
From Civic Place to Digital Space: The Design of Public Libraries in Britain from Past to Present

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ABSTRACT

Inaugurated as, at once, an antidote to the social problems of industrialization and a cultural and “scientific” helpmate to progress in an industrial society, public libraries in Britain first appeared in 1850 and soon became a familiar feature, not only on the sociocultural, but also the urban-architectural, landscape. Over the past century and a half, changes in the public library built form have reflected changes in the aims of the public library movement, in architectural style and planning and in wider society. The development and symbolism of the public library built form is analyzed in five periods, stretching from the pre–First World War phases of civic architecture and large-scale philanthropic eclecticism, through the interwar period of embryonic modernism, to the post–Second World War era of full-blown modernism and the subsequent postmodernism of the digital age. In each of these periods, the public library building can be “read” as readily as the books they contained.

INTRODUCTION

Buildings communicate with us and we with them. The design of buildings is analogous to the planned and, indeed, unplanned human behavior, including critical observation, that occurs in connection with built forms.¹ By virtue of their status as communication media, the messages invested in, and generated by, *library* buildings are perhaps more meaningful and potent than those associated with a great deal of other material culture. Library buildings, like any other type of building, exist in a “non-material web of ideas, values, norms, beliefs and other phenomena” (Gutman, 1969, p. 13). They reflect society and its aspirations, needs, and values. Thus, like the books they contain, library buildings, past and present, can be “read” and their meanings defined and debated.

Public libraries in Britain first appeared in 1850 and soon became a familiar feature of both the sociocultural and urban architectural landscapes. They immediately became places of civic importance, reflecting a strong, “modern” desire among the middle and respectable working classes of Britain’s expanding towns and cities for social and material progress. Against a background of relatively weak—compared to what was to come in the twentieth century—central-government intervention, social, cultural and economic improvement was to be achieved largely through the workings of the local state: through the provision and expansion of institutions like the municipal public library, funded from local taxation and open to all. Before the First World War, the local, civic identity of the public library was enhanced by philanthropic action, and after 1918 supplemented by greater support and arrangements at the national level. Although remaining a local institution, after the Second World War the public library was woven into the fabric of a powerful welfare state, after which it has struggled, in some aspects successfully, to respond to the needs of an emergent postmodern digital society.

It is evident, therefore, that since its inception over a century and a half ago, the public library in Britain has undergone a series of radical transformations and, because built forms reflect social forms, it is not surprising that the design of the public library has also undergone a process of change. This chapter tells the story of public library design in Britain from the institution’s civic beginnings (the library as “civic place”) to the era of the universal digital library (in which virtual and physical space coexist). The design history of the public library in Britain can be divided into five periods: 1850–1883, the era of the “civic” public library, which gave rise to a first wave of pioneer library buildings; 1883–1919, the years of the “endowed” public library, which saw the emergence of the serial public library architect; 1919–1939, when the “national network” public library appeared and a protomodernism in library design emerged; 1939–1979, a period that delivered the “Fordist” public library deeply characterized by architectural modernism; and the movement in recent decades toward the digital library and the appearance of postmodern and unpredictable library designs. However, before analyzing each of these periods in turn, a statement is required regarding the main theoretical motives underpinning our discourse.

REVISING THE RECEIVED HISTORY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY DESIGN

Prevalent in the British library world is the homespun view that early public library architecture was “mistaken” and that a process of improving evolution in library design over the century and a half has now begun to produce library buildings that are at last “fit for purpose.” Negative views on early public library architecture are not new. Lionel McColvin,

in his masterly survey of public libraries in 1942, opined that in the 1880s and 1890s the libraries that had been built were “ugly, uncomfortable, cold, badly lit, dreary, undecorated monuments”; they were “*undecoratable* monuments to an enthusiasm which paid no heed to the morrow” (McColvin, 1942, p. 81). Also in 1942, the librarian Ernest Savage proclaimed: “The worst period of library architecture was between 1895 and 1914” (p. 109). Despite the recent popularity of historic library renovations, the image remains of early public libraries as inconvenient, over-elaborate, and provider-focused. Then, according to the received view of history, after the First World War some progress was made. Infatuation with the “monumental” declined (though by no means did it disappear), and concern for function grew; structures more suited to their purpose began to appear in greater numbers (Savage, 1942, p. 109). Even the structures of the 1960s—now so unloved—have been seen as advances, in some respects, on what went before by virtue of their streamlining and brightness. However, retrospective analysis is dangerous. Our contention is that the linear, evolutionary account of the history of public library design is simplistic. Early public library designs were far from devoid of efforts to introduce “convenience” and efficiency. Nor did they neglect popular demand by supposedly indulging themselves in aesthetics. The notion that only recently has the public library thrown off the yoke of being a supplier-led service housed in drab, uninspiring places owes more to myth than good history.

The proposition that public library buildings have only recently become “suitable” structures is closely linked, arguably, to the notion that public librarians and library providers have historically displayed an illiberal face in their relations with users—notwithstanding the institution’s credentials as an engine of progress and enlightenment. An old and enduring stereotype of the early public library in Britain is the institution’s primary role as an instrument of social control, whereby working-class readers, which made up the bulk of patrons, were morally dragooned by a strict regimen of library discipline, by the selection of “appropriate” reading materials, and by the library’s potency as a counterattraction to irrational recreation and as a tool of sly capitalists in need of skilled and compliant workers (Noyce, 1974; Corrigan & Gillespie, 1978). In the 1970s this stereotype was reinforced by the work of social historians who were sympathetic to the “social control” thesis and who were seeking to explain the weakness of workers’ radicalism and the relative stability of British society despite serious problems generated by accelerating industrialization and urbanization, fluctuations in trade, and the perplexing persistence of poverty (Donajgrodzki, 1977). In addition, more subtle ideas concerning control were presented by Michel Foucault, who viewed “expert” institutions such as libraries (though he never featured libraries in his writings) as essentially functions of the power aspirations of the professions

(surveillance constituted by the professional “gaze”) and, as Max Weber put it, of modernity’s “iron cage” of bureaucracy (Foucault, 1980; Weber, 1978).

However, while the early public library in Britain patently displayed a control dimension, it is misleading to explain its origins and later development simply as a function of social control or professional-bureaucratic dominance. The illiberal, controlling view of public library history can be challenged in the first instance by summarizing the argument against the social control thesis *per se*. First, power holders have not formed a homogenous group or espoused a single dominant ideology and have themselves been divided along cultural, class, and ideological lines. Second, class—which lies at the heart of the social-control thesis—has rarely been the central, overriding determinant of social identity. Third, values like self-help, independence, thrift, and respectability have not been the monopoly of the supposedly controlling bourgeoisie. Fourth, as history shows, control efforts always run the risk of precipitating self-assertive and even rebellious reactions, creating problems that require further control strategies. Fifth, the working classes, or the “controlled,” have not been the passive victims of middle-class indoctrination but have exploited control efforts for their own emancipation. Sixth, bureaucratic control of the citizen, at the macro level as well as in microsocial environments, is a necessary, pervasive, inevitable, and accepted consequence of modernity and should not be interpreted as a conspiracy of domination by the powerful (Thompson, 1981).

These various elements of the critique of the social-control thesis can be mapped onto the history of the public library. First, the public library has not received universal support from the middle classes, who were initially split on the issue. Before the First World War there were widespread objections by local taxpayers to the idea of a local library. However, other sections of the middle class were wholeheartedly in favor of libraries—not because of their power to discipline the masses, but because they themselves, as aspiring members of the middle class, could make use of them. Second, public libraries have historically been sincerely promoted as shared, civic resources, not simply as places where class mixing would corrode class conflict. In terms of identity, public library patrons have been joint owners of an institution open to all and celebrated in terms of the utilitarian, economic sense this made. Third, a prominent member of the public library’s clientele has been the working-class or, in more recent decades, lower-middle-class autodidact. Self-help and respectability, expressed through a desire for independent learning, have been motives held autonomously by ordinary users of the public library. Fourth, even if one does attach a control dynamic to the public library, it would not be a comprehensively convincing one. Because of their “establishment” position within the civic life of towns and cities, as well as the necessary

regimen of discipline they entailed, libraries have often stimulated low-level antisocial behavior. Libraries have been places of moderate social friction as well as civilized communication. Patrolling, uniformed library janitors, and even policemen, were common sights on the premises of early libraries, even into the 1930s when the institution became a refuge for the unemployed masses. The figure of the library tramp is a familiar one in the history of the public library. The very existence of a myriad of library rules and procedures has often acted as a direct invitation to some to break them or negotiate their way through or around them. Fifth, although control may have been attempted, in the form, say, of a partial selection of materials, this does not mean to say that users have not been able to get what they have wanted out of the institution. In order to attract working-class readers in large numbers, librarians and library providers have historically *had* to compromise—whether on literary standards in the early decades or more recently on the use of library computers by readers to access their email. Finally, there is no evidence that the heavy regimen of library regulation and bureaucracy inevitably seen in libraries has significantly alienated users who, rather, have accepted surveillance and administrative control as a fact of life. Surveillance of users, in the Foucaultean sense, is easily exaggerated. Of greater importance has been the self-policing that occurs in libraries, with users operating an “internal” social control: that is to say, self-regulation through the fear of peer response if one did not conform.

If social control does not offer a theoretical way forward, what other theoretical lenses might be employed to help us think about public library development, including the institution’s architectural treatment? Alternative explanations can be offered based on Antonio Gramsci’s theories of “hegemony” and “social negotiation,” Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the “public sphere” (and Oldenburg’s derived idea of the “third place”), and Karl Popper’s notion of consensual, or “piecemeal,” social engineering.

In explaining his theories of “cultural hegemony” and “social negotiation,” Gramsci argued that a ruling group can only maintain power, or hegemony, if it anticipates and accommodates the demands of any oppositional culture—for wherever there is power there is resistance. Any ruling group, in order to continue ruling, compromises, makes sacrifices and *negotiates* (Gramsci, 1991). This theory plays out well, of course, in the context of the great fiction debate of the time. On the issue of admitting popular fiction to libraries, many librarians and library managers were forced to negotiate—and eventually the lavish provision of popular fiction became the norm. The idea of social negotiation also throws light on the way internal physical arrangements in libraries have been fashioned to reflect power relations between librarians and their readers.

The idea of the public library, so vividly projected in its built form, was part of the emergence of a new understanding of what was meant

by “public.” The public library was not only free and open to all; it was distinct from the private sphere and divorced from the market. It was a shared, civic, public-sphere institution that drew on the same discourse that equated knowledge with light, or enlightenment (Joyce, 2003, p. 129). In this respect, the public library, in the form it developed in Britain from 1850 onwards, was firmly in the tradition of the eighteenth-century public-sphere institutions theorized by Habermas (1989) in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Such institutions—from the early coffee shops and philosophical societies to encyclopedias and scientific journals—were open, rational, and productive of debate. The concept of the “public sphere” institution has found form today, though in a depoliticized way, in Ray Oldenburg’s (1999; 2001) notion of the “third place.” Like today’s “everyday,” “hangout” institutions (such as coffee shops, bookstores, public houses, sports clubs, lunch clubs, community centers, and hair salons), public libraries have historically displayed the core characteristics of the “third place”—neutral, leveling, relatively unpretentious communal territories that are familiar, comfortable, and accessible; that encourage social interaction, conversation (within limits), and a mood of playfulness; that are frequented by “regulars”; and that serve as homes away from home, releasing individuals from the daily grind and providing solace and distraction.

Far from being a narrow exercise in social control, the large-scale program of public library construction that marked the first century of its existence, which reached a peak in the immediate pre-First World War decades, should be acknowledged as a successful exercise in “social engineering”—which can be defined as a collection of techniques designed to control, change, or manipulate people’s attitudes, actions, or social behavior. The concept has been closely associated with the mass disciplinary efforts of totalitarian states. But this is not the sense in which we use it here. In this regard, of relevance is Popper’s concept of *piecemeal* social engineering. In the realms of social planning, Popper contrasted the “historicist,” or “utopian social engineer,” with the “piecemeal social engineer.” The “utopian social engineer” understands social engineering as “the science of immutable historical tendencies”; there is an insistence on determining the future course of history according to a blueprint that seeks to establish an “ideal state” and with the operation, therefore, of strong centralized rule. The “piecemeal social engineer,” by contrast, may also start with a social blueprint, but it is one that is subject to trial and error, whose results can be tested by emerging knowledge and by experience; that is to say, the application of the scientific method to planning (Popper, 2002, pp. 24, 173, 177). The design and construction of thousands of public library buildings since the 1850s and the lessons learned from those experiences by successive generations of library planners suggests that the idea of piecemeal social engineering might have considerable relevance in this regard.

Applying these lines of thought to the world of design, one is restrained from viewing architecture—whether that of the library or any institution—as a controlling discourse. Clearly, built forms can shape society and people’s behavior, but they are also, patently, determined *by* people and society (King, 1980). Library buildings, like other buildings, set out to influence patterns of patron use, but they are as much a product of patron requirements, perceived or real, as well as wider social forms and attitudes. In the temporal sections that follow, such a “reading” of the history of the public library built form will be attempted with the aid of the theoretical positions outlined above.

THE “CIVIC” PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1850–1883: PIONEER PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDINGS

The local tax-funded, free-at-the-point-of-use, municipal public library that we know today owes its existence to the inaugural Public Libraries Act (1850). The Act allowed (crucially it did not compel) a municipal borough to establish a public library funded from local taxation (the rates), but only if its population exceeded 10,000. Local taxpayers were not to be overburdened, and were to be charged no more than one half-penny in the pound for the purpose. The resulting funds could only be spent on facilities and staffing; purchases of books and other printed materials from the funds were disallowed. Permission to establish a library needed to be obtained via a vote of local taxpayers on the matter; two-thirds, or more, of ratepayers voting were required to support any proposal for a library. These components of the Act amounted to a limited statute aimed at larger towns, but amending and more liberal legislation over future years was to widen its applicability and appeal. In its formative decades, the public library was parochial in character, a local institution founded upon, and operated by, municipal principles established in the Municipal Corporations Act (1835), which set the framework for the development of local services like libraries. The most obvious of these principles was the right of local citizens to tax themselves in order to fund services made open and accessible to all members of the local community. Shared ownership formed the basis of the *civic* ideal. The public library was widely promoted as the cultural powerhouse of a town. Culture in the shape of a public library did not just reflect local economic progress, it was also seen to contribute to it. Public libraries were crucial to the strengthening of civic pride, as they were important components in the competitive struggle with other towns for supremacy in urban social progress.

The origins and development of the public library parallel those of the growth of nineteenth-century liberal ideology and reform. Philosophically, the public library drew its initial sustenance from the utilitarian tradition. Utilitarians were keen to promulgate the concept of “good citizenship.” Good citizens recognized the utility of life’s higher pleasures, which

included the pursuit of useful knowledge and education. Good citizens were supporters of meritocracy, the cornerstone of which was education, and denounced the exclusivity of closed, corrupt societies. These were recurring themes in the discourse of library promotion. Utilitarianism posited individuals as mechanistic units that were shaped by the environments they experienced. Good environments, like public libraries, were productive of good citizenship. Utilitarians, and good citizens, were supportive of political economy's espousal of the free market. They also endorsed the doctrine of self-help. However, utilitarianism was not narrowly atomistic. It recognized that the state had a role to play in enabling good citizens to help themselves. If state intervention maximized utility then it could be justified. Money spent on libraries and other educational facilities would be turned into profit when set against the money that would consequently not need to be spent on controlling and containing immoral behavior, including criminality. The economist W. S. Jevons (1881, p. 385) argued: "The main *raison d'être* of Free Public Libraries, as indeed of public museums, art galleries, parks, halls, public clocks, and many other kinds of public works, is the enormous increase of utility which is thereby acquired for the community at a trifling cost."

However, public libraries were not viewed simply as generators of material utility. They were also trumpeted as citadels of culture, emporiums of civilization. Whether material or cultural in their purpose, public libraries emerged at a time of great social tension and flux, and were created as institutions that could stabilize society and heal the wounds that early industrialization had inflicted. As a core component of the civic ideal's endorsement of progress, the public library was symbolic of the desire to create a new society, industrialized yet civilized, morally disciplined yet democratic, and replete with opportunities for education and social advance.

Reflecting the limited nature of early public library legislation, a high proportion of the first generation of public library buildings were in premises converted from other uses. Early designers had little to go on, apart from an awareness of the collegiate and grand traditions in library design and widely publicized projects in the 1850s such as the reading room of the British Museum, the Boston Public Library, and the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris. The commentary by the Papworth brothers in 1853 remained the only significant guide to library planning for a number of decades (Papworth & Papworth, 1853). Although characterized by a hesitant investment in the public library idea (by 1868 only 27 local authorities had opened libraries) and, it follows, in library buildings also, this period produced a number of interesting designs. Iconic libraries of this period might be considered to be Liverpool's William Brown Library (1860, extended by the addition of the Picton Reading Room in 1879) and Birmingham Public Library (1882). Many designs of this period followed, predictably, the classical model, as in the case of the "Italian

style” Hulme Branch Library, Manchester (1866), although medieval and Gothic influences were by no means absent, as in the buildings opened in Hereford (1871) and Oldham (1882). The public library represented a new Victorian building type, which was frequently conceived in conjunction with other cultural facilities, most notably museums and art galleries.

Pioneer library buildings, like the Liverpool Public Library (see fig. 1), struck a “monumental” pose. The Liverpool Public Library was described as “palatial,” possessing a “stately and imposing appearance” (Cowell, 1903, pp. 102, 104). However, the fact that pioneer libraries were built to “impress” does not mean that library providers wished to distance the ordinary reader. Early public library buildings did not alienate their users. There is little evidence to suggest that working-class users were humbled or deterred by monumental library architecture. As Birmingham’s librarian, J. D. Mullins put it in 1879: “if gin palaces and the like are brilliant and handsome, why should the opposition [libraries] be enamoured of the dingy and the mean?” (p. 6). Even the most popular of rooms—those housing newspapers and magazines—were often treated with great aesthetic care. Retrospectively, the many photographs of reading rooms illustrated in annual reports and books and journals that promoted libraries appear to present an environment that is drab, sparse, cold, and institutionalized. But this represents a look at history through the eyes of the present, and it was certainly not the opinion of contemporaries. In Manchester, the Hulme Branch Library’s reading room was variously described at its opening ceremony in 1866 as “fit for a queen to read in,” “beautiful and comfortable,” and “noble” (Credland, 1899, pp. 63, 70). The attractiveness of the surroundings reflected the universality of use that was encouraged.

THE “ENDOWED” PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1883–1919: THE RISE OF THE SERIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY ARCHITECT

As the idea of the public library gained in popularity and as its civic value became more obvious, legislators attempted to hasten the development of the institution. A legislative breakthrough came in the form of an act in 1893 (1894 in Scotland) which allowed local authorities to establish a library service merely by local authority resolution—that is to say, without recourse to a public vote. Between 1868 and 1886 the number of library authorities had risen from 27 to 125. By 1918, however, 566 library authorities were in existence, many providing more than one library service point. Expansion came from increased demand, as literacy rates improved and public education became more widespread. Above all, however, rapid public library expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was supply-driven, resulting from the philanthropic gifts a range of benefactors, such as Sir John Brunner, Henry Tate, John Passmore Edwards and, most notably, the Scottish-born American steel



Figure 1. The Brown Public Library, Liverpool (opened in 1860) (Cowell, 1903).

magnate Andrew Carnegie. The first library gifted by Carnegie was in his native Dunfermline in 1883, the date that we have thus chosen to mark the end of our first, and the start of our second, period of public library development. By the time Carnegie died, he had gifted money to 354 buildings (a further 35 were funded by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust) (Bobinski, 1969).

This unprecedented generosity did not take place in a social vacuum. Gifts were requested and given, and interest in the public library grew because of changing attitudes toward much larger issues like social deprivation, the direction of the economy, and education. In the decades immediately before the First World War, idealism eclipsed utilitarianism as the dominant philosophy of the age, providing a surge of energy to the public library as well as other social institutions and policy initiatives. Idealism emphasized citizenship as “duty.” This contrasted with the utilitarian definition of the good citizen as an individual whose actions produced personal as well as social utility, the latter crudely equated with happiness. Moral action, idealists countered, was defined by duty, charity, and love—none of which may necessarily deliver personal utility. This changed philosophical and intellectual climate goes some of the way to explaining the philanthropy of the age, including gifts given for library provision. In 1892, in J. Passmore Edwards’s opening of the Whitechapel Public Library, one of the many targets of his benefaction, he remarked that “a philanthropic spirit is good” but “a dutiful spirit is better” (1905, p. 39).

The idealist resolve to be dutiful to one’s fellow citizens found expression in the civic ideal and in local institutions like libraries. Public libraries

attracted large numbers of poor workers who were by definition, because they were availing themselves of the institution, to be considered “deserving.” But there was always the fear that the deserving poor could be contaminated by their undeserving counterparts and fall into the realms of the immovable “residuum” of the permanently “unfit” and unemployable, also termed the “submerged tenth” of the population, the lumpenproletariat. Educating the “deserving” poor in public libraries would safeguard them from being dragged down into the lower reaches of society.

Much of the social good that libraries could achieve was perceived through the lens of the economy. Just as early proposals for libraries had emerged in the context of the first great crisis and economic depression of protoindustrialization in the 1830s and 1840s, in the decades before the First World War renewed anxieties about international competition and economic decline were an important fillip to library development. In Manchester in 1907, in response specifically to the rising German trade challenge, the Chamber of Commerce urged the public library authority to “establish a complete expert branch of the free libraries replete with up-to-date information on the position of all the industrial arts dependent upon scientific knowledge” (*Manchester Chamber of Commerce Monthly Record*, 1907, p. 288). During and shortly after the First World War, pessimistic projections of a hostile postwar economic climate encouraged many large public libraries—including Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Liverpool—to establish, in the spirit of reconstruction, commercial and technical departments.

The rapid acceleration in public library adoptions that began in the late nineteenth century, together with the huge injection of philanthropic capital in the generation before the First World War, brought a commensurate expansion in the physical infrastructure of the public library. Between 1884 and 1919, 712 libraries opened—an average of over 19 libraries per year. This contrasted sharply with the annual average of just under 2.5 achieved between 1850 and 1883; it was also greater than the annual average of 15.5 seen between 1920 and 1939. To facilitate this expansion, a new breed of specialist public library architect emerged, including Henry Hare and Maurice Adams (though they did not devote themselves to libraries alone), paralleling the serial, “scientific” philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie, John Passmore Edwards, and many others. Around the turn of the twentieth century, library design became something to be taken seriously. The public library became a “planned” institution, a development underpinned by the appearance of published discourses on the subject penned by architects, librarians, and library supporters (Macdonald, 1900; Champneys, 1907; Cotgreave, 1901; Burgoyne, 1905; Soule, 1912). The public library rarely attracted interest from the heavyweights of the architectural world (Alfred Waterhouse was an exception). On the contrary, public library design was highly “democratic,” in that it

was carried out by a myriad of local architects and borough engineers and surveyors.

This dilution of design responsibility, notwithstanding the emergence of some library-design experts, goes some of the way to explaining the eclecticism of style that characterized much of this period (we say “some of the way” because generally, and not just in library design, this was a period that witnessed an increasingly wide variation in architectural language). Eclecticism was also virtually assured by the fact that public library provision was a local, civic duty. No governing national or regional bodies—as was the case in respect of the London School Board or London Underground—existed to impose a homogeneous style. Such was the aesthetic diversity that existed that even those architects who made a name for themselves as library specialists did not adhere, unlike in the United States for example, to an unchanging design model; rather, like Sidney Smith in Lambeth in the 1880s and 1890s, they were keen to experiment and build up a portfolio of library styles. Some designs were in themselves highly eclectic in their mixing of historical styles, such as the Kensington Branch Library, Liverpool (1890) (fig. 2).

In contrast to external style, a large degree of homogeneity existed in terms of the type and arrangement of internal spaces in buildings.² Early *large* public libraries were highly compartmentalized, with rooms allocated according to the various kinds of activity librarians sought to accommodate: serious reading, popular reading (of magazines and newspapers) and the seeking of “everyday” information, lending for home reading, use by children and juveniles, patronage by women, antiquarianism, “rational” recreation (like billiards or chess), and demand for public lectures arising from the expansion of the adult education movement. Some of these activities commanded a higher status than others, and this was of course reflected in the positioning, size, and architectural treatment of rooms—children’s room relegated to the basement; the popular reading room placed close to the entrance and the noise of the street; the reference room, awarded relatively serious aesthetic attention and promoted to the upper floors. In smaller libraries the “butterfly plan” became common: an entrance hall, with a librarian’s central supervision point, flanked by a room on either side, and an additional room to the rear often housing an open-access lending stock. In the capital the “London plan,” as it became known, was frequently employed: a narrow frontage (reflecting high property costs and spatial restrictions) masking a larger, plainer structure to the rear, connected to the street by a long corridor. It would certainly be wrong to assume that internal plans were predictable and uniform. However, it is noticeable that in the early twentieth century, as the discourse and debate on library design gained momentum, attempts were made to stimulate a dialogue that would distil and deliver “best practice” in internal design.



Figure 2. Kensington Branch Library, Liverpool (opened in 1890) (Cowell, 1903).

The most publicized aspect of “best practice” became open access (allowing readers free access to the shelves), following its introduction into Britain in 1894 by James Duff Brown at Clerkenwell Public Library. The shift to open access was a turning point in public library design. Open access not only revolutionized the library service, increasing substantially its popularity, it also paved the way for an open-plan mentality half a century later. Open access did not instantly liberate the user. Its full name, it is important to recall, was *safeguarded* open access. This implies a continuing need and desire to *regulate* the user—in this instance through the architectural device of the wicket (entrance and exit) gate and the observation of activity up and down the length of stacks that in many library designs radiated outwards, like the spokes of a wheel, from a central superintending position. On the one hand, such arrangements can be seen as proof positive of an overbearing surveillance of readers and, it follows, an inherent tendency in the public library’s rationale toward social control. On the other hand, open access gave power to the reader in allowing her/him to wander through the collection. In this respect, one might consider the move to open access as a classic *design* example of Gramsci’s “social negotiation,” of extending the “Habermasian public sphere” credentials of the public library and of Popper’s consensual, piecemeal social engineering aimed at a large expansion of public library use.

THE “NATIONAL NETWORK” PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1919–1939: PROTOMODERNISM

Even though it had long been promoted as a national asset, in the interwar years the public library widened its platform and became a national institution offering a service that, though by no means fully nationally integrated, nonetheless had a nationwide presence. The growth of this presence paralleled, and was influenced by, wider developments affecting the nation, including an erosion of localism, the increasing reach of the central state, and a trend towards cultural homogenization facilitated by developments in transport, communication, and social provision—from cinema, radio, and the telephone to mass council housing, the motor car, and electrification (the “national grid”). Public libraries were also to be affected by the faltering of the economy in the 1930s and the mass unemployment that ensued.

The Public Libraries Act (1919), the most important library legislation since the inaugural statute of 1850, placed the public library on a national footing. The Act arose directly from the war and in particular the reconstruction movement, which was aimed at planning a better postwar world, improving wartime morale, and undercutting disaffection. (Regarding this last aim, the public library was seen as a bulwark, albeit a minor one, against industrial unrest as well as the possibility of a Bolshevik-style revolution in Britain.) Alongside the linked subjects of museums, adult education, and education in the army, public libraries were included in the deliberations of the Ministry of Reconstruction whose report on the question paved the way for the 1919 Act (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919). The Act empowered county councils to become library authorities; it thus extended access to citizens who, by virtue of their residence in rural areas, had previously found themselves effectively disenfranchised from the nation’s public library service. It also abolished the limit that had historically been placed on the amount of money a local authority could spend on public libraries, although economic reality naturally determined that this new stipulation could never constitute a blank check.

In the 1920s and 1930s the idea of the public library infrastructure as a “national network” took firm root. In these decades the idea matured that libraries could be linked together in networked structures to disseminate knowledge even more powerfully than they had in the past.³ The librarian Stanley Jast (1939, ch. 10) expressed the need for a national “library grid,” a suggestion that reflected the work that was being undertaken at the time to create a national grid for electricity and a national telephone network. National economic problems between the wars and the cuts in public expenditure that this precipitated resulted in a series of proposals and actions on library cooperation and networking to help overcome the pressure on library spending. The most adventurous of these was the establishment of a National Lending Library in 1930, with a supporting

network of regional library bureaus and “outlier libraries” (Filon, 1977; Newcombe, 1937).

The interwar years saw the emergence of modernism—a protomodernism—in library architecture. This period marks a new era in local authority funding (generally without philanthropic support), which, although restricted by economic constraints for much of the period, supported a flowering of modernist library design as the 1930s progressed. In a number of cities the interwar years saw the construction of second-generation central library buildings, representing an opportunity to rethink both the technology and the image presented by public buildings. Grand new structures such as Sheffield Central Library (fig. 3) and the iconic Manchester Central Library (both opened in 1934) presented a measured, stripped classicism laced with a growing appreciation of modernist fluidity. Building on the prewar growth of branch-library development, suburban library expansion continued apace: by 1939 Liverpool had 25 service points. In this period, Art Deco and minimalist neo-Georgian came to symbolize a modernist desire to shake off the legacy of Victorianism.

Reflective of the public library’s maturing profile in regional and national development was the conceptualization and construction of the Manchester Central Library. The interwar library system was machine-like in the way it began to link libraries across the country through formal arrangements in an effort to disseminate knowledge more widely and efficiently; moreover, like a machine, this interwar network aimed to *reproduce* the institution of the library at central, regional, city, suburb, small town, and village levels. Symbolic of this emergent vision of a nationwide library machine was the Manchester Central Library, the brainchild of Stanley Jast, whose personal philosophy, derived from Eastern mysticism’s belief in the unity of humanity, led him to employ a vocabulary about libraries and the library network that included words like “grid,” “web” and “nerve ganglion”—words that are highly applicable today to the network of information available through the “global village” technology of the internet. The Manchester Central Library was a mini version of the “global” library grid Jast promoted. Its core feature was the placing of the closed bookstack (holding the vast majority of the library’s books) under the reading rooms, the latter being fed books from the stacks below by means of numerous booklifts. Jast believed that the location of the stack was critical to the efficient flow of books—of knowledge—through the library and to the reader. It was also critical to the overall performance of library operations—for the stack, said Jast (1927, p. 20), was the “nerve ganglion” of the library. Sitting directly on top of the stacks, on the first floor of the building, was the centerpiece of the library, the domed “Great Hall” reading room, its readers’ desks radiating from a central book-delivery and supervision, or surveillance, point. This central “superintendents’ station” as adorned by four pillars supporting a canopy topped by a large, ornate



Figure 3. Sheffield Central Library (opened in 1934). (Photograph by Alistair Black, 2010.)

clock and elaborate metalwork, a structure that was likened to an oracular “well of knowledge,” out of which would gush the library’s books (Harris, 1934, p. 221). This “running spring” image was appropriate considering the positioning of the stacks beneath the reading room.⁴

THE FORDIST PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1939–1979: MODERNISM EMBRACED

After 1945, the desire to build a better postwar world was enshrined in the election of a Labour government committed to the nationalization of key sectors of the economy, the provision of a national health service free at the point of use, and a willingness to manage the economy through intervention on a scale that contrasted sharply with the passive approach to economic policy in the 1930s. In design terms, the intended modernization of the nation was flagged by the Festival of Britain in 1951, which aimed to promote better-quality design in the redevelopment of Britain’s town and cities. It was not until the 1960s, however, that the quintessential “modern Britain” of the postwar era materialized—a Britain characterized by a revolutionary youth and pop culture, a liberalization of social behavior, and an injection of energy into scientific and technological development. In the wake of an exhausting war effort and the austerity of the immediate postwar years, but armed with a blueprint for the way forward in the form of the McColvin Report published in 1942 (McColvin, 1942),

the public library also moved into the modern age. In 1950 the public library movement celebrated its centenary and took the opportunity to promote itself as “democracy at work” (Jefcoate, 1999). In 1953 Wakefield Public Library took down its Victorian “silence” notices—a potent symbolic act if ever there was one (Dynamic Librarian of Wakefield, 1953). The public library reflected the postwar era’s newfound optimism.

The postwar, modern public library developed according to Fordist principles. Fordist “universalism” is characterized by economies of scale, standardization, vertical integration, division of labor, and mass production. At once reflective and productive of the public library’s Fordist features was a new Public Libraries Act, which reached the statute book in 1964. The Act underscored a commitment to welfare-state universalism by compelling (rather than simply allowing) local authorities to provide a library service. Moreover, it was stipulated that a library service should be both “comprehensive” and “efficient.”⁵ Library authorities grew in size, driven by local government reorganization in London in the mid-1960s and elsewhere in the country a decade later. The idea of library cooperation that had been born in the interwar years was taken forward with greater enthusiasm: “A librarian regards every library as a branch of the national library service,” wrote W. C. B. Sayers in 1947 (p. 4). The amalgamation of smaller library authorities, combined with the increased cooperation *between* the resulting enlarged library systems, made for much greater standardization in operations. Standardization was also encouraged by government in the form of the Bourdillon Report (1962). Perhaps the most powerful driver of standardized, cooperative practice came not from government but from developments already underway in the world of information technology. Defying their backward-looking stereotype, libraries in the 1960s were at the forefront of adopting computer systems, first for (union) cataloguing, then for circulation control (Crawford, 2007). In their larger library systems—and buildings indeed—librarians responded to the new mass culture. A detailed division of labor is endemic in library work—the “army system of delegated responsibility works well in a library,” McColvin (1939, p. 118) once remarked—and remained even more emphatically so during this period. Increased service specialization was reflected in the growth of subject departments, from business and social science libraries to repositories for local history and music (Overington, 1969; Duckett, 1985).

The emergence of a Fordist regimen of operation in Britain’s public library network reflected its new status as a thoroughly modern institution. It is no surprise, therefore, that architectural modernism was enthusiastically adopted by the library planners of the day as well as by the general public. Modernist designs for libraries became the norm. The attraction that many librarians felt in the 1950s and 1960s toward Scandinavian library architecture was part of the new orthodoxy (Dewe, 1996). For

many, including librarians like K. C. Harrison, modernism in architecture provided a lifeline for a public library movement weighed down by the baggage of Victorianism. Of newly built central libraries in places like Exeter, Camden, Bradford, Guildford, and Luton, as well as a large number of urban branch libraries, Harrison (p. 13) wrote in 1968: "Thanks to our architects and to briefings from experienced librarians, all these new libraries are attractive in their various ways. Gone is the institutional look, and in its place has come, not before its time, the clean, colourful and welcoming library, softened by carpeted browsing areas, curtains, plants and flowers, and by comfortable upholstery."

The age's passion for streamlining found favor among librarians, including Harrison, who pointed out that it had become a prime concern for he and his fellow professionals "to streamline their organisations for the convenience of readers" (1963, p. 12). Harrison, along with many others, was a fan of the modern, uncomplicated systems (administration) and lines (buildings) of Scandinavian libraries. Clean lines, uncluttered space, and well-lit premises provided, in many places, library environments a world far removed from the designs of earlier generations. The lighter feel to many of the new library buildings of the 1960s was illustrated vividly in the design of the Bradford Central Library (fig. 4) in 1967: "Vast rows of windows flood the building with light . . . Especially pleasing is the glass-fronted entrance hall with its elegant canopy. The interior of the hall is spacious and its marble floor, walls and columns, together with pendant clusters of tubular lights, all help to make it an aesthetic delight" (*Paradise for Book-Lovers*, 1967). "Space age" was how the chief librarian of Newcastle-upon-Tyne Public Library described his newly designed building in the late 1960s.⁶

Notwithstanding the appearance of compartmentalized spaces forming subject departments (noted above) in some large city libraries, library buildings of all sizes experienced a move toward the open, or free/fluid, plan. In this respect, they replicated the widespread uptake of the open plan in the postwar home and office. Just as large expanses of glass blurred the distinction between inside and outside, allowing internal spaces to achieve a sense of spaciousness more characteristic of spaces beyond a building's walls, free-flowing floor plans, including those in libraries, allowed internal spatial domains to permeate each other (Isenstadt, 1975, p. 175; Zion, 2002). In open-plan environments, layout was defined by traffic flow rather than top-down determined functions and professional priorities (Massey, 2001, p. 146). Librarians approached the management of their newly fashioned fluid spaces in this way, mapping and predicting use from an operations-research perspective. In planning their new spaces, librarians again looked to Scandinavia libraries where open interiors were offering greater flexibility and efficiency in service provision (Plovgaard 1960). They were also aware of the efficiency gains that were

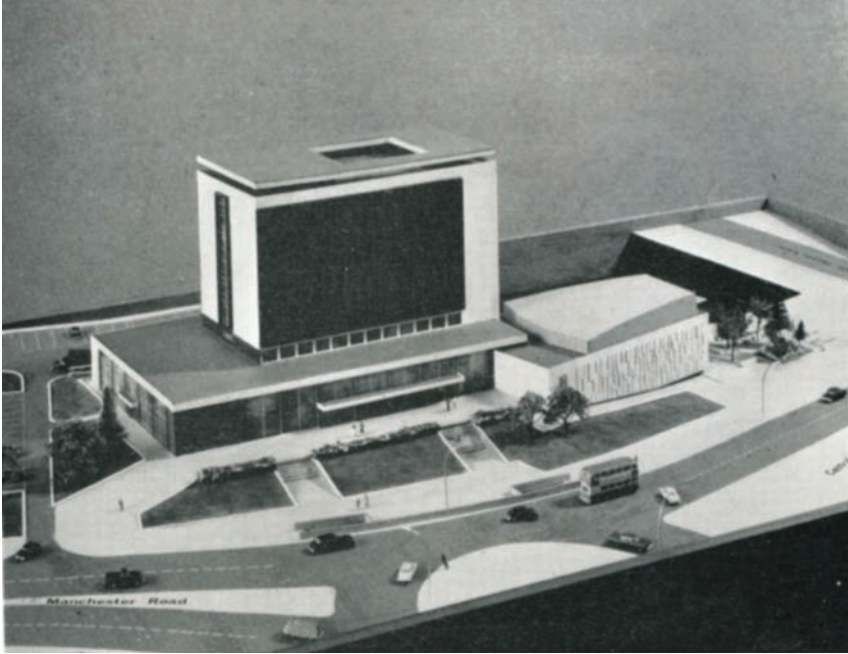


Figure 4. Bradford Central Library (opened in 1967). (Reproduced with the permission of City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council.)

accompanying the modularization movement in the United States (Black 2011, p. 85).

The strengthening of the open-plan philosophy after the Second World War was driven by an enthusiasm for technological advance as well as a desire on the part of society to break loose from an oppressive era of depression and war. One area where this latter impulse leeches over into public library planning was in the case of the children's room and its relation to other departments. As attitudes toward children became "less Victorian," open-plan buildings allowed children's library services to become more integrated into the general work and image of the library. In 1960, in the renovated Ormeau Road Branch Library in Belfast, one-third of the space was given over to children's accommodation, but there no physical partition was erected between the area used by children and that used by adults (though the children's section was demarcated by a lower ceiling) (Crawley, 1960).

However, the removal of barriers between adult and child accommodation was not appropriate everywhere. In Pimlico, in London's Westminster district, a stand-alone children's library was opened in 1960. Here, the library occupied two shop units at the base of a seven-story block of

flats on the edge of the Churchill Gardens Housing Estate. The library's internal design was uncompromisingly modern. The staff counter was of a novel light design in metal and glass. The L-shaped room was lit on its two inner sides by natural light from a glass-screened courtyard, which served as an outdoor reading room in the summer months. Photographs of the room reveal a highly contemporary interior design, with a modernist simplicity typical of the time. From the photographic evidence alone, however, one cannot tell that the room was the site of a children's-library service. Its appearance is more like that of the modern office. Indeed, a great many children's libraries of the 1960s appear to take their cue from the office environment, providing an abundance of "workmanlike tables" (Reynolds, 1966, p. 44) alongside more comfortable furniture. For Lionel McColvin, Librarian of Westminster and the instigator of the Pimlico Children's Library, public libraries needed to embrace the modernist revolution in design, even if that meant a synchronization with adult accommodation and the adoption of a ubiquitous, minimalist style. The library literature of the 1960s is replete with images of adult and children's libraries subjected to the modernist design ethos of the day, with many office-like in tone.

Great optimism surrounded the fresh, modern library styles of the 1960s, but their popularity has now faded. Whereas the "Victorian" was once the *bête noir* of popular and professional design opinion, in recent decades this position has been assumed by the modernism of the 1960s and 1970s. "Post-war Britain was in such a rush to build that it placed too much on functionality over form" was the opinion offered by one of the judges of the 2005 Public Library Building Awards (Harper, 2006, p. 35). In the same year, one member of the public voiced the following about his local public library built in the 1960s: "[It] looks like nothing so much as the headquarters of the Secret Police in some dingy corner of Eastern Europe. It is an ugly block of grey concrete made even greyer by the water that runs off its flat roof; all sharp angles and blank plate glass windows."⁷

THE DIGITAL PUBLIC LIBRARY: TOWARD POSTMODERN BUILT FORMS

The year that opens the last of our periods of analysis, 1979, has more meaning with regard to developments in general social and political affairs than in terms of the world of British public libraries. This said, the election that year of a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, committed to reigning in the influence of the state, was to have a significant effect on public library development for a generation. Although extensive public expenditure cuts had been ushered in under a Labour government in the mid-1970s—under pressure from the International Monetary Fund—those introduced by a series of Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s were ideologically driven, aimed at

securing economic growth as well as moral regeneration through a reduction in the supposedly damaging workings of the state, both central and local. The return of a raw “market” philosophy threatened the future of the public library. Right-wing ideologues, opposing the state subsidization of culture, proposed the introduction of charging for all public library services and called for their privatization (Adam Smith Institute, 1986). In the 1980s, spending on public libraries stagnated, and in the 1990s, it is estimated that over 500 public libraries closed (Fifty Libraries Face Closure, 1999).

Countering the threat from the right in the 1980s, some librarians developed a mode of radical public library service: community librarianship. Its objective was to help in a redistribution of wealth and opportunity by prioritizing library services to the disadvantaged. This was to be achieved through a deinstitutionalization of the public library, which on the ground meant the taking of services into the community and working through preexisting community groups. This represented a reversal of the historic top-down approach to provision. The philosophy of taking services outside the walls of the library by definition undermined the value of the library building—itsself already under pressure from low levels of investment to remedy physical decay. As Thatcherism strengthened its hold on the country, the radical departure that community librarianship represented was thwarted. However, the legacy it left was that it had demonstrated the importance of satisfying the library and information needs—to be met through imaginative design as well as other strategies—of an increasingly pluralistic society. In truth, it was difficult to untangle this liberal mindset from the new citizen-consumerist ethos of viewing library users as merely customers whose demands, however trivial in cultural terms, needed to be met.

Alongside the market ethos, the public library was also imbued with a heritage philosophy (“heritage” might be defined as shallow history as well as the viewing of history through rose-tinted glasses, both of which are conducive to the production of “myth”). The institution was presented as a valuable asset for both society and the individual by virtue of its traditional purpose as a conveyor of what were described in Thatcherite vocabulary as “Victorian values”—values such as self-help, respectability, and educational seriousness; values that, it was said, had driven forward both the public library and wider society in the nineteenth century (Sigsworth, 1988; Smout, 1992). Intriguingly, this heritage image was promoted at a time when a revolution in information and communication technologies was prompting a utopian futurism in which the public library could, it was urged, play a leading part. The election of a Labour government in 1997 heralded a new strategy for public libraries. Two reports commissioned by the government and published in the late 1990s by the Library and Information Commission (1997; 1998)—*New Library: The People’s Network* and

Building the New Library Network: A Report to Government—proclaimed the pressing need for the public library to embrace emergent digital network technologies.

Arguably, none of the transformations experienced by the public library in its history have been more intense than the one it has experienced in recent years. Today, there is a considerable and growing emphasis on the digital, or electronic, library—the library without walls (Brophy, Craven, & Markland, 2006; Rowley, 1998). The reality of recent library development, however, has been toward the “hybrid,” or “bricks and clicks,” library, where both “virtual” and “physical” space coexist in mutual harmony. Indeed, despite the digital revolution, not for a century has there been so much interest in library buildings, both public and private (Dewe, 2007). Although the electronic library has been advancing speedily, the physical presence of the library is far from vanquished. However, in recent decades both the configuration and look of internal library space have changed noticeably to accommodate new information and communication technologies—from audiovisual materials and photocopiers to interactive technologies and computer terminals. Regarding the latter, it is interesting to note that whereas in some libraries computer access points have been scattered throughout the library space, in others they have been segregated in single rooms, thereby aping the newspaper and magazine reading rooms of yesteryear—spaces that were as popular and information orientated as the computer rooms of today.

As the internet revolution progressed, librarians and architects, acknowledging that “old” architecture doesn’t necessarily mean “bad” architecture, became ever more adept at melding existing—and sometimes very historic—library buildings with the new digital technologies demanded by users. As a result, library renovation projects have become popular and numerous, contrasting markedly with the ethos of the 1960s and 1970s when “redevelopment” and “planned obsolescence” were in vogue (Dewe, 2006, p. 133–154); and it’s not only crumbling Victorian, Edwardian, and interwar library buildings that have been successfully refurbished: buildings from the 1960s and 1970s have also had radical makeovers. The increased emphasis on recycling as well as the availability of more durable and energy-efficient materials has led to the realization that historic libraries can be “made to last,” or at any rate last much longer, this being an aspect of design analogous to the continuity and accumulation of knowledge that libraries espouse. The popularity of preserving library buildings has also chimed with the postmodern celebration of heritage.

Marrying the old and new in the library context appears both natural and logical. Within the library and architectural communities, there is a belief that the library as a building type lends itself well to refurbishment. As the digital revolution gained pace in the 1990s, the mixing of the Victorian with the contemporary was something that worked extremely well

in the renovation and extension of the central library in Croydon. The result of the much-publicized Croydon project was an effective meshing of past and future—"a fine example of how the marriage of a new design with historic architecture can ennoble both" (Glancey, 1993).

But it is not just in the area of "heritage" that the postmodern public library has been fashioned. The postmodern public library is also characterized by the rise of digital and nonprint formats, which have begun to challenge longstanding cultural identities; uncertainty regarding its future purpose; a growing awareness of the need to respond to social pluralism and to provide flexible services to meet the changing tastes and lifestyles of readers; an acceptance of cultural relativism; a strengthening commercial ethos that has begun to eat into its public-service rationale; and a *modus operandi* that borrows much from the worlds of retail and consumerism.⁸

This postmodern turn is nowhere more visible in design terms than in the emergence of the "Idea Store" to replace the traditional brand of the "library." The range of "Idea Stores" opened by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (in London's impoverished East End) represents not only a bold new design concept but also an imaginative semantic shift in the way people think about libraries—in essence, an encouragement and invitation to nontraditional users to make use of the free library service. The prototype Idea Store, in Stratford, was partly a refurbished century-old library. Bright colors, modern furniture, and other alterations gave it a retail ambiance and, more specifically, "the feel of a record shop" (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p. 21). Later units—for example, the Whitechapel Idea Store—have been, and will be, purpose-built structures. One of the main aspects of Idea Stores is their location adjacent to shopping areas, adding to the trend of placing libraries in shopping centers and malls, which, although not new, has escalated rapidly over the past thirty years. The main advantage of "shopping center" libraries, or libraries highly proximate to shopping outlets, is that they increase footfall. The main disadvantage of such libraries, it might be argued, is that they take on a privatized, consumerist image, conflicting with their fundamental "public service" ethos (Goulding, 2006, p. 257). Footfall into Idea Stores had by 2005 increased by more than threefold the number of users that had come to the facilities that the Stores replaced (Evidence of Heather Wills, 2005, p. 17). Endorsement of the Idea Store design concept came with the shortlisting of the Whitechapel building for the 2006 Royal Institute of British Architect's Stirling Prize.

In Kent and Hampshire, libraries have similarly been rebranded as "Discovery Centres" and marketed as being "more than just libraries."⁹ New brands such as the Idea Store and the Discovery Centre, though tapping into the historic strengths of library philosophy and purpose, essentially "reinterpret the role of libraries in a modern setting" (Department of

Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p. 22). Peckham Public Library has become an icon for those convinced of both the need to break with the past and the public popularity of new designs. Winner of the Stirling Prize in 2000, Peckham's boldly colored inverted capital letter "L" shape has come to represent the energy that has characterized purpose-built public library architecture in recent years. Its postmodern playfulness is evocative of a Disneyland fantasy world—a visual commodification of culture that has also been prevalent in the design of children's libraries as comfort zones reminiscent of pop-culture playgrounds. The Peckham Public Library has become a vibrant new civic landmark for the area and, as the cultural commentator Ken Worpole (2004, p. 15) emphasizes, "its breezy stylish image has won the affection and loyalty of many of the areas young people as well as traditional library users."

However, the desire to reinvent the library service with the help of adventurous new designs has not meant that historic aspects of public library design have been ditched. Elements of past library design have found their way into contemporary library buildings. Peckham Public Library's trademark overhang, supported by unobscuring thin steel pillars set at random angles, has created a public space in the tradition of the premodern public square (the same traditional device has been used in the creation of the new British Library's entrance piazza, the message made all the more emphatic by the erection of a campanile to oversee it). Peckham's polypurpose orientation—with accommodation for a wide variety of community cultural activities from ICT training to meeting-room "pods"—is in many respects a throwback to the provision in Victorian libraries of art galleries, museums, and billiard and smoking rooms. Even in Brighton's bold, new, uncompromisingly modern, eco-friendly design (winner of a Prime Minister's Better Buildings Award in 2005), reference to the historic and traditional is blatant. Inside the building the reader is confronted with two impressive, soaring, double-height vaulted-ceiling spaces punctuated by six pillars that mimic the nave and flanking aisles of a medieval cathedral. Through the walls of the corridors that run along each side of the library, open windows have been punched through, giving the feel of the medieval cloister (fig. 5). Inspiration for the cathedral-like interior is said to have been drawn from Henri Labrousse's libraries in nineteenth-century Paris: the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and the *Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève*.¹⁰

At a time of recession and low national and social morale, new libraries are today seen as a means of economic and social stimuli. As in the US where a number of new "downtown" libraries have sprung up in recent years (Mattern, 2007), thereby reversing the earlier centrifugal tendencies of modernist suburbanization, in the UK a clutch of new "statement" central libraries have aimed to breathe new life into city centers. The new central library planned for Birmingham—which will provide the city's



Figure 5. Brighton Jubilee Library (opened in 2005). [Source: Alistair Black (photographed in 2008).]

citizens with the country's largest ever lending library—is seen as a “flagship for . . . regeneration” (Books at Birmingham’s Heart, 2009). Despite the onset of the information age and the reinterpretation of the library “place” as a digital space, library buildings have become popular again. New, eye-catching, flagship libraries—like those in Peckham, Norwich, Newcastle, and Brighton—appear to be defying the predictions of the technological futurists.

CONCLUSION

Like the primary purpose library *collections* have fulfilled since the Enlightenment, early public library *buildings* were analogous to the quest for modernity and progress. In accordance with the contention that “built forms” arise from “social forms,” it can be argued that the popular reading spaces that librarians, architects and library planners constructed symbolized a broad acceptance of the public library as an institution corresponding to a new definition of “public”—located as the institution was in a shared, civic, urban, public-sphere domain devoted to rational learning, debate, and improvement and to an opening up of society.

In considering the symbolism of early British public library buildings, no historian has at length addressed the subject of the library metaphor

or other figurative language.¹¹ Yet, early public libraries in Britain were frequently the subject of figurative, including metaphorical, description by contemporaries. Regarding the perception of public libraries as centers of high culture, it was common for libraries to be cited as “jewels in the crown” of civic society. They were places where readers could access works that summoned up the “spirits of the ages.” Reflecting a democratic ethos, readers in public libraries were treated (supposedly) to a spectrum of political and social opinion: libraries were said to be places where the “wolf could lie down with the lamb.” They were also promoted as “universities of the people.” A practical dimension was also in evidence. To win more widespread support, libraries were often badged as “workshops” and “laboratories.”

Rhetorical figurative vocabulary such as the metaphor has also been mobilized retrospectively. Historians are adept at employing the metaphor to drive home the points they want to make. Historians studying the history of libraries are no different in this regard. In fact, one could argue that being a literary device, the metaphor is more suited to analyses of the library—a literary institution—than of most other subjects. Early college libraries have been termed “arks for learning” (Barber, 1995). Libraries and their librarians generally have been conceptualized, respectively, as “storehouses” and “gatekeepers” of knowledge (Markus, 1993, pp. 172–185). The humble card catalogue of the pre-computer age has been likened to a canal for coping with “book floods” that were apparent as early as the eighteenth century; and additionally, in the domains of the private scholar and the early twentieth-century corporation, the same historian has bestowed upon the card catalogue the descriptions “scholar’s machine” (in the case of the former) and “paper-slip economy” (in the case of the latter) (Krajewski, 2011). Perhaps most famously, early public libraries in the United States have been designated “arsenals of democracy” (Ditzion, 1947). In terms of the recent history of libraries, the notion of library as “place” has been much publicized, even as the rise of the “electronic” library, or the library “without walls,” has catapulted to the fore the notion of library “space” as opposed to the traditional concept of the library in a fixed physical location.

However, unlike these examples, the discussion in this article has not foregrounded overt figurative language. It has not attempted to make extensive use of figures of speech—such as “emporia of culture” or “citadels of science”—to illustrate the development of early public library buildings. Rather, the aim has been to uncover and elaborate the “meanings” of early public library buildings, though without resorting to figurative speech.

In the first sixty years of their development, the highly artistic and confident treatment of public libraries, in a wide variety of styles and freestyle concoctions (some bizarre, admittedly, but these were few in number), reflected a burning belief in the value to material and social advance

of learning, culture, information, and imaginative literature. The built forms of early public libraries played out the pursuit of progress in a civic context. The impressive designs that characterized many library buildings celebrated civic ideals of self-help, citizenship, and duty—ideals which were also promoted in the discourses of the philanthropists who gave such a boost to public library provision in the generation before the First World War.

The monumentality of early public libraries—derived from the impulse to construct places and spaces that served as landmarks of civic achievement—has popularly been seen as a mistake; a frivolous indulgence in public art at the expense of function. However, impressive designs were *meant* to attract, and there is certainly little evidence that they deterred. In addition, the functional aspects of early public library design have been underplayed. Beyond the obvious fact that aesthetically pleasing and impressive buildings are essentially functional in their ability to attract readers, by the late-Victorian age—and even before the pre-First World War library building boom got underway—librarians and library promoters, as well as the new breed of library architect that was beginning to appear at this time, were all thinking hard about issues of efficiency and convenience in library buildings. In short, they were conceptualizing libraries as “machines” as well as “monuments.”

The machine metaphor becomes even more appropriate in the inter-war years, as well as in the 1960s, when library construction was resumed, with gusto, after the war. The “calmer” (relative to the Victorian and Edwardian) designs of the 1920s and 1930s, accompanied by an opening up of space internally (by the Second World War only a handful of lending libraries retained closed-access arrangements) and a concern for the efficient flow of people and books through libraries (notably evident in the design of the Manchester Central Library) mirrored the emergence of a national library “grid” through which books could be exchanged and knowledge disseminated. “Stripped” versions of historic styles also announced the early influence of modernism on library design.

Although the public library has never lost its civic localism, the image of the individual library as a node in a national library network was given greater depth by the construction of a welfare state after the Second World War. During the golden age of investment in the public library, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, designers adopted modernism uncompromisingly. This is not surprising, given that, generally, public library architects have from the outset designed in the fashion of the day; and have placed less emphasis on style than on generic attributes like solidity, refinement, good taste, convenience, and the construction of structures that were *built to last*. However, what is striking is the homogeneity of 1960s—and, to a degree, 1970s—design, in stark contrast to the use of both the classical and the Gothic for early libraries, the eclecticism of the

pre–First World War generation of buildings, the experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s, and the unpredictability of designs in recent years. The general air of boldness and optimism that characterized the 1960s rubbed off on public library provision and design. Modernist library buildings reflected the prevailing climate of modernization, in terms of both the perceived efficacy of technological development and the good prospects for social improvement.

As the confidence of the 1960s faded, the public library and its built form moved into a revolutionary era. Reflecting the pluralism, informatization, commercialization, consumerization, and heritage aspects of postmodernity, public library buildings (including the designs of many recycled, renovated libraries) have become more playful, relaxed, and digitally defined, adopting a mix of adventure park, retail, and “contemporary domestic” themes and combining physical and virtual space. They have also become less predictable, frequently rejecting the box-like structures that dominated both modernist and premodernist eras. However, as new flagship libraries—in Peckham, Norwich Brighton, Tower Hamlets and elsewhere—show, both the lure of monumentality and the desire to make statements through structures are as potent today as they were in the institution’s formative, Victorian age.

NOTES

1. This article arises out of a research project conducted jointly between Liverpool University and Leeds Metropolitan University, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) between 2004 and 2008. A major feature of the research was the construction of a database of more than a thousand early (pre-1939) public library buildings, whether extant, destroyed, or recycled for other purposes. The full results of the research have been published in Black, Pepper, & Bagshaw (2009).
2. As in the US in respect of Carnegie libraries; see Van Slyck (1998).
3. On the history of library cooperation, see Bunch (2006).
4. For a fuller account of the Manchester Public Library as an antecedent of the information society, see Black (2008).
5. Aside from formally permitting public libraries to provide nonbook formats and services, the Act also officially enabled library authorities to collaborate with each other and to form joint authorities if they so wished.
6. Commentary accompanying a photograph of the inquiry hall in the city’s new library building, City of Newcastle upon Tyne, *Report of the city librarian* (1968–69).
7. Anonymous contributor to “Directive on Public Library Buildings” (2005), Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.
8. On the postmodern public library, see Black (2000), pp. 141–168.
9. See www3.hants.gov.uk/discoverycentres.htm.
10. The new Jubilee Library in Brighton (March 3, 2005). Retrieved November 18, 2009, from www.lja.uk.com/BrightonLibrary/press1161b.htm; Showcase library opens in Brighton (2005).
11. However, the subject has been addressed in the context of the United States. Nardini (2001) explains that in the United States early library metaphors were tools for promoting public libraries to doubters and the uninitiated, and revolved around church, school, and university, and that these were later supplemented by metaphors drawn from the world of business.

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