

**PUBLIC LIBRARIES:
CONSUMER SPACES OR PUBLIC PLACES?**

Introduction

In today's world, we are constantly bombarded with advertising, whether it is while we read our newspaper in the morning, when travel to work, or listen to the radio. In addition, with the newest technological "conveniences" of ipods, instant messaging, and blogs, there is an increasing amount of information that adds a new sense of complexity to our daily lives. With the onslaught of the commercialization of public spaces, and the increase of technology that makes it easier for us to stay home, rather than to venture out into the world of people, our sense of community is eroding, and a physical sense of place, or community center, is often lacking.

In *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building*, Kathleen de la Peña McCook points out that civic engagement is on the decline in America. Less people are attending political meetings and joining local organizations than they were a generation ago. She states,

People feel they are too busy, suburbanization erodes a sense of connection, frequent moves make it difficult to feel a part of the neighborhood where one lives. The rise of chain stores, the decline of family businesses, and television as a replacement for group meetings have all contributed to a weakening sense of community.¹

Yet, people still desire a connection to their community and libraries can provide that.

¹ Kathleen de la Peña McCook, *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000): 7.

Thus, it is essential to preserve libraries as public spaces, free from the inundation of commercial and corporate interests. Yet, a problem arises when public libraries, motivated by a need for funding, partner with corporations and businesses, who are interested in the PR and marketing aspect of working with a library. Public libraries are primarily funded by our tax-dollars. Should a publicly funded space be used as a tool for delivering advertisements to its unsuspecting users? Or is it a necessary evil for providing quality service to the community?

The library as a public space

What is the role of a public library in today's society? How can it best serve its community and be relevant to its users (and non-users) in the complex world we live in? These are the questions I ask of myself as I prepare to join the ranks of public librarians in the United States. As I have made my way through library school, I have been presented with several different visions of what a public library can be. A public library can cater to mass entertainment appeal, stocking its shelves with multiple copies of the latest bestseller. It can view its users as "customers" and market itself from that perspective. It can maintain a zine file, available for browsing and possible circulation. It can strive to collect works from independent press sources or it can maintain the status quo and order from the same jobber, year after year. (Or find a compromise between the two). It can be a space for community dialogue and discussion. A public library can offer comfortable chairs in a warm, friendly environment, or it can limit its comfy corners in an attempt to keep the unwanted out.

There are many ways to envision a library, but I would like to make a case for a model of a public library that focuses on its essential value as a public, community space. As a public space, it is important that libraries avoid the lure of corporate sponsorships and privatization. It is important they represent alternative viewpoints and provide space for community interaction and discussion. A library does not only have to cater to the desire for mainstream entertainment (although there is a place for that too), but it can also strive towards informing the community about issues that are relevant to their lives.

In Gloria J. Leckie's article, "Three Perspectives on Libraries as Public Space," she discusses the notion of "the public sphere, that area of life that is neither the sphere of the home nor the sphere of the state."² Leckie cites the work of Jurgen Habermas, who defined the "public sphere" as "a sphere of criticism of public authority."³ She points out that public space is important because it can be used as a common ground for debate and dialogue within the community. Public libraries are ideal for this purpose, and Frank Webster has argued that, "public libraries were formed and developed on the basis of a notion that information was a resource which belonged to everyone...available freely to those who wished to gain access to it...rather than being a commodity which might be proprietary."⁴ Yet, there is a sense of concern among some librarians, as well as those concerned with the preservation of public spaces, that libraries are being threatened by commercial interests.

²Gloria J. Leckie, "Three Perspectives on Libraries as Public Space," *Feliciter* 6: 2004, 233.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Frank Webster qtd in Leckie, 233.

Chris Dodge, a former Minneapolis public librarian, and the “street librarian” for the independent press magazine, *Utne*, has expressed his concern for the future of public libraries. He fears that,

the new libraries of the future will be closer in spirit to amusement complexes—centers offering corporate-sponsored ‘edutainment’ spectacles and tiered services to paying clientele.⁵

He points out that some library leaders have already partnered with corporations such as Starbucks and McDonald’s to supplement funding resources.

Ralph Nader also has commented on the loss of public spaces in communities and in his article, “Selling Out: Our Public Space, Universal Services Under Assault,” he mentions that the decline of funding for libraries has pressured some to rebuild in malls and other “multi-use projects.” Nader sees this as a negative change, where

families and individuals entering and leaving libraries must navigate between people with shopping bags and carts negotiating adjacent stores, parking, and all the noise.⁶

An argument for corporate sponsorships

Some argue that libraries, facing budget cuts across the nation, must come up with creative solutions to keep up with rising costs. Glen Holt, the former director of St. Louis Public Library, asserts that

...corporate or business sponsorships for library programs are easier and more rewarding than trying to raise money from folks already up to their

⁵ Chris Dodge, “Knowledge for Sale,” *Utne magazine*, July/August 2005. [http://utne.com]. Accessed 16 April 2006.

⁶ Ralph Nader, “Selling Out: Our Public Space, Universal Services Under Assault,” *Common Dreams News Center* online, 10 August, 2003, [http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=views/03/081] Accessed 16 April, 2006.

elbows in making donations to other non-profit educational and cultural institutions.⁷

Holt took advantage of corporate funding while at the St. Louis Public Library (SLPL). In 1991, Anheuser-Busch sponsored a year of programs on African-American history. The SLPL also worked with Price-Waterhouse, which donated the services of a CPA to the library in return for "...direct thanks through the library's regular publications."⁸ Holt does urge library leaders to be cautious when soliciting corporate sponsorships, and advises them to weigh the costs and benefits of such a relationship.

Compromises, compromises...

Unlike the ALA, the Canadian Library Association (CLA) has developed a policy for library partnerships with corporations/businesses. Although the CLA encourages the support of ongoing public funding for public libraries, it also acknowledges that,

Corporate sponsorships are one source of additional support that allows libraries to enhance the level, extend the range, or improve the quality of library service.⁹

In its policy, the CLA lists five principles that it believes libraries are responsible to uphold if they are to accept funding from corporate donors. The CLA states that,

Libraries have a responsibility to:

1. demonstrate that sponsors further the library's mission, goals, objectives and priorities, but do not drive the library's agenda or priorities.

⁷ Glen E. Holt, "Corporate Sponsorships," *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances* 19 (1): 2006, 35-39.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Canadian Library Association, "Corporate Sponsorship Agreement in Libraries," 21 June, 1997. [<http://www.cla.ca/about/sponsor.htm>]. Accessed 17 April 2006.

2. safeguard equity of access to library services and not allow sponsorship agreements to give unfair advantage to, or cause discrimination against sectors of the community.
3. protect the principle of intellectual freedom and not permit sponsors to influence the selection of collections, or staff advice and recommendations about library materials, nor require endorsement of products or services.
4. ensure the confidentiality of user records by not selling or providing access to library records.
5. be sensitive to the local political and social climate and select partners who will enhance the library's image in the community.¹⁰

Thus, the policy of the CLA suggests that it is possible to have appropriate corporate partnerships in a public library. But when a corporate label or brand is placed on a library sign or in a newsletter, is that library still a “public space”?

Libraries: consumer spaces or public places?

In a response to the Verizon sponsored Literacy Network established by the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services, ALA Council member Mark Rosenzweig questioned,

By what right do we use our well-established commitment to literacy as a selling point for commercial exploitation by such companies as Verizon? Literacy is not so much a priority for Verizon as it is a promotional opportunity. Just because a company offers us a \$250,000 grant, should we encourage this sort of bought-and-paid-for (at a bargain rate) corporate image-making?¹¹

Rosenzweig brings up a valid point. Is it fair for a public institution to promote a for-profit corporation? Are we taking away our community’s access to a public space, free from commercialization? If libraries embrace corporate logos in

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mark Rosenzweig, “Branded! Hucksterism @ Your Library,” *American Libraries* 32(5) : May 2001, 46.

exchange for funding, will there be any place left for people to go where they are not targeted as consumers? John Buschman ask a similar question, “as a society, do we really need another model of media- and market-driven consumer space, or do we need an alternative in the public sphere?”¹²

My philosophy

I believe that it is possible to build public libraries that provide excellent services, as well as provide a place for the community that is not consumer driven, but is a welcoming, open, and non-commercial space. As a public librarian, I hope to strive to serve my community by creating a public space that is not devalued by an encroaching sense of consumerism. I hope to provide access to alternative literature and independent materials, while also accommodating more mainstream desires. I hope to be a part of a community space where people feel empowered to participate and engage in the world around them.

¹² John Buschman, “Staying Public: the Real Crisis in Librarianship,” *American Libraries*, 35(7): Aug 2004, 40-42.