013), the question is not how to preserve the future of the library, more pertinent is to ask what kind of lessons can be learnt from the history of this institution to design for what is needed in the urban world of tomorrow.

Keywords — *History of the library; Urban institution; Social institution; Redefining the library; Future of the library*

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a discussion about the role of the library in the future of the built urban environment. Positions and opinions amongst academics range from assertions that the book and library are dead, to those who see the library as the cornerstone of urban space and democracy (Campbell, 2013, p.282). Although a number of authors argue for a future based on feelings of nostalgia, attachment to the physical artefact or heritage of the institution, this paper proposes that the historical social and urban roles still present are the central reason for their indispensability.

The culture of preservation has been the central role around which the history of the library was built. 'In the ages past, librarians saw their job as collectors and keepers of information' (Palfrey, 2015, p.23). However, digitisation and internet technology have fundamentally changed the processes of preservation, by growing exponentially in ways which are not physical nor spatial. This is fundamentally affecting the perception of the core role of the library. While physical preservation of particular items is likely to continue to be part of library curation, on a large scale preservation is no longer the central role for the public libraries of the future. Rather, the library is, and has been developing into: a building which is core to democratic processes, a place to find free assistance, and a place to work and generate content. Each of these

functions has roots in history and this history shows that the library is and has been for a long time providing a number of additional roles.

The discussion on the future of the library is especially relevant because digital technology has changed, and continues to change, how civic buildings, institutional and urban space are defined. As cities remake themselves in a digital 21st century there is a need to redefine the role public institutions play in current urban environments and propose the new roles the library and other public services might have in future urban environments. This opens the question of what is the role of the library of the 21st century.

This paper proposes that the answer to this question has to be closely related to a more careful examination of the historical roles of the library. Over history, in addition to preservation and dissemination of knowledge, the library has played an urban and social role. Consequently, the library represents a complex relationship between the concept of preservation of information, and the social and urban views of the period. This paper will evaluate the literature on the history of the library on those two levels.

THE LIBRARY OF THE ANCIENT PERIOD

The ancient period saw the formation of the library as an institution, with the first known writing system and first recorded presence of storage of written material found in ancient Mesopotamia over 5500 years ago (MacLeod, 2000, p.19). Many of the social, urban and architectural qualities of the library were established during this early period and since have had a lasting influence with some continuing to define the library of today. The library, both as a collection of information and as a space in which the information is stored, developed from early examples found in the ancient world (Campbell, 2013, p.19). Although in terms of its physical manifestation the library of the ancient period can be seen as very modest, it began the concept of preservation of knowledge and started development of the expression of knowledge as a symbol of power.

The most fundamental function of the ancient library was the preservation of written knowledge. In contrast to stories passed from generation to generation, written records enabled greater certainty in understanding of the past and sharing of knowledge, forming the very essence of the library (Campbell, 2013, p.37). This brought ancient knowledge out of storytelling and began to create artefacts which could be preserved.

The physical manifestation of this new idea was best embodied by the library in the ancient city of Ebla (Palfrey, 2015, p.23). The library at Ebla, dated between 2500 BC - 2250 BC, was little more than a storeroom, rectangular 3.5x4m, storing 8-12inch engraved square clay tablets (Campbell, 2013, p.38). While very modest and unlikely to be the oldest library, it demonstrated the early Mesopotamian archival practices that began the culture of preservation of written material.

In the centuries that followed, the culture of preservation began to demand a spatial presence in the cities. One of the most significant libraries of the ancient era was the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, an encyclopaedic royal library, and 'the most famous scholarly centre of classical antiquity' (Berti and Costa, 2009, p.4). Founded by Ptolemy I Soter around 331BC, it endeavoured to attempt to gather all of the world's knowledge in one place and in doing so brought scholars 'from all over the known world to teach, to learn, to dispute, to create' (Campbell, 2013, p.44; MacLeod, 2000, p.35). The medium of storing information by this period was the papyrus scroll, the library of Alexandria was thought to hold upwards of 700,000 (Campbell, 2013, p.37). This library was also seen as a cultural community of which only the royal and educated elite were permitted to enter. This is typical of the libraries of the ancient world, where access to knowledge was seen as a great privilege and restricted to those of the upper class (Berti and Costa, 2009, p.4). This idea of knowledge as a privilege tracks through many subsequent centuries of library development.

Throughout the ancient period, scrolls, tablets and the knowledge they held developed to be more of a symbol of power. Exemplifying this, the library of Celsus at Ephesus, built in 135AD to commemorate Tiberious Julius Celcus Polemaeanus, considered to represent the standard Roman library, began to celebrate and develop the architectural expression of power through scale and ornament. The inscriptions and architectural ornament found on its remains also show its importance as a monument (Johnson, 1984, p.13; Campbell, 2013, p.54). The power associated with libraries was very significant in the Roman era as libraries were built primarily as impressive buildings with storage as a secondary consideration (Figure 1). For example, the library of Celsus, had only one room approximately 17x11m, with small cupboards set into a large blank wall. This design typifies what would now be considered a very inefficient library (Campbell, 2013, p.54). These libraries became the embodiment of civic architecture and the power associated with being knowledgeable and informed. Therefore, the ancient period established the culture of preservation of written records, gave these a specific physical space and that space an early urban presence.



Figure 1: Library of Celsus, The library of Celsus is an ancient Roman building in Ephesus, Anatolia, now part of Selçuk, Turkey. (Image: lensmatter, 2015, www.flickr.com/photos/lensmatter)

MEDIEVAL LIBRARIES

The fall of the Roman Empire marked the end to the ancient era of the library, and introduced a new set of qualities characteristic of the medieval period. Around 500AD, the knowledge of the ancient world was fragmented, and the records which remained were mostly held by religious orders (Harris, 1995, p.91). This set the trend of the medieval era where libraries were closely tied with Christianity and the medieval monastery tradition. Monasteries played the key role in preserving parts of the ancient culture throughout this period (Campbell, 2013, p.79).

The medieval monastery further reinforced the importance and necessity of preservation of written knowledge as one of its most emphasised roles. St. Benedict was one of the most notable figures supporting this process (Clark, 2006). After withdrawing from Rome, to the mountains south of the city to live as a hermit, St. Benedict began to develop rules for the

activities to be practised by his monk followers (Harris, 1995, p.91). These rules, which later evolved into the Benedictine Order, made reading and copying of books part of the monastic routine, guiding many lives for centuries to come (Harris, 1995, p.91; Clark 2006; Wormald, 1958, p.96; Bloch, 1986). The practices of these monastic order continued the ancient culture of preservation. The Benedictine and monastic efforts to reproduce information transformed the world of written works. Each time books were copied they contributed to slowly expanding the amount of literature and preservation of classical and Christian works and ideas. However the labour of reproducing books in these times was tremendous, a single volume could take months to transcribe, and the materials, parchment and binding were all very costly (Kelly, 1966, p.14). The monastic idea sought to preserve the majority of ancient and religious literature, although the methods of the time made it very difficult to preserve it all (Campbell, 2013, p.79). These efforts increased the availability of the scholarly works, and generally availability of written works.

In terms of the development of the concepts of the library, the monastery tradition contributed the idea of a strong link between the knowledge and a place, and a continuation of difficulty of access to knowledge. Continuing from procedures of the ancient world, access to information and learning was restricted to the elite. However, during the medieval period the difficulties are emphasised further, as the knowledge is not only restricted to the educated or royal, but also by the difficulty of the procedure. The most significant of which was location. Traditionally, monasteries were set up by groups of dedicated Christians, who left populated areas to study religious works or meditate (Harris, 1995, p.71). For example, the Monastery of St. Catherine, 565AD, was located in the centre of mountains in the lower region of the Sinai Peninsula, a remote and difficult to reach location. (Forsyth, 1968, p.3).The physical separation between the secular towns and monasteries prevented undesirable access to knowledge and also helped with monastery defence and economy (Pollard, 1997). This separation supported the notion of knowledge belonging to a special place, an almost secret world. By removing themselves from urban environments monasteries and the collections they held became a pilgrimage destination, setting the agenda of controlled access to knowledge, which can be traced through the history of the library.

The key new features the medieval period brought to the library, in terms of the social and urban role, were the increase of availability of knowledge through reproduction, which powerfully contributed to greater availability of knowledge to those privileged to have such access and the development of a strong association between the written knowledge belonging to a specific place.

The end of the medieval period saw a new development in the role of the library, and the passing of knowledge: the university. In the later 11th and early 12th centuries 'a number of schools connected with monasteries came into prominence', these however were not founded and by the church alone, but with support from secular authority, kings or emperors (Cordasco, 1976, p.32). The earliest recorded university is the University of Bologna, founded in 1088. While the information in these early institutions was still restricted to the wealthy it was another step in the wider availability of knowledge (Gaston, 2012, p.18). The early university had a significant influence to both educational and political environment, they were an important step towards secularisation of knowledge and they were also the first to incorporate any sort of democratic organisation to processes of knowledge (Cordasco, 1976, p.32).

THE LIBRARY OF THE RENAISSANCE AND THE REFORMATION OF EUROPE

The next significant set of shifts in the development of the social and urban role of the library occurred during the Renaissance and the protestant reformation of Europe. Although both of these periods had their own distinctive characteristics in relation to the development of the library, jointly they present a clear progression centred on similar key processes: the literacy was becoming more common creating a larger reading audience, books were becoming more available, and the knowledge was increasingly seen as secular and desirable. Yet, the specific steps leading to this general picture were more complex.

By the late medieval period, although much of knowledge was held by the monasteries, many powerful or wealthy

families begun to amass significant private libraries. Over the 16th century, this process continued and the library began to expand from the private collections and monasteries into a more public form (Burke, 1982; Campbell, 2013, p.91), making a powerful move towards the current institution of the public library.

The other very significant factor of this period was the revolution in the production of written information. With the development of movable type printing around 1450, it became possible to produce books on a scale previously unseen. The increase in ease of production of books laid the foundation for a more extended public library service (Kelly, 1966, p.38).

Alongside this development in reproduction of information, the library, especially in Italy, reveals some significant innovation in its architectural form, and its social and urban role. The renaissance period, revives and develops on the ancient Greek notion of the idea of knowledge and its embodiment, the library, as a symbol of power. Throughout the Renaissance period this idea is communicated more explicitly, through the use of architectural and urban strategies. Two excellent 16th century examples stand out in this regard.

The Laurentian Library in Florence designed by Michelangelo from 1524, then completed in 1571, represented a move towards architecturally communicating the power associated with knowledge (Hemsoll, 2003 p.24; Campbell, 2013, p.103). Giulio de' Medici, when anointed Pope, commissioned this building to flaunt Medici family 'support of scholarship and the arts to justify and support their political position' (Campbell, 2013, p.105). This idea of knowledge as power was communicated architecturally through ornament. The intricate wooden carved ceiling, 'long walls are treated as internal facades' and bookcase examples of the 'finest specimens in existence of wood-carving' spoke of a wealth not demonstrated in libraries since the ancient libraries of Rome (Figure 2) (Campbell 2013 p.104; Clark 2006). This library was a gift to the city, but also it demonstrated that the power and influence could be communicated in the form of promotion of knowledge and scholarship (Campbell, 2013, p.104).



Figure 2: Reading room of the historic Laurentian Library, located in the cloister of the Basilica of San Lorenzo
(Image: Nathan Hughes Hamilton, 2013, www.flickr.com/photos/nat507/11227909143)

The second library, was the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, designed by Jacopo Sansovino, built in 1564 (Labowsky, 1979). Although constructed under similar circumstance, it also began to speak of a more pure and civic motive. It was conceived to house the life work of Cardinel Basilio Bessarion, a humanist scholar, who had over his life acquired one of the finest collections of manuscripts in ancient Greek anywhere in the world (Lowry, 1982). Upon his death in 1472, he donated his work, more than 1000 manuscripts, to the state of Venice, on the 'proviso that it was made available to anyone who wished to view it' (Lowry 1982; Campbell, 2013, p.100). This library had a very significant urban presence, because it was built on the edge of St Marks Square. In terms of its architecture, ornament and scale, this library starts to communicate the return to the importance of public buildings of the classical era.

Both of these Renaissance libraries develop the social role of the library in terms of public access. They reintroduce 'public' access to material, although at this time the term public was still limited to the literate, predominantly of the wealthy classes. This was however a broader and more inclusive approach than what had been seen before. Libraries of this period represent an important step in the secularisation of the library (Campbell, 2013, p.105).

The 17th and 18th centuries was a significant growth period for the library. These new buildings reflected similar social and urban roles developed during the Renaissance period. Many libraries of this period were created by gift or endowment (Kelly, 1977, p.3). Wealthy individuals donated collections that formed national, state and university libraries, which were developed to be 'public' spaces. However, their use remained restricted based on social class (Kelly, 1966, p.52). As the reading public grew over these centuries, the demand for literature increased and a variety of libraries developed to meet this need, although none of these were yet truly public (Kelly, 1977, p.3). Nevertheless, the gradual transformations during this period set the scene for the subsequent development of the public library.

18TH AND 19TH CENTURY FORMATION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

The 18th and 19th century marked the most significant period of development of the library in terms of its social and urban role. This is the period during which the library evolved to become more inclusive and more truly public while also reflecting and supporting the social move towards democracy and increased empowerment through easier social mobility. The development of the social role of the library is tied to a wider period of societal change; the rise in democracy. Democracy is a broad term, by some definitions dating back to the ancient Greece. This paper uses the term referring to the changes that occurred throughout Europe in the late 18th early 19th century, the increase in improvements and availability of services to all, regardless of class, which facilitated easier social mobility. This was tied to a period which came to be known as 'the enlightenment', in which number of changes occurred in the way knowledge and the library were conceived. Enlightenment was based on the idea that 'though a spreading of education, a more rational civilized, social and political harmony would exist' (Greenhalgh et. al. 1995, p.20). It was linked with the scientific revolution, the idea that scholars and scientists can explain by reason and scientifically prove the working of the cosmos, contrary to traditions and established views of the church (Porter, 2000). This period was significant as it marked a further move towards secularisation of knowledge and emphasised importance of education, thus laying the grounds for the changes towards democracy which spread through Europe in the 19th century.

These changes to the society of the western world is exemplified by 19th century Great Britain. The enlightenment ideals spread throughout the politics of the 19th century and prompted a number of Parliamentary acts that represented a road to more humane and more democratic society; the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832, the Factory Act of 1833, the first government grant for education in 1833, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and the Public Health Act of 1848 (Kelly, 1977, p.3). These changes were not born suddenly, but emerged slowly and gradually from public need (Kelly 1966 p.13). This 19th century idealist philosophy was also applied to the library movement, with the Public Libraries Act passing in 1850 (Henry, 1993). 'Social reformers saw in the library a place for a new social consensus: a place that symbolised the reduction in inequalities and class conflict' (Greenhalgh et. al, 1995, p.20). The library was a place that could offer opportunities for individuals to realise their potential and satisfy the strong demand for knowledge (Greenhalgh

et. al, 1995, p.20; Black, 1996, p.26). The library came to embody the idea of democracy. They represented free access to information with less of an influence from the class system. As a consequence, the library was dealing with increased use, developing more sophisticated security procedures, while also enabling almost porous architectural arrangements.

During the early 19th century, continuing the trends of the Renaissance era, philanthropy continued to provide core financing for expansion of libraries. The main difference was that the particular individuals now had more pure enlightenment motives (Greenhalgh et. al. 1995, p.20; Kelly, 1977, p.3). For example, Andrew Carnegie, donated the finances for 2,811 public libraries across the English speaking world (Campbell, 2013, p.234). Carnegie's philanthropy embraced the United States, Canada, the British Isles, Australia and New Zealand, almost the entire English speaking world (Rosenfield, 2014).

Nevertheless, these philanthropic efforts were insufficient to fully satisfy the public pressure to improve access to libraries, eventually leading to changes in financing of the libraries. The legislations which developed throughout Western countries empowered municipal libraries. For example, the Public Libraries Act, signed in 1850 in Great Britain, meant the municipal bodies were allowed increase taxes to raise money for support of libraries (Campbell, 2013, p.234). Although this move did not drastically change the method of funding for libraries, it made the publicness of such libraries fundamental, strongly supporting explicit formation of the public library. The municipal library was the first time 'any considerable collection of books available to all the people, without charge, and completely detached from social, political and religious prejudices' (Altick, 1957, p.223). These new public libraries were for the first time in history truly free and public.

A building that demonstrates this Western move to a more democratic and public library is the Boston Public Library. Designed in 1852, and funded by Joshua Bates it was the first major public library in the world. Bates wrote before its design, the building ought 'to be an ornament to the city' and most importantly be 'perfectly free to all' (Palfrey 2015 p.1; O'Connor, 1944). This library and the ideas it was built upon embodies the democratic development of the libraries that happened in this period (Palfrey 2015 p.1).

CONTEMPORARY LIBRARY

Compared to previous periods, most of the 20th century provided relatively modest innovation with the concept of the public library. Rather, there was much refinement in the procedures of accessing information and significant increases in general availability of the service. The lower social classes began to embrace the library and the general notion of public education, reflecting a more complete delivery on the already established objectives of enlightenment. The architectural expression and urban role of the library changed significantly alongside the architectural styles of the time while the social role remained relatively stable.

The technological development of the 20th century significantly affected the procedures of accessing information. While books in their physical form remained the key content of the library, the procedure associated with reviewing content underwent greater improvements. As libraries increased in size, improvements in cataloguing were needed. These developments could be seen as simultaneously facilitating ease of finding information but also continuing the trend of difficulty in regards to access (Worpole, 2013).

The technological developments continued into the 21st century with the advent of the digital catalogue, the time and difficulty associated with accessing information decreased again, and the internet finally removed the need for any physical procedure at all. The internet has meant a fundamental refocus for the modern library by stripping part of the difficulty of procedure of access (Palfrey, 2015). As a consequence of the internet, the library has been grappling with the digital era. Not since the invention of the printing press has there been a technological development that has caused a fundamental rethinking in the function and operation of the institution. Digital technology has unquestionably changed

how people interact with knowledge, but also how they interact with their urban environments (Murphy, 2006). As the digital world continues to grow, access to it becomes more and more a necessary tool for participation in the society. Since the dawn of the digital era the library has grown slowly into a place that all people can rely on for internet access (Norman, 2012). The library in some parts of the world evolving into a market leader of digital services, offering services like educational databases and job assistance programs that help their communities (Mullen, 2013). These programs and the access to data that libraries provide is essential for active and equitable participation in a digital world.

Furthermore, during the 20th century, the library also developed a greater urban presence, which only reinforced its public importance in democratic processes and urban life. The public library was increasingly seen as an important public building, and to a large extent due to the fact it was the easiest to access indoor public space of the city. As such it started to facilitate a particular type of inclusive and informal leisure space that formed a part of daily urban life (Hayes, 2005, p.80).

The strong relationship with urban, social and civic functions in contemporary libraries can be found throughout the world, for example the Wellington City Library, designed by Ian Athfield, completed in 1991, has a strong link to the adjacent Civic Square, council buildings, and nearby waterfront (Collected Works 1992) This building intended to give "as much information as possible to as many people as possible" while embracing the connection the library has with its surrounding urban landscape (Honey 1992). The building uses a mezzanine to connect the street with the neighbouring civic square to encourage library interaction and thoroughfare (Figure 3). The connection to the civic square through an 88m long glass façade, mezzanine path and significant social spaces reflect the how the contemporary library moved to reflect a more significant social and urban role (Dale 1998).



Figure 3: Wellington Public Library, main collection, glass façade and civic square beyond
(Image: Zac Nicholson.)

The Seattle Public Library, built in 2004, designed by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), also represents

development in the social and urban role of the library in the modern digital era (Athens, 2007). The building, similar to the Wellington Public Library, embraces its connection with the surrounding urban landscape. A continuous glass façade and multiple entrances on split levels provide many opportunities for public interaction. In addition to this urban role, the library also intensifies its public role by embracing digital media alongside analogue material expressing a deliberate and significant focus on the ability to participate in daily urban life. The large computer area, is located close to the main atrium of the library and street, providing easy and free access to digital media which engages more casual users. Alongside the acknowledgement of digital media there is also recognition of the importance of spaces simply for information exchange and social interaction in real time and space, something which no technology or internet can provide.

Contemporary public libraries, such as the Seattle Public Library and Wellington City Library, explicitly embody what libraries have become since the age of enlightenment; a place that grew with democracy and that facilitates public conversations and activities in ways that are separate from corporate interest (Willingham, 2008). The library and the ideas of mass education grew with democracy and are inextricably linked. Tied directly to the community, the library has developed into a place of social transformation, a place all members of the community can use, meet and share ideas (Oldenburg, 1996, Norman, 2012). The library also became a place to get computer access, or access to technology otherwise unavailable to all (Norman, 2012). Exposure and access to new ideas is fundamental for the public to participate in the democratic system (Palfrey, 2015). In a digital age the library serves as a place to be exposed to new ideas and sort credible from less credible information (Durant and Horava, 2015, p.8). The library embodies a place now fundamental to urban and societal processes.

In addition to social transformations, the urban presence of libraries has steadily grown since the late medieval period, becoming important as a physical symbol for access to knowledge and democracy. For the purpose of being accessible and democratic, the public library has moved away in its architectural expression from the intent to simply evoke a sense of power to a greater emphasis on urban connection and presence. The Wellington Public Library and the Seattle Public Library reflects these ideas in its architectural expression, setting and urban relationships. The façades of these buildings do not portray separation between itself and the city. Instead, these libraries try ‘to be both an autonomous urban object and a complex microcosm of urban fabric and link to the digital world beyond’ (Murphy 2006).

CONCLUSION

This brief history of the library shows the library has a complex and rich history with many changing roles in representing the social values in relation to knowledge and information. The historical trends discussed in this paper clearly show a progression in development of the library from an almost exclusive focus on the preservation of the material, to a public urban role in facilitating democratic processes. Although the storage and preservation of knowledge increased over the centuries, the library also continued to develop and increase its social and urban presence.

Reflecting on these trends, the library of today can be seen as an inviting democratic space with universal access to information. These roles developed through a long process of the library participating in the reforming of society, informing the wider public, facilitating upward social mobility and participating in democracy. It is in these roots that the future of the library can be found. The social and urban roles of the library are the reason the ‘death of the library’ should not be up for debate. What, however, remains to be seen is in what architectural form these roles will be provided and how the greater emphasis on the social role will continue to transform its physicality.

Therefore, while the digital transformation might impact the main library media, there are significant reasons to expect that the social, public and urban roles of the library will continue with the established trend and continue growing.

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