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## Accessing Library Space: Spatial Rhetorics From the U.S. to France and Back Again

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ACCESSING LIBRARY SPACE: SPATIAL RHETORICS FROM THE U.S. TO  
FRANCE AND BACK AGAIN

By

Emily M. Simmons

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

In Rhetoric, Theory and Culture

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## **Abstract**

The exterior environments of libraries are sites rich for study, as they often hold histories of inequality that affect present-day access and use in complex, layered ways. The particularities of the environment through which community members pass before entering a library have an impact on the experience within the library. If libraries wish to remain public spaces dedicated to the strengthening of democracy, they should extend their focus beyond their walls to the surrounding neighborhood. This study puts into conversation the fields of spatial rhetorics, accessibility, and critical geography. Four topoi were developed to assess the accessibility of exterior library spaces. These topoi are wayfinding signage, building signage, wheelchair accessibility, and cultural landscape. These topoi are applied to the examination of library sites in a French city and a rural library district in Michigan. The recommendations resulting from this study include an examination of spatial rhetorics and a geo-spatial survey.

# 1 Introduction

To the modern American mind, libraries are vibrant places of community, research, and scholarship. They are situated as democratic places where anyone can come to utilize resources, build community, and find entertainment and information. Who has access to knowledge in the form of books, the internet, and other cultural artifacts held in libraries matters. However, despite being praised as democratic institutions, libraries have a long history as sites where power and politics are contested. They are not neutral. Explicitly or implicitly, an assortment of factors renders the knowledge and resources held by libraries inaccessible to certain groups.

For the majority of library history, libraries have been private collections held by the aristocracy. It was only during the Renaissance that the idea of a public library first started emerging. Even then, the first “public” libraries were often formed when the holders of private collections made their collections available to a small number of elite scholars. As historian Matthew Battles writes, “In the terms of fifteenth-century Florence, however, the word “public” refers not to the masses, but to that stage upon which the church, the nobility, and powerful mercantile families performed their roles and wielded their authority. The library...was public in this sense: that the work of scholars who used it would benefit society in a new and important way” (67-68). It would take many more years until the idea of the public library began to emerge in a form we would recognize, effectively continuing to exclude the vast majority of the populace.



Even as the public library movement gained momentum in America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Jim Crow era laws and policies barred Black community members from accessing many public, state-funded libraries. This is a history the modern library institution must contend with. The ways policies have created a material reality in which access to libraries was denied to large groups of citizens are still present in the very design of some library buildings and the communities in which they exist.

While evolving policies, such as civil rights legislation and the Americans with Disabilities Act, have formally increased access to public libraries, various factors still conspire to restrict, even if unintentionally, certain groups from accessing the resources within.

To move, however modestly, toward the ideal vision of the public library, I conduct an examination of the spatial rhetorics of libraries in Toulouse, France, and develop a set of criteria that can be used to analyze the accessibility of a wide range of library spaces. These topoi specifically address the exteriors of libraries and the ways library buildings inhabit space and interact with their communities and neighborhoods. Second, I apply these topoi to three libraries in Houghton County, in the Keweenaw Peninsula of Upper Michigan. Last, I make a two-fold recommendation to all libraries that wish to become more aware of their spatial rhetorics. First, I recommend an examination of the spatial rhetorics of the exteriors of library sites to help library workers understand and mitigate the ways library buildings are inadvertently inaccessible. Second, I suggest the employment of a geo-spatial mapping survey to center the voices and experiences of

underserved community members. In doing this, I lay a footpath for library workers to follow toward an inclusive, accessible examination of libraries within community spaces. My hope is that this thesis will provide a standard for libraries to utilize when assessing their building's spatial existence in a given community context.

## **2 Theory**

### **2.1 Significance of Study**

While many argue that libraries as physical spaces are becoming a relic of the past and can be replaced by Amazon or Google, this is simply untrue. We live in a time when digital technology use and development seem to be taking over our lives and media literacy is crucial to the stability of our democracy. Simultaneously, protests, such as the marches stemming from the Black Lives Matter movement and the 2017 Women's March, to name only a few, are moving from the internet back onto the public space of the streets. Consequently, the placement of libraries in neighborhoods and the extent to which they are accessible to those who could most benefit from their services are matters of great concern.

There is a gap in literature addressing library accessibility issues. Plenty of research has been conducted studying the accessibility and usability of library websites, databases, and other digitally-mediated resources. There also exists a strong push to ensure ease of movement throughout library spaces for those who are unfamiliar with the space and, especially, for those with physical disabilities. To this end, many studies examine and suggest changes to digital library spaces and interior library spaces. These studies are crucial to improving library services.

However, a critical piece is left out of the examination of the library user experience. Libraries do not exist in vacuums. The exterior environments of libraries are sites rich for

study, as they often hold histories of inequality that affect present-day access and use in complex, layered ways. The particularities of the environment through which community members pass before entering a library are sure to have an impact on the experience within the library—they may even affect if the user ever makes it to or through the front entrance of the library. If libraries wish to remain public spaces dedicated to the strengthening of democracy, they should extend their focus beyond their own walls to the surrounding neighborhood.

Even with the rise of digital technologies mediating library work and space, the material form is of huge importance. That cannot be forgotten or ignored. Library staff should be attentive to and concerned with the material realities of their broader environment and the ways these realities interact with the intersectional identities of potential patrons. We are all embodied. As poet Adrienne Rich writes, “...I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (212). The work of libraries is embodied, in place.

To build my study, I put into conversation the fields of spatial rhetorics, accessibility, and critical geography. I have chosen to theoretically situate my study in this diverse array of disciplines in an attempt to acknowledge the complexity of the histories and stakeholders at play.

## 2.2 Spatial Rhetorics

Rhetorician Kathleen Ethel Welch’s article “Technical Communication and Physical Location: Topoi and Architecture in the Computer Classrooms” models a rhetorical analysis of physical spaces’ influence on user experience. After conducting site visits, she lays out five criteria, or topoi, for evaluating the spatial rhetorics of early computer classrooms. The importance of this analysis, Welch writes, is to “contribute data to the community” to “standardize and speed the construction” of similar spaces in the future (336). Welch’s study is positioned at an important time in the history of computer classrooms—early enough in the rise of this type of space that her work was influential and easily applied, but with enough existing examples to have some trial and error to build upon.

Following Welch’s example, the present study aims to identify criteria that can be used to evaluate library spaces. Establishing relevant topoi is a crucial first step in understanding the spatial rhetorics of a library as it exists within a neighborhood, city, or otherwise defined community. While Welch’s study addressed a newly emerging type of space, library sites have existed within communities for centuries. Thus, the context out of which library topoi will be constructed has a higher level of complexity.

At first glance, Welch’s use of topoi is perplexing. The concept of topoi reaches back to Aristotle. The Greek word, meaning place, was appropriated by Aristotle as a name for a group of argumentative patterns for arriving at a desired conclusion (Rapp).

Looking further into the history of topoi throughout the centuries provides some ways of understanding how this term can inform the field of spatial rhetorics. The editors of *The Rhetorical Tradition* note that commonplaces, an English rendition of topoi, are “the ‘locations’ of standard categories of arguments” (1630). If categories of arguments can be physically located, I suggest that physical spaces themselves can make arguments. This is how I conceptualize the workings of spatial rhetorics. In this study I seek to explore what arguments are made by the physical design of spaces inhabited by libraries. Additionally, I am interested in the role that recognizing patterns (topoi) can have in helping us “read” these spaces.

Similarly, Anis Bawarshi describes topoi as “rhetorical habitats,” which “[frame] communal knowledge” (104). In this study, I seek to find out what communal knowledge is located in the spaces surrounding libraries. What can we learn about the patterns and priorities of these habitats?

Rhetorician Carolyn R. Miller writes, “the commonplace serves literally as a place where the familiar can be ‘brought into contact with’ the unfamiliar or with transformations of the familiar” (132). In the spirit of the commonplace, I suggest a close reading of the everyday spaces surrounding libraries. Zooming in to take a close look at the spaces most people stroll through as they go about their daily lives renders these familiar places strange. Asking what the streets and signs and sidewalks are trying to tell us is an unfamiliar practice. But through this unfamiliar process, I hope to make familiar places

legible, and, in so doing, to render more citizens literate to the arguments of their communities.

The essays included in the “Locations” sections of *Relations Location Positions*, edited by Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon, offer broad theoretical grounding for the importance of location in composition instruction and study. The editors remind us that built environments are connected to “the exercise of power” (174). Individuals who are differently situated to power structures in these spaces will have different experiences of these built environments, so these connections should be studied to gain a better understanding of their intricacies.

The design of space has consequences. Abigail A. Van Slyck, professor of art history, examines the trends of desirable library design and placement following the advent of Carnegie libraries in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In *Free to All: Carnegie Library American Culture*, Van Slyck also suggests the practice of “considering buildings as components of the larger cultural landscape. We must view buildings in their immediate surroundings, no matter how stylistically or aesthetically incongruous the resulting images seem” (xxi). How a single building, such as a library building, interacts with its neighbors is important to pay attention to.

Sociologist Tony Bennett examines the exhibitionary complex, which emerged alongside public museums in the nineteenth century, and its role in “forming a technology of vision which served not to atomize and disperse the crowd but to regulate it, and to do so by rendering it visible to itself” (81). The way libraries frame and render their users visible is

an area of consideration. The systems of visibility operating within library spaces covertly enforces particular classist norms. The design of library buildings, especially where older library buildings are concerned, continues to reflect the exclusionary, capitalist, classist, racist, and sexist foundations of the institution.

Take for example the philosophy behind the phenomena of Carnegie libraries. It is difficult to argue that Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic donations, resulting in the construction of 1,679 public libraries across the United States, had an overall negative effect on the people and communities they served. However, by digging beneath the surface of the matter, a complex foundation to these American institutions is uncovered. Carnegie, in funding so many libraries across the country, hoped to "create a disciplined work force" to emulate his own rise from obscurity to respectable community standing (Van Slyck 65). This intention is shown through suggested library designs that valued efficiency over grand architectural statements.

Local city planners also injected their own cultural politics into the design of Carnegie-funded libraries. In many communities, there was conflict between conservative and progressive stakeholders, with the conservative faction wanting libraries to continue to be symbols of prestige and culture and the progressive faction lobbying for branch libraries to bring access to books to the working class. Some library boards solidified their classist biases through design and funding decisions, constructing awe-inspiring central libraries that were practically inaccessible to the majority of the population and adding branch libraries as lackluster afterthoughts.



Reflecting this struggle to control the design of library buildings is the use of library space as “a public place where the community displayed its cultural value...and where appropriate social behaviors were modeled and learned,” according to historian Wayne A. Wiegand (164). This takes us back to Bennett’s exhibitionary complex. Where efforts are underway to remake the working class in the image of the more privileged, social control of one kind or another is at play. Many library board members and even some librarians wanted to press middle-class values and behaviors on the working-class patrons. Van Slyck summarizes these pursuits: “Carnegie’s brand of reform did not serve to eradicate poverty per se, but worked on eradicating its outward appearance” (109, 110). The public library’s history in the United States is tangled up with classism and respectability politics—a legacy that can be seen in library placement and design.

### **2.3 Libraries as Public Spaces**

Claiming to be public, democratic spaces is a politically charged stance for libraries to take. In upholding ideals of democracy and free speech, libraries are participating (at least nominally) in a critical, liberatory practice, which the field of critical geography takes up. To the extent that libraries inhabit physical space, this claim of democracy involves libraries in the work of critical geography. I believe libraries can play a pivotal role in shaping and equalizing community space, starting with their own buildings and extending out into the surrounding community. In “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” Michel Foucault writes, “Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (361). Here Foucault is addressing confessional,

or religious, architecture, a departure from his frequented topic of disciplinary architecture. As far as communal life and exercises of power go, libraries surely fall somewhere on the spectrum between religious and disciplinary spaces. The ways that library space is an exercise of power, and whom that power is working for and against, needs to be examined.

Many writers and scholars have noted the rarity of having a space in a community that is free for individuals to spend as much time in as they like without feeling pressure to buy something. Public space is frequently overlooked and easily eliminated, as historian and author Rebecca Solnit notes:

Few remember that 'the right of the people peaceably to assemble' is listed in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution...as critical to a democracy....when public spaces are eliminated, so ultimately is the public; the individual has ceased to be a citizen capable of experiencing and acting in common with fellow citizens. Citizenship is predicated on the sense of having something in common with strangers, just as democracy is built upon trust in strangers. And public space is the space we share with strangers, the unsegregated zone (217-218).

Public space is critical to functioning democracies. With the adoption of the Library Bill of Rights by the American Library Association Council in 1939, libraries have made an explicit commitment to providing public space where people can freely assemble. The Library Bill of Rights includes a call to challenge censorship and to “make [exhibit

spaces and meeting rooms] available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use” (Library Bill of Rights).

Christopher Platt, Chief Branch Library Officer at New York Public Library, reiterates this obligation: “anybody should be able to walk into any public library and find what they need to start a revolution” (#ReadersUnite!). This is a lofty and radical goal that speaks to the mission of the library to be truly for the people.

Not all libraries uphold this standard equally, of course. Library worker Reed Garber-Pearson tweets, “When we advocate for Libraries as a whole, it makes an assumption that all libraries are inherently good. But libraries and library workers do harm” (@alwaysreeding). There is ongoing work to be done to make spaces truly democratic, and to ensure that all library workers are aware of this mission. That, unfortunately, is a topic for another paper. This is just a necessary reminder that while the overall mission of libraries bends towards social justice, individual libraries work toward that goal at different paces.

One of the ways library workers can work toward this goal of liberation is to help members of the community gain literacy in navigating and reading public space and design. As Solnit notes above, we as an American society have forgotten the role public space and free assembly plays in our civic duties. Library workers can advocate for bringing these practices back to the public consciousness, therefore expanding the awareness of the foundational importance of libraries themselves. Additionally, as

changes are made to city spaces, library workers and users can assert their voices in the conversation for a more accessible, democratically designed city.

User-centered design is a crucial aspect of the end, or purpose, of libraries. John Wild's discussion of techne in his article "Plato's Theory of Techne: A Phenomenological Interpretation" is relevant here. One of the defining characteristics of a techne, according to Wild's understanding of Plato, is a useful end (259). At first, it seems obvious that the end of a library is an orderly, well-stocked, well-preserved collection of texts and, in our digital age, a database that seamlessly connects users to journal articles, e-books, and other digital sources across multiple platforms. However, I contend that all the order in the world is good for nothing if the library building itself can't be accessed by the community. Without use, a library is not serving its purpose. Wild writes, "Each art has its own specific work to do. The finished temple is the work of the building art" (258). The work of librarianship is not to have the most complete collection, therefore; it is a library that is well-used for being easily accessible to those who need it the most; it is a library that seeps laughter and music and discussions of tax forms and social justice because it has been deemed the meeting space a community needs. If the fulfillment of patrons' needs is the end and aim of librarianship then designing buildings, planning programs, ensuring accessibility, and purchasing technology and equipment with user-centered principles in mind is only logical. Librarians are not the intended end users of the system. Libraries exist for the sake of patron use.

In the user-centered library, a number of interrelated concerns need to be juggled, including literacy, physical space, and representation. If these issues are overlooked, the patron or group of patrons who are affected by the oversight may feel that the library is not for them.

It is sometimes perceptual, not physical, factors that impede access. French librarian Anne-Marie Bertrand examines the need to rebrand French libraries as *médiathèques* to distinguish them from the pre-World War II *bibliothèques*' history of alienating most users through overly scholarly collections (476). While this seems to be a small, semantic change, it indicates concern with and responsiveness to the affective connection patrons have to library spaces. Not only did the terminology change, the physical presentation of the institution responded to the changing needs of the community.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “the built environment clarifies social roles and relations. People know better who they are and how they ought to behave when the arena is humanly designed rather than nature’s raw stage” (102). Critical geography asks what the built environment tells us about our roles and relations and how these messages can be made more empowering to those who are currently marginalized by the design of the space.

The ways libraries have been made inaccessible to various groups over the years, stripping them of their value as democratic spaces, needs to be acknowledged. Stories of segregated libraries are not hard to find. In his memoir, *Black Boy*, Richard Wright uses his experiences growing up in the segregated American south to draw attention to the

history of state-sanctioned discrimination, including the banning of black community members from public libraries. Wright recounts the story of forging a note so that he could take out books from a local library, consequently beginning his life-long journey of study and activism (246, 247). Similarly, Virginia Woolf recounts the story of getting turned away from a university library because she is a woman. She makes the observation, “Intellectual freedom depends upon material things” (118).

What does it really look like to be committed to maintaining and furthering democratic space? Wright tells about the role reading played in his childhood in the south and his political formation in Chicago: “I did not want to feel, like an animal in a jungle, that the whole world was alien and hostile. I did not want to make individual war or individual peace. So far I had managed to keep humanly alive through transfusions from books” (318). Libraries, when made accessible, contain life-changing and life-sustaining materials and services. No group of people should be denied access to these resources. While formal legal segregation may be (mostly) in the past, its effects linger in city design and funding patterns. Libraries have the potential to be spaces of inclusion for groups that are excluded from other public arenas. Dr. Andreas Vårheim, professor of language and culture, focuses on immigrant populations and their use of library spaces and programs to create social capital. Similarly, Svanhild Aabø et al. show the potential library spaces can have for “equalizing the possibilities of being an active citizen across social and economic differences” (25). These positive and inclusive uses of libraries can be held as examples and models.

## 2.4 Accessibility

There are numerous facets of accessibility and usability that need to be considered in this study. Accessibility cannot be discussed without a concern for the intersection of identities that underserved groups hold. Disability studies scholar Dan Goodley writes “Intersectionality is about not simply bringing together these markers and their theoretical responses, but also considering how each supports the constitution of one another” (44). While I don’t have the space in this paper to fully explore the ways the intersections of identities (including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability) impact access to library space, I do want to acknowledge that this is a complex issue that needs to be carefully considered. Two of the main frames with which I am addressing accessibility in this paper are disability and race.

First, as physical spaces, libraries need to be physically accessible to those with physical disabilities. Not only should buildings be accessible, they should communicate this accessibility clearly, through measures such as clear signage and prominently placed accessibility information on websites. Disability studies offers the helpful perspective of locating disability “firmly and squarely in the social world” (Goodley, xi). Further, Goodley writes, “When folks with impairments find their ambitions, desires, or activities restricted by physical environments that put up a host of attitudinal and structural barriers, then disablism (the exclusion of people with impairments) emerges” (xi). This frame is important to my study to correctly locate the problems of library inaccessibility, not on an individual’s inability to be able to successfully navigate the space, but in the

space's design that renders it inaccessible to certain individuals. Disability is a "cultural, economic, and political phenomena;" it is not any disabled individual's fault or individual problem (xi).

Disability scholars argue that designing spaces and technology that are accessible by those with disabilities and those who are neurodivergent will result in designs that are more functional and usable by the population as a whole. Deaf human-centered designer Elise Roy claims, "when we design for disability first, we often stumble upon solutions that are not only inclusive, but also are often better than when we design for the norm" (00:06:01–00:06:30). Accessible design is better design.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) advocates for library users, saying that many improvements to access for disabled patrons do not necessarily require large amounts of money, but that solutions can "often be found through a change of staff attitude and thinking in new ways" (3). Inaccessibility ranges from explicit policies that restrict certain groups from using library spaces and services to more inadvertent yet equally malignant design choices that limit accessibility. Heather Hill, professor of information and media studies, conducted a content analysis of literature addressing the intersections of disability and library accessibility. While library professionals are aware of the need to make library spaces and service more accessible, there is a lack of "research directly [involving] people with disabilities" (140).

Next, race is another important factor affecting library accessibility, both historically and continuing into the present day. While technically integrating their libraries in 1962,



Montgomery, Alabama, removed all the chairs in the library, “effectively [eliminating] any possibility of races sharing tables” (D. Battles, 126). This move worked to comply with orders to integrate while sending a clear message that the Black population was still not welcome in the libraries.

We have already considered examples relating to past segregation of libraries. However, libraries are still made inaccessible based on race and country of origin in more subtle ways. Library and wayfinding signage needs to take into consideration that language barriers will be an issue in effectively communicating their messages.

Another concern relevant to many underserved groups is the availability of transportation. Walkability is an important component of accessibility where large populations do not have access to other modes of transportation. Solnit writes, “Walkers are ‘practitioners of the city,’ for the city is made to be walked, [De Certeau] wrote. A city is a language...and walking is the act of speaking that language....De Certeau's metaphors suggests a frightening possibility: that if the city is a language spoken by walkers, then a postpedestrian city not only has fallen silent but risks becoming a dead language...” (213). For many underserved groups, walking can be a primary form of transportation, therefore accessibility by pedestrians needs to be accounted for when examining library sites.

The next sections of this paper will develop topoi, explore case studies, and make recommendations. The following are guiding questions that inform and frame my approach. What criteria should be used to analyze the spatial rhetorics of libraries and

their positions in their communities? How can libraries enact theories of location and the material to improve access to the service they provide their patrons? How can libraries use geo-spatial technologies and mapping to understand spatial rhetorics? To summarize, how do places speak, and how can we develop practices of listening?

## 3 Case Studies

### 3.1 Methods

Following the example presented in Welch's study of early computer classrooms, a central part of the present study consisted of conducting site visits to identify criteria relevant to the spatial rhetorics of libraries. Anticipated criteria included proximity to public transportation, walkability of neighborhood, wayfinding signage, perceived safety of neighborhood, access to other services nearby, demographics of neighborhood, parking, and building signage. Over the course of the site visits, four topoi rose to the forefront in importance when considering the accessibility of these libraries: wayfinding signage, building signage, wheelchair accessibility of entrances, and cultural landscape.

Carter and Cromley articulate a method for conducting site visits, using the term "cultural landscape" to point to the benefit of "seeing buildings in their larger contexts....You will find that patterns are much more easily observable if the larger landscape is studied." (13). Expanding the scope of a site visit to include the surrounding buildings and attendant features has its benefits: "Regional, environmental, and social differences are thrown into relief when sets of buildings are compared" (Carter and Cromley 13). This method, with its integral focus on the broader landscape, is valuable to a study encompassing sites in both France and the United States. The wide lens offered by this approach will make space for the differences and nuances that naturally arise between sites.

After devising a preliminary list of spatial topoi, I made a template on which to record observations during site visits. Site visits were undertaken by determining the public transportation stop (metro station, bus stop, tram stop) nearest to each library site. This decision was made because vulnerable populations are more likely to have access to and to utilize public transportation than to drive. I also chose to use public transportation, because as an American living in France for ten months, it was the only mode of transportation—besides walking—readily available to me.

Upon arrival at the nearest public transportation stop, I began my observation of the cultural landscape, taking careful note of wayfinding signage directing users toward the library, surrounding businesses and services, ease of navigation from the public transportation to the library, walkability of the route from public transportation to the library, and other factors. Walkability was further determined using an online tool called Walk Score, which factors in elements such as whether streets are designed for bicyclist and pedestrians as well as transit, compactness of neighborhood, and mixed use spaces. Availability of parking lots and street parking was noted as well.

Additionally, wheelchair accessibility and other accessibility accommodations (such as tactile guide paths) were observed. As often as possible, I tried to go beyond noting the simple fact of whether a library was technically wheelchair accessible or not, but under what sort of conditions it was made accessible. It is also important to note that many sidewalks in France are inaccessible to wheelchair users due to extremely narrow width and obstructions in the form of posts, bollards, and parked cars, to name only a few.

As an additional method of gathering data and keeping notes, I photographed the sites, making sure to take images of relevant signs and unique features. Site visits were conducted from June 19 to June 27, 2018. After the data was collected during the site visits, it was digitized and compiled.

After compiling and examining the data, thereby determining the spatial rhetorics relevant to Toulouse libraries, an attempt was made to apply these topoi to the libraries in the Portage Lake District, namely three library sites in Houghton County. Similar site visit methods were employed when visiting the Portage Lake District Library sites upon my return to the United States.

Demographics must be considered in such a study as this. Toulouse is a large city with a population of 440,000. According to a statistical report published by the Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, in 2015, 11% of the French population “had at least one migrant parent” (Brutel). For this reason, immigrants are a population that needs to be taken into consideration.

Compare this to the Portage Lake District, encompassing, for this study, Houghton County in the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Houghton has a population of around 8,000, and Hancock, 4,500. According to the United States Census Bureau, the poverty rate for Houghton County is around 20% (“Houghton County”). Poor community members make up one underserved group in the area. Additionally, Michigan Technological University has an enrollment of about 62% international students in their

graduate programs (“Enrollment”). International students bring a unique set of concerns to a rural community, rendering them a marginalized group as well.

## **3.2 Toulouse Site Visits**

Site visits to the twenty libraries in Toulouse were conducted to gain an understanding of the spatial rhetorics at play in a large French city. While an expansive preliminary list of topoi were proposed before, the site visits provided a winnowing tool. Ultimately, most topoi fell away, and four topoi rose to the forefront in importance when considering the accessibility of these libraries: wayfinding signage, building signage, wheelchair accessibility of entrances, and cultural landscape.

### **3.2.1 The Topoi**

Four main types of signage were identified in relation to the libraries in Toulouse, including one type of wayfinding sign, one branding logo, and two styles of building signs.

1. The first is a city wayfinding sign. This type of sign, seen in Figure 3.1, is common in European cities and serves the purpose of aiding pedestrians and drivers in navigating to points of interest within cities and neighborhoods. These signs are shaped as horizontal rectangles, with one end coming to a point to serve as an arrow, pointing toward the relevant destination. They are white with black borders and give the name of the destination in simple black font. Due to their standardized, highly visible

design, they provide an excellent means of aiding navigation, especially to individuals who are unfamiliar with the area.



Figure 3.1 Wayfinding signs in Toulouse help aid navigation within the city

## 2. Building signage

- a. The second is the stylized “B” logo that is used to signify city of Toulouse libraries or *bibliothèques* (“B” stands for *bibliothèque*). This “B,” shown in Figure 3.2, is stylized in the form of a green and orange rectangle with a line bisecting it horizontally. This symbol is used frequently on signs, windows, doors, and promotional material. It provides the library with a quick, visual identity, which can be recognized from a distance. A strong visual marker makes library branches highly legible to a broad range of community members. For those considered illiterate in the traditional sense of not being able to read the given language—

children and foreigners who have not learned the language for whatever reason, just to name two such populations—this sort of imagery renders the library accessible.



Figure 3.2 Bibliothèque logo for Toulouse libraries increases the legibility of library buildings

- i. A variation of this “B” logo, shown in Figure 3.3, is used to identify *médiathèques* as unique within the library system in Toulouse. In this variation, the logo is turned on its side to form a stylized “M.” Often, the colors of these variations deviates from the standard green and orange, including a red and gold variation at the José Cabanis location and a white and gray variation at the Grand M location. This variation indicates association with the wider library institution, while also signaling a special status. As discussed in the previous section, médiatheques occupy a



unique and important place in the history of French libraries.



Figure 3.3 Médiathèque variation of Toulouse library logo connects médiathèques to the library system while marking them as distinct

- b. The second category of building signage, shown in Figure 3.4, is a rigid projecting sign, which protrudes from the side of the library building for increased visibility to pedestrians walking down the street. Typically, these signs have the stylized “B” logo and either the word “bibliothèque” or “bibliothèque” plus the name of the library. Additionally, these signs occasionally include “Mairie de Toulouse” and the red and gold city flag to indicate the library’s status as an official municipal building.



Figure 3.4 Rigid projecting sign on a Toulouse library increases visibility

- c. The final category of signage identified in association with Toulouse libraries is a freestanding sign listing the library's hours of operation. These signs, as shown in Figure 3.5, are located on sidewalks or in courtyards, often when the library building itself is set back from the street. This type of sign increases visibility of the library building from a distance. Much like the projecting signs, these signs are usually branded with the "B" logo and the "Mairie de Toulouse" text and flag, lending them credibility and visual companionship with the libraries.



Figure 3.5 Freestanding signs increase visibility of library buildings

3. Wheelchair accessibility measures range from providing elevators and ramps where entrances have steps to automatic doors. Accessibility seems to be a contentious issue throughout France. According to a 2013 article, a law was passed in 2005 to require improved access to public transportation and business. Businesses had ten years to comply with the legislation, but at the time of publication, many had failed to make changes toward accessibility (Flint). Retrofitting an ancient country to modern standards of accessibility seems to be an insurmountable inconvenience.
4. Cultural landscapes vary greatly throughout Toulouse. For analysis purposes, the library sites are categorized into three groups: “quartier”

(neighborhood), “centre-ville” (city center), and médiathèque. Contextual elements are diverse between and within these categories.

### **3.2.2 Analysis of Topoi in Toulouse**

None of the library sites were observed as having all four types of signage present.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that there is some room for error, especially in the case of the white wayfinding signs, as these signs could be placed along any number of routes leading to the library from multiple beginning points. In most cases, only one route—the most direct from the nearest public transportation stop to the library—was examined.

Eleven out of twenty libraries had white wayfinding signs in the surrounding neighborhood. Two of the three médiathèques, two of the three centre-ville libraries, and five out of fourteen quartier libraries lacked this type of signage. This lack of wayfinding signage makes library branches difficult to find, especially for individuals who are unfamiliar with the given neighborhood.

All twenty libraries had the “B” logo or its “M” variation present in some manner, no matter how small—such as a barely noticeable decal on a sliding glass door. This speaks to the importance of this type of strong visual branding.

Ten out of twenty libraries had projecting signs. Two of the three médiathèques, two of the three centre-ville libraries, and six out of fourteen quartier libraries lacked this type of signage.

Six out of twenty libraries had freestanding signs. Two of the three médiathèques, two of the three centre-ville libraries, and ten out of fourteen quartier libraries lacked this type of signage.

Only two of the twenty libraries are not wheelchair accessible. One of these is a quartier library located near an apartment complex a great distance from city center. This library is noticeably old and outdated. The other non-accessible library is a centre-ville library located in the historic district of the city. Of the eighteen libraries that are wheelchair accessible, fifteen are wheelchair accessible either with their main entrances having no steps, or by providing a ramp directly to the main entrance. The remaining three libraries necessitate the use of an elevator to gain access to the library. None of the centre-ville libraries' main entrances can be accessed by wheelchair users without the aid of an elevator.

One of these centre-ville libraries, the *Bibliothèque d'Étude et du Patrimoine*, has placed the elevator entrance in the third building back from the front of the complex. The library has an impressive exterior, with a large, empty courtyard leading to a set of broad steps and large, imposing doors. Columns and a frieze lend an additional sense of grandeur and importance to the building. The façade is indicative of the contents and atmosphere within the building: it manages the city's historical collections and serves as a depository for all regional publications. Relegating the wheelchair accessible entrance to the back of the complex over a rough courtyard, indicated only by sparse signage, shows greater worth given to appearances than accessibility.

Four out of the fourteen quartier libraries are located within some sort of neighborhood or community center. Various names given to these places include “centre culturel” (cultural center), “mairie de quartier” (neighborhood town hall), “mairie annexe” (town hall annex), “espace [quartier name]” (neighborhood space), “maison de quartier” (community center), “municipale annexe” (city annex), and “centre social” (community center). These four libraries occupied one or more rooms within a larger building with spaces designated for community activities such as exposition galleries, youth activities, and jewelry making workshops. Out of these four libraries, two had only one type of signage, and one had only two types of signage.

One city center library is also located in a complex housing various city offices, including police administration and birth, marriage, and death certificate processing. This centre-ville library only had one out of the four types of signage. We see here a tentative correlation between cultural landscape and signage. Libraries that are housed within neighborhood centers tend to have less wayfinding and building signage. In some instances, a wayfinding sign exists for the community center, but not for the library housed within the center. Therefore, if an individual knows that the library is part of the community center, they would be able to navigate to the library following those signs. This requires a certain familiarity with the area that not all users are guaranteed to have.

In the realm of signage, the Toulouse library system offers an excellent reference point. For other library systems looking to create a strong visual brand Toulouse sets a great precedence. Their logo is clean and recognizable from a distance. It can be transformed to



accommodate both médiathèques and bibliothèques; it is versatile. It is easily scaled. It can stand alone or with other visual and textual marks to provide necessary information. The use of wayfinding signage in European cities is also an example that could be adopted by American cities. Standardized wayfinding signs leading to various public buildings and points of interest are assets to the community. One criterion Toulouse libraries should not be recognized as a standard for is accessibility. The library system in Toulouse has room for improvement on this front.

### **3.3 Houghton Site Visits**

In this section, the topoi that were developed through site visits in Toulouse, France, will be applied to a small, rural community in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This measure is being taken to demonstrate how the topoi are transferrable to a drastically different cultural context from the one in which they were developed.

Three unique sites in Portage Lake district served as the scope for this portion of the study. The first site is the main district library located in downtown Houghton. This site was constructed and opened to the public in 2006. The second site is the Carnegie Museum of the Keweenaw. This building was the original public library in Houghton. Funded by Andrew Carnegie and built in 1909, it housed the public library until the new building was opened in 2006. This site now functions as a historical museum for the area. Its history as the area's first library building and as one of the notorious Carnegie libraries makes it a valuable contribution to the study. The third site is Hancock public library, housed in the Hancock public high school. In August 2018, Portage Lake District

Library and the Hancock School Board announced their agreement to have Portage Lake District Library assume management of library services beginning November 2018 (Katerberg). This site was chosen to examine the ways that rural library districts evolve and adapt to best serve the needs of their communities.

Compared to Toulouse sites, wayfinding signs in the Portage Lake district were sparse. Two wayfinding signs were found for the main district library. First, is a blue sign mounted on the corner of a downtown building, seen in Figure 3.6. This sign has the national library symbol, the word “library,” and an arrow pointing down the street to where the library is located three blocks away. Second, is a small sign that reads “public library” with an arrow pointing toward the building’s location. This sign is posted with two other wayfinding signs under the “Downtown Houghton” header and a significantly larger sign for the Isle Royale National Park headquarters.



Figure 3.6 Wayfinding sign in Houghton utilizes the national library symbol



In association with the Hancock library, there is a wayfinding sign directing drivers to the school. So while there is not library-specific wayfinding signage, there is a sign that will guide you to the library if you know it is housed within the school building. As seen in Toulouse, familiarity with the cultural landscape will aid in navigation when wayfinding signs are scarce.

The libraries in this study had no unifying building signage. The current Houghton library building has a large “Portage Lake District Library” sign above the main entrance, shown in Figure 3.7. The book return bins are emblazoned with the national library symbol—the closest thing these libraries seem to have to a visual brand. The Carnegie library has the words “Public Library” in the stone molding above the main entrance. There are also signs indicating the building’s current status as a museum and state historic site. Because it is not actively a library, this lack of signage is not surprising. The only piece of library signage at the Hancock site is a small plaque near the main entrance of the high school indicating the library hours and a book return slot. This sign is easily missed when entering the building.



Figure 3.7 Portage Lake District Library entrance displays clear signage and wheelchair accessibility measures

The Houghton library branch is wheelchair accessible by curb cuts, a stair-free main entrance, and an ADA-compliant door opener button. As seen in Figure 3.8, the Carnegie building main entrance is accessible from a ramp leading from the southern street and sidewalk to the main entrance. However, directly inside the front door is a set of stairs leading up to the first level and another set of stairs leading down to the lower level. These stairs render the building inaccessible. Being a historic building, this is a reminder of the ways standards have changed over the decades to allow for more accessibility. The main entrance to the Hancock school building is wheelchair accessible. The room in which the library is housed in the school has a ramp to make its multiple levels accessible.



Figure 3.8 Carnegie library entrance

While Toulouse libraries were generally close to public transportation stops, transportation takes on a drastically different set of criteria in rural America. There are limited public transportation options in Houghton. However, the majority of residents use other methods of transportation in their day-to-day life. Short-term parking lots and street parking are abundant in downtown Houghton, servicing the main branch. The Hancock school provides a large parking lot.

The Houghton library branch is positioned to accommodate other modes of transportation in addition to cars, including bicycles and boats. A sign in the front window of the library indicates that bicyclists should use the bike rack at the side of the building to store their bikes while in the library. Additionally, a multiuse recreational path running parallel to the Portage Canal passes by the library. This provides another opportunity for convenient

access to the library. The building's location along the Portage Canal offers a unique opportunity for boat access. A public dock allows boaters to move directly from the water to the front door of the library. This speaks to the unique cultural landscape of the Portage Lake district—the distinct culture of water transportation that comes from the proximity to the Portage Canal and Lake Superior.

In contrast to Toulouse, the Portage Lake District Library system is not excelling in the use of signage. Compare Portage Lake's lack of visual logo to Toulouse's strong visual identity. A unified visual branding piece would help create a feeling of trust and confidence in a library system that covers such a large, dispersed geographic area. The Portage Lake District Library system does in fact have a logo that appears on the website and signage material within the library space. As Figure 3.9 shows, this logo features a book and a set of undulating lines, which mimic both turning pages and waves of water—indicating both the traditional function of libraries and the unique geographic location of the library system on both the Portage Canal and the Keweenaw Peninsula. Expanding this logo to exterior signage would be a simple way to improve visibility of the library branches in the community.



Figure 3.9 Portage Lake District Library logo

The modern Portage Lake District Library branches set a good example in the realm of wheelchair accessibility measures, however. They appear to comply with ADA standards in regards to curb cuts, doors, and parking. It comes as no surprise that the original Carnegie library in Houghton is not accessible, as it was constructed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Through the examples of these two sets of site visits, the development and application process of topoi has been demonstrated. Though the locations of Toulouse and the Portage Lake district are significantly different, the suggested topoi are sufficiently broad and versatile to encompass such differences.

## 4 Recommendations

### 4.1 Examination of Spatial Rhetorics

In this study, I have established a set of criteria with which libraries can evaluate their spatial existence. I recommend that all libraries undertake such an examination of the ways their building exists within their community. Historian Wayne A. Wiegand writes, “public libraries are local organisms living within the social and cultural environments their communities create for them” (268). These idiosyncratic environments lead to idiosyncratic design challenges and solutions. While these peculiarities need to be allowed for, I believe the presented criteria offer enough flexibility and breadth to accommodate most sites.

As physical spaces evolve and shift, some members of the community are more equipped to mediate “the new spatialities;” rhetorician Johnathan Mauk suggests that composition instructors can do this for their students (220). Similarly, library workers may be able to do this work of mediating spaces for patrons. Conducting an analysis of the topoi as suggested above is a crucial first step in mediating library space. Library workers need to familiarize themselves with the patterns and arguments present in the spaces their libraries inhabit. Only when they are aware of the condition of the topoi can library workers begin to mediate the space for their patrons.

Included in this study is an adaptation of the form used while conducting site visits in both Toulouse and the Portage Lake District. This form, shown in Figure 4.1, can be



## 4.2 Geo-Spatial Survey

Given their commitment to remaining public spaces dedicated to the strengthening of democracy, libraries ought to extend their focus beyond their own walls to the surrounding neighborhood. Library staff should be attentive and concerned with the material realities of their broader environment. Even with the rise of digital technologies mediating library work and space, the material components of libraries is of huge importance. An effective way account for the material realities, beyond a library worker-led examination of the spatial rhetorics, is to utilize mapping to elicit user feedback. In other words, ask the patrons and community members to share their lived experiences of accessing the library through maps.

Education scholar Kimberly Powell makes a compelling argument for mapping as a research method. She writes, “Mapping can offer researchers a view into how people—children, parents, community members—see their world, what is important to them, what their lived social relations are, and where they spend their time....maps can shed light on the ways in which we traverse, encounter, and construct racial, ethnic, gendered, and political boundaries” (553). Maps are not just about representations of physical spaces; then can also be about the complex ways people interact with and relate to physical spaces.

Scholars have used a wide range of geo-spatial and mapping methods to assess library use and access. These methods will be surveyed briefly in this section as a cursory



overview of the available technologies. I will follow with a recommended course of action to put mapping methods to use.

Library science scholars Amelia N. Gibson and Samantha Kaplan have participants draw “egocentric social network maps of support in their communities” to understand where information seekers expect to find information and whether those expectations are satisfied or not (134). These maps place the subject of the study in the middle of a series of concentric circles to indicate distance from information sources.

Similarly, Devon Greyson et al. use information world mapping has the benefit of “placing the depiction of an information world into the hands of socially-marginalized participants” (150). In this model, researchers ask participants to create a map to illustrate their place within what they consider to be their information world. Due to this study’s lack of strict direction, maps varied in form from word webs to symbolic illustrations. This shift of agency to individuals who have been marginalized or denied access to institutions is crucial if libraries are going to continue to move toward democracy and equality.

Cognitive mapping is a popular way to study perceptions of spaces. This method can “yield valuable insights into the meanings that people attach to various environments” (Given and Leckie 369). While not providing technically accurate visual representations of space, these sorts of maps can allow researchers to better understand the experiences of the individuals creating the maps.

While a wide array of terms are put into use to talk about possible forms of mapping, the terminology is not the most important takeaway from this discussion. The emphasis on geo-spatial mapping techniques is particularly relevant to anchor the conversation in materiality in our society that is increasingly pulled toward the virtual.

One of the problems with mapping is the power imbalance inherent in the medium. The examples above begin to give some agency to subjects, but ultimately the researchers continue to control the interpretations of the data. It is important to continue working toward giving power and control to the people. Artist and innovator-in-residence at the Library of Congress, Jer Thorp, writes about maps: “since I had very little say in how this map was made, I’m constrained by the biases and politics of the map and the data placed on top of it.” As a solution to rebalance this power disparity, Thorp offers an example of one way of putting the authority of mapping into the hands of the people: a community mapping space where community members can interact with datasets and their own lived experiences to create valuable portrayals of life in one US city. The goal of this project, Thorp writes, is a “city that is also *wise* as a result of a shared understanding of lived experience amongst its citizens.” Technical knowledge alone is not the end goal.

Professors of information and library science Noah Lenstra and Karen S. Baker emphasize the importance of narrative and “story-making” in allowing “major shifts in thinking” to come about (485). Increasing the breadth of stories that are allowed to exist side by side and be deemed valuable is necessary.

Thorp's example is part of a larger movement to shift mapping power from the formal disciplines of cartography and geography into the realms of experience and folk knowledge. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes,

Much of human experience is difficult to articulate, however, and we are far from finding devices that measure satisfactorily the quality of a feeling or aesthetic response. What we cannot say in an acceptable scientific language we tend to deny or forget....[the geographer] and the architect-planner tend to assume familiarity...rather than describe and try to understand what "being-in-the-world" is truly like....Our understanding of human reality suffers as a result. ...Blindness to experience is in fact a common human condition (200–201).

Researchers could benefit from divesting of their obsession with so-called scientific truth. As Tuan points out, it is harming our ability to understand the world and our experiences in it. There are groups and individuals who have not bought into this lie as fully as the mainstream culture has. Let's let those people lead the way into a more equitable, accessible world. Tuan notes that marginalized groups possess a special ability to know a place, not in spite of, but because of their marginalized position. He writes, "Partially because of their...marginality, they were able to develop a holistic concept of the...neighborhood" (170).

I see inherent value in letting underserved and vulnerable groups take a prominent role in conversations about the ways space and design can be improved to better serve them.

Believe women. Listened to disabled users. Listen to the experiences of people of color.

This can be a challenging shift to make in a society that values expertise and the scientific process and formal education—things that many marginalized groups do not have access to—and fears displays of emotion and semiotic forms of communication—things that marginalized groups are frequently criticized and dismissed for. A “double vision” that is attentive to both discourse and materiality, which addresses both “linguistic systems” and “material inequities” can and should be deployed here, according to rhetorician Kristie S. Fleckenstein (330, 332). Stories and feelings and experiences that defy scientific constraints matter here. They always have and they always will.

Journalist Nora Young offers a way into considering the intersection of discourse and materiality in library realms, referencing the role librarians play in pop culture:

Many of us feel quite conflicted about formal or ‘book’ knowledge; we are aware of its power, but anxious about our abilities to manipulate and understand it....Librarians' facility in searching for information, and their role as the access point for information, makes them a lightning rod for these contradictory anxieties and desires (114).

If librarians' represent the public's anxiety about information, it is possible that library buildings similarly represent some conflicting desires and anxieties surrounding information and community access and interaction. Understanding these underlying, subconscious anxieties is crucial to mitigating any hesitancy users have in approaching libraries. Asking library users to explore their desires and anxieties—and any other

manifesting emotions—about accessing library space is a good way to help users begin to name and understand these emotions.

A model of mapping that effectively combines all the factors discussed above is The Complete City in Portland, Maine. This project uses a modified form of cognitive mapping to elicit feedback from community members to identify areas within the city that could be improved, or just generally need some attention. The format of The Complete City initiative involved distributing blank maps of the city to community members who were then free to draw and mark on the maps in whatever form they wanted. From a map annotated by a four year old to maps suggesting improved public transportation methods, from abstract collages to maps showing only what the participant had deemed “fave” and “lousy” walks, from detailed and technical mappings of development opportunities to a map full of profanity and the words “WHO CARES” scrawled in bold letters, the completed maps show a wide range of emotions, opinions, and analyses of the city space. This method allows for boundless variation, while maintaining a low technological complexity.

I recommend this model specifically because of its adaptability and ease of access. As demonstrated by the Portland maps, community members of all kinds can participate and provide feedback. If a four year old can provide feedback alongside a participant using language such as “placemaking” and “picturesque,” the methods seem to be reasonably accommodating to a wide swath of the population. This mapping tool can be adapted to supplement the spatial rhetoric survey recommended above. By prompting participants to

map instances of wayfinding signage, building signage, accessibility measures, and elements of the cultural landscape which impact their access to the library space, library workers can gain valuable feedback on the ways library users experience the library as it exists in the community.

Putting mapping into the hands of the community members—especially those belonging to underserved groups—is crucial to my work because of its emphasis on shifting power structures away from the traditional figureheads toward historically ignored members of society.

## 5 Conclusion

Located in the field of spatial rhetorics and contending with the long history of the concept of *topoi*, this study has looked at the ways library spaces speak and the arguments they make.

Let us revisit the questions posed earlier in this paper: What patterns were present in the sites studied in this thesis? What communal knowledge is embedded within the spaces libraries inhabit in their communities? What is revealed through this lens, which makes the familiar unfamiliar? What do we see when we slow down and really look around us?

1. Signage systems in Toulouse tend to make library spaces visible as part of the municipal landscape through a strong visual logo and the inclusion of the “Mairie de Toulouse” text and flag on many signage elements. Repetition of familiar and official symbols provides a level of comfort and reassurance that is immeasurably appreciated when entering a new space for the first time. Additionally, the standard use of wayfinding signs throughout the city and country provide reliable navigation aids. These provisions help make library spaces legible and accessible to individuals who may be unfamiliar with the area.
2. Library spaces in Toulouse are moving toward increased wheelchair accessibility. Newer library buildings incorporate design measures that make the buildings compliant with recent laws. Making old buildings and

surrounding sidewalks wheelchair accessible seems to be a far greater challenge, however. Old habits die hard in an ancient country.

3. Similarly, patterns of wheelchair accessibility in Portage Lake district libraries tell a story of changing understandings of disability and accessibility in the United States. New construction complies with standards and regulations that aim to make buildings accessible for those with disabilities, while old buildings serve as reminders of our inequitable, inaccessible history.
4. Signage for the Portage Lake district libraries tells of a developing community. A small, close-knit community can get away with limited signage. However, as the community expands and grows, it must move to accommodate and make its public spaces legible. The city of Houghton is doing this through the use of a visual logo depicting a miner. The public library system could adopt this method by expanding the use of their own logo to exterior signage.

These are just some of the ways the sites in this study speak when we are willing to listen. As we continue listening, we will become increasingly aware of the ways the built environment deems large portions of our fellow community members illiterate and disabled. My hope is that this awareness leads to action. This action will necessarily involve centralizing voices from the margins as we move toward a more equitable and accessible future.



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# A Appendix A

Name of Site:

Address:

Date Visited:

Time:

Wayfinding Signage	Description	Location	Notes
Building Signage	Description	Location	Notes
Accessibility Measures	Description	Location	Notes

Parking:

Ease of Navigation:

Walkability: