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The Lady and the Library Loafer

Gender and Public Space in Victorian America

Abigail A. Van Slyck

READING ROOMS reserved exclusively for the use of women were once a common feature of public libraries built during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the United States, England, and many parts of the British empire. Small rooms stocked with fashion magazines and communicating directly with the women's toilet, these facilities were relatively short-lived, particularly in the United States, where they abruptly disappeared in the early years of the twentieth century. Yet the ladies' reading room was often considered an absolute necessity for encouraging respectable women to venture into the public library. Recovering the circumstances of the proliferation, and subsequent decline, of ladies' reading rooms offers much to current considerations of the intersection between Victorian gender ideology and the design and use of space. Specifically, this recovery provides a useful means for assessing the meta-

phor of the separate spheres as a way of understanding the organization of the actual, physical spaces of the Victorian world.¹

Rethinking the Separate Spheres

The concept of the separate spheres has been central to the study of gender and space in Victorian culture throughout the Anglo-American world. The phrase initially was coined to describe a highly gendered view of human interests and aptitudes, one that associated men with public affairs and women with private, family life. Yet the word *sphere* was itself highly suggestive. It called to mind a literal space as well as a figurative one and encouraged scholars of material culture to consider how the Victorian gender system affected urban and suburban design, architecture, interior decoration, and material objects of all kinds. The impact on the field was nothing short of revolutionary, particularly in redeeming the domestic realm and women's activities therein from the margins of architectural history and in acknowledging their important role in expressing some of the most deeply held cultural values of nineteenth-century society.²

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¹ It is difficult to summarize the full extent of the ladies' reading room phenomenon, since these facilities are routinely ignored in library history. However, primary documents reveal that 8 of the 18 public libraries built in New Zealand with Carnegie funds included ladies' reading rooms when they opened in the early twentieth century, while 22 public libraries in Great Britain included such facilities in the 1890s. "Women's Reading Rooms," *The Library* 4 (1892): 108–11.

² For a discussion of the use of this concept in women's history, see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9–39. Thanks to scholars

Yet, in many respects, the concept of the separate spheres, with its dualistic opposition between public areas and private, domestic realms, is too simplistic to provide a full explanation of Victorian space. After all, many of the building types invented in the late nineteenth century fit neatly into neither category. College dormitories, nurses' residences, settlement houses, commercially run single-room occupancy hotels, philanthropically supported worker hostels, and other residential structures were domestic in function but were not private in the sense of housing a single nuclear family. Large in size, institutional in character, and often urban in setting, these buildings seem more closely connected with the public sphere than with the private, single-family house. Likewise, the "public realm" was composed of a range of spaces that varied substantially both in their architectural character and in their explicit and implicit admission policies. Private clubs were class- and gender-specific corners of the public realm, closed to all but a finite roster of dues-paying members. Restaurants and saloons were more open but still required an outlay of cash in the form of a purchase. The payment of a fee was also required of anyone wanting to attend a baseball game or to take advantage of the city's musical or theatrical entertainments. Theoretically, municipal museums and libraries were open to everyone but nonetheless demanded genteel behavior of those who would enter this part of the public realm. Sexes and classes mixed more readily in corporate and professional offices, but these spaces were heavily policed by a cadre of private employees, including doormen, elevator operators, receptionists, and secretaries. City streets were perhaps the most public area of the public realm, but even they were often di-

such as Dolores Hayden, Gwendolyn Wright, Sally McMurry, and Annmarie Adams, we now have a very good sense of the specific architectural forms and interior decorating practices that sustained ideas of "true womanhood" in middle-class houses throughout the Anglo-American world. See Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981); Dolores Hayden, "Catherine Beecher and the Politics of Housework," in Susana Torre, ed., *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), pp. 40–49; Gwendolyn Wright, "Domestic Architecture and the Cultures of Domesticity," *Design Quarterly* 138 (Spring 1987): 13–19; Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870–1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

vided into "turfs" that "belonged" (at least in practice) to distinct class, sex, and age groups. In short, neither "public" nor "domestic" were monolithic categories in the Victorian world.³

Our understanding of the relationship between gender and space in the nineteenth century is further compromised by the tendency on the part of twentieth-century scholars to interpret the separate spheres somewhat too literally—to talk about women only in conjunction with the home, to discuss men only in conjunction with the urban sites in which they worked and socialized. Such a literal interpretation of the separate spheres is doubly problematic. On one hand, it risks naturalizing and universalizing a gender ideology that tended to be class- and race-specific. On the other hand, it distorts the historical reality of the lives of those white, middle-class men and women who did embrace Victorian gender roles. Even the busiest of businessmen were regular inhabitants of the domestic realm; indeed, according to Victorian ideology, one of the home's most important functions was to provide respite and relaxation for the husband and father who had braved the city on behalf of his wife and children. Recent studies have also begun to look in

³ For more on these residential structures in the late nineteenth century, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Hull-House as Women's Space," *Chicago History* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 40–55; Annmarie Adams, "Rooms of Their Own: The Nurses' Residences at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital," *Material History Review* 40 (Fall 1994): 29–41; Karen Kingsley, "The Architecture of Nursing," in Anne Hudson Jones, ed., *Images of Nurses: Perspectives from History, Art, and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 63–94; Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). For more on the range of public spaces, see William D. Moore, "The Masonic Lodge Room, 1870–1930: A Sacred Space of Masculine Spiritual Hierarchy," in Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins, eds., *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture V* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), pp. 26–39; Cynthia Rock, "Building the Women's Club in Nineteenth-Century America," *Heresies* 11, vol. 3, no. 3 (1981): 87–90; Karen Blair, *The Torchbearers: Women and Their Amateur Arts Associations in America, 1890–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Gunter Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture and the City: Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1976; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985).

greater detail at the role that men played in parlor-making and other domestic activities. Likewise, Victorian ideology may have associated women with the domestic sphere, but it never required their total physical containment in the home. Indeed, Victorian ideals of “true womanhood” encouraged even domesticated middle-class women to venture into many corners of the city. The department store, the church, the museum, and the library were all nondomestic sites where women were expected to go in order to accumulate the domestic goods, religious piety, and cultural refinement that they dispensed at home. By the end of the nineteenth century, middle-class women made explicit this connection between their domestic roles and their public activities by deploying the concept of “municipal housekeeping” as a rationale for their participation in the physical reform of the urban environment.⁴

To say that the convention of the separate spheres does not describe physical reality in an absolute way, however, is not to suggest that gender ideology is irrelevant to understanding the cultural landscape of the Victorian world. Consider the opening of the new public library in Newark, New Jersey, in 1889. According to the *Library Journal*, “the people wandered through the handsome rooms and admired everything they saw. The men liked the substantial appearance of walls, floors, stairways, and clever lighting, while the women admired the general cleanliness, the harmonizing colors, and the handsome furniture.” Here middle-class men and women were both welcome to use municipally funded cultural amenities, but they were understood to reproduce their highly gendered domestic roles as they

inhabited this genteel public space: men were associated with the sound construction of the architectural shell and with the installation of its technological innovations while women were assumed to care more about maintenance and interior decoration. In short, the Victorian gender system did not bar women from every corner of the public realm, but it did posit that men and women experienced some public spaces differently.⁵

Equally important, the Victorian gender system also called for a more active reshaping of some kinds of public space in order to encourage women’s entry into socially sanctioned areas of the urban realm. The creation of sex-segregated rooms within public and commercial institutions was a favorite strategy in the United States, so much so that historian Mary Ryan has identified the provision of public space for women as a “major civic project in the latter half of the nineteenth century.” In fact, the phenomenon seems to have begun even earlier with the provision of women’s parlors on steamboats in the late 1820s. By the 1880s, women could find rooms set aside for their use on railroad cars, in commercial photography studios and department stores, in hotels and restaurants, in banks and post offices, in public parks and public libraries. By the end of the century, middle-class women took a more active role in providing entire buildings that offered sex-segregated public space, both for themselves (in the form of clubhouses) and for working-class women (in settlement houses and the YWCA).⁶

If there is a growing acknowledgment of the existence of sex-segregated public spaces in nineteenth-century America, there is thus far little agreement about how to interpret that phenomenon. Some studies imply that such ladies’ parlors represent the opening of the public sphere to women. In this interpretation, the city is understood as an inherently masculine realm, and women’s rooms effectively colonize a portion of

⁴ For the role of men in the home, see Margaret Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870–1915,” *American Quarterly* 2, no. 40 (June 1988): 165–86; Cheryl Robertson, “Male and Female Agendas for Domestic Reform: The Middle-Class Bungalow in Gendered Perspective,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, nos. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1991): 123–41; Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Katharine Martinez, “The American Home as Exhibition Space” (Paper presented at the “Gendered Space and Aesthetics” session of the American Studies Association conference, 1995). For women’s use of department stores and other cultural institutions, see Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Horowitz, *Culture and the City*; Anne Firor Scott, “Women and Libraries,” *Journal of Library History* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 400–405. For municipal housekeeping, see Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Madeline Stein Wortman, “Domesticating the American City,” *Prospects* 3 (1977): 531–72.

⁵ “The Newark (N.J.) Free Public Library,” *Library Journal* 14, no. 11 (November 1889): 437.

⁶ Mary R. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 78. For women’s parlors on steamboats, railroad cars, and in commercial photographs, see Katherine C. Grier, “Imagining the Parlor, 1830–1880” in Gerald W. R. Ward, ed., *Perspectives on American Furniture* (New York: W. W. Norton for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1988), pp. 205–39; see also Benson, *Counter Cultures*; Carolyn Brucken, “In the Public Eye: Women and the American Luxury Hotel” in this issue of *Winterthur Portfolio*; Galen Cranz, “Women in Urban Parks,” *Signs* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980 supplement): S80–85; Rock, “Building the Women’s Club”; Blair, *Torchbearers*; Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*; Horowitz, “Hull-House as Women’s Space.”

that masculine realm for female use, allowing, in Lynne Walker's words, "a rapid growth in women's unaccompanied presence in the public sphere" and providing "spaces for real change through the development of a public ideology for women." In contrast, scholars such as Ryan argue that such spaces are more accurately seen as a closing down of the public sphere. In the early nineteenth century, Ryan notes, even the city street was "relatively careless of male/female distinctions"; men and women of different classes and different races moved easily in a heterogeneous urban environment. Between 1825 and 1840, however, the urban environment was partitioned into a number of sex-segregated spaces, into all-male preserves that explicitly excluded women and, later, into all-female preserves (such as the ladies' parlors mentioned above) that implicitly marked the rest of the city as off-limits to respectable women. In either case, the development of sex-segregated spaces served to limit the type and number of public places where respectable women felt free to go.⁷

This difference in interpretation derives in part from the time frame under consideration; studies that focus on the late nineteenth century often accept the Victorian notion of the city as a male preserve and thus interpret any female presence in the city as emancipatory. The difference in interpretation may also have to do with a tendency to accept the department store as the best exemplar of a public space rededicated to the female user in the late nineteenth century. While the department store is an important site for understanding the material expression of the Victorian gender system, particularly for the role it played in forging a still-potent link between consumerism and femininity, its commercial nature also means that it cannot stand for all types of public space. Privately owned entities, department stores were able to use employment policies to control the interaction between male clerks and female customers, who moved effortlessly be-

tween the truly public space of the street and the store interior precisely because it was in the financial interest of owners and managers to allow them to do so. Yet that experience cannot be generalized to women's experience in other kinds of urban space, particularly the municipally funded spaces created specifically for women's use. In order to develop a better understanding of how the Victorian gender system affected the use of the city, we need to pay closer attention to places where the interaction between men and women was unmediated by the promise of financial gain or the threat of dismissal. The public library is one such space.⁸

Women as Library Users: Midcentury Debates

In the 1850s, public libraries were still a rarity in most American cities. Library facilities did exist but primarily in the form of social libraries or athenaea, private institutions open only to paying members and offering a wide array of cultural amenities. One of the best examples is the Boston Athenaeum, established in 1807 by the leading members of Boston's cultural aristocracy. At mid-century, the Athenaeum was housed in a new building on Beacon Street. Designed by Edward C. Cabot, the building is most directly comparable to a gentlemen's club in both its architectural imagery and interior arrangements. Its facade was modeled on the Italian Renaissance palazzo, a popular new image for private clubs, particularly among Anglophiles familiar with Charles Barry's designs for the Reform and Traveler's Clubs in London. Inside, a full range of facilities fed the scientific, artistic, and literary appetites of gentlemen of taste, including a room used by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a sculpture gallery, a picture gallery, a library, and reading rooms. Double-height book alcoves lined the principle reading rooms in an arrangement that recalled both European university libraries and the princely libraries on which they had been modeled (fig. 1). Having accepted the idea that an innate capacity for cultural appreciation was a function of class and gender, Athenaeum mem-

⁷ Lynne Walker, "Vistas of Pleasure: Women Consumers of Urban Space in the West End of London, 1850-1900," in Clarissa Campbell Orr, ed., *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 79. Although Walker writes about the English scene, her interpretation is implicit in many studies of women's spaces in the United States; Cynthia Rock, for instance, characterizes the building of a women's club as "the claiming of space" (Rock, "Building the Women's Club," p. 88), while Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz refers to Hull-House as a setting that allowed residents "to plunge into the life of their time" (Horowitz, "Hull-House as Women's Space," p. 55). Ryan, *Women in Public*, pp. 66-68.

⁸ An inherent faith in the notion of progress may also play a role in the tendency to interpret any female presence in the city as emancipatory. Many scholars seem to hold fast to the idea that women's lives are getting better and assume that the late nineteenth century must, therefore, represent an improvement in women's lives over the beginning of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 1. Reading room, Boston Athenaeum, 1855. From *Athenaeum Centenary: The Influence and History of the Boston Athenaeum from 1807–1907* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1907), opp. p. 132.

bers treasured a setting that allowed them to pursue these interests in the company of like minds.⁹

Such social libraries often excluded women, even women of the same class and caste. Engravings of the Boston Athenaeum in 1855 depict a few women using the library with male guidance, but in reality women were welcomed only into the art galleries. Indeed, Athenaeum librarian Charles Folsom reacted with shock and horror when some of the trustees suggested opening the doors of this private preserve to women. First, Folsom noted that the building itself was unsuitable for the use of ladies; the very idea of traversing its narrow galleries and steep staircases should, Folsom felt, “cause a decent female to shrink.” Second, because the unavoidable spectacle of the active female form “would occasion frequent embarrassment to modest men,” the proposed change in policy would inconvenience the Athenaeum’s legitimate (male) readers. Finally, the paternalistic Folsom was against giving any “modest young woman” easy access to what he called “the corrupter portions of the polite literature.” From his point of view, “a considerable portion

of a general library should be to her a sealed book.”¹⁰

Not all of Folsom’s contemporaries agreed that women should be barred from the library, but his comments are useful for articulating the anxieties raised by the presence of women in this private corner of the public realm. The issue was often couched in terms of protecting female sensibilities—both from the literature that might do her harm as well as from a social situation that would put her respectability at risk. Indeed, Victorian culture perceived women as particularly vulnerable to the symbolic violations of the male leer and the impertinent comment and called upon women to exercise the most extreme forms of bodily management in order to avoid these intrusions. Soberly dressed, eyes averted, moving at a measured pace, the respectable woman sought to avoid embarrassment by making her physical presence as inconspicuous as possible. For a woman to mount one of the library’s spiral staircases, to expose her ankles to public view on one of the library’s elevated galleries, was to discard her symbolic shield of privacy and actually to invite rudeness.¹¹

⁹ Kenneth A. Breisch, “Small Public Libraries in America, 1850–1890: The Invention and Evolution of a Building Type” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1982), pp. 68–70; *Athenaeum Centenary: The Influence and History of the Boston Athenaeum from 1807–1907* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1907), pp. 35–37, 40.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Athenaeum Centenary*, p. 41.

¹¹ The phrase *bodily management* and the analysis of its application to Victorian women come from John F. Kasson’s study of nineteenth-century etiquette books; John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and*

Yet Folsom's tirade suggests that female respectability was hardly his only, or even his primary, concern. Men, too, were vulnerable to embarrassment in public places, particularly when forced into visual contact with those who broke the rules of genteel deportment. An important tenet of propriety was the refusal to collaborate in another's self-exposure. Thus, a woman who moved outside established norms of respectable behavior embarrassed both herself and the respectable men she encountered. For Folsom and other Victorians, female readers not only disrupted library order but also threatened to rend the very social fabric of respectable Boston. Where gender and class were so intricately intertwined, the female presence had potentially terrifying consequences.¹²

Beginning in the 1850s, the development of public libraries brought the question of the female presence to the fore. By admitting male and female readers of all classes (but not of all races), public libraries actually helped protect the elite masculine atmosphere of many American athenaeae—a fact that helps explain why so many athenaeae members took an active role in establishing public libraries that they themselves did not frequent. At the same time, however, the heterogeneous climate of a public library made the presence of women even more problematic. Women were still perceived as a disruptive force that interrupted the study of serious readers. This was particularly true in England, although British complaints about female readers were often reprinted in American periodicals. These complaints encompassed a stunning variety of library crimes; women were accused of talking and giggling “beneath the stately dome” of the British Museum Library, of “eating strawberries behind folios in the society of some happy student of the opposite sex,” and even of stealing fashion plates from library periodicals. When British librarians began to debate the desirability of giving readers free access to bookshelves in the 1890s, opponents of the idea encapsulated their worst fears in a cartoon entitled “Chaos in the Lending Library,” where the central figure is a woman perched on a ladder, calling attention to herself by her precarious position and by dropping several books

onto the head of the startled male reader below her.¹³

The American library world of the late nineteenth century was less prone to such overt demonization of women, but it continued to see the female library patron as a special case. For one thing, librarians and library boards held fast to the belief that adult reading tastes were highly gendered. Even in the face of evidence to the contrary, male library officials persisted in their assumptions that women came to the library primarily to consult fashion and home advice magazines and light novels. The 1898 annual report of the Peoria Public Library is a case in point. There the librarian cited by name eight women's clubs whose members had used the library to prepare presentations on history, travel, fiction, and Shakespeare. Yet, when writing about female readers generically, he reverted to the stereotype of “the lady of the house, or the daughter, [who] hungers for the last new novel, which to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven.” Characterizing this desire to read as an “appetite that may be appeased at the public library,” he further diminished the seriousness of women's reading by associating it with bodily functions rather than with cerebral activity.¹⁴

American library leaders may have seen women as shallow, but they still tended to embrace the Victorian notion that women were superior morally and thus naturally suited to enhancing the library's cultural mission of uplift. In many American cities, municipal officials sought to attract women to public institutions such as parks because their presence was believed to encourage genteel behavior in the men who were the primary objects of many urban reform movements. By the end of the century, the concept of “municipal housekeeping” encouraged middle-

¹³ “Ladies in Libraries,” *Library Journal* 11, no. 10 (October 1886): 420; “Women's Reading Rooms,” *The Library* 4 (1892): 109. The cartoon “Chaos in the Lending Library” was the frontispiece to an anonymous pamphlet entitled “The Truth About Giving Readers Free Access to the Books in a Public Lending Library,” printed in 1895 and reproduced in Thomas Kelly, *History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845–1975* (London: Library Assoc., 1977), p. 179.

¹⁴ Recent studies of mid nineteenth-century book-borrowing records suggest that reading preferences were not as gendered as librarians and library boards believed. For an example, see Ronald J. Zboray, “Reading Patterns in Antebellum America: Evidence in the Charge Records of the New York Society Library,” *Libraries and Culture* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 301–33. *The Eighteenth Annual Report of the Peoria Public Library* (Peoria, Ill.: By the library, 1898), pp. 6–7.

Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), pp. 128–132.

¹² Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, pp. 126–27.

class women to exercise their moral and cultural influence on the wider community and prompted many women to look to the library for employment. Whether working in paid positions in urban branches or serving as volunteers in the small-town institutions established as an extension of women's study clubs, the large number of women in public library work was a distinctly American phenomenon that attracted comments from British librarians.¹⁵

Because this goal of moral uplift required their presence in the heterogeneous mix of public library users, female readers were increasingly perceived as potential victims, susceptible to the advances of vulgar males. Of particular concern were "library loafers," unredeemable working-class men whose loitering thwarted the noble purpose of the public library. The loafer took on almost mythic proportions in library literature throughout the Anglo-American world and could be evoked to support a range of library causes. When the question arose of amalgamating the private Dunedin Athenaeum with the newly constructed Carnegie Free Library in that New Zealand city in 1908, one Athenaeum member

¹⁵ For women as a moral influence in public institutions, see Cranz, "Women in Urban Parks," pp. S80–85. For women in the paid workforce of American librarianship, see Joanne Passett, *Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the American West, 1900–1917* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 173–241; Laurel Grotzinger, "Biographical Research: Recognition Denied," *Journal of Library History* 18, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 372–81; Mary Niles Maack, "Toward a History of Women in Librarianship: A Critical Analysis with Suggestions for Future Research," *Journal of Library History* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 164–85; Barbara E. Brand, "Librarianship and Other Female-Intensive Professions," *Journal of Library History* 18, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 391–406; Wayne Wiegand, "The Development of Librarianship in the United States," *Libraries and Culture* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 99–109. Western women were so active in establishing and administering libraries for their towns that in 1933 the American Library Association credited women's clubs with initiating 75 percent of the public libraries then in existence. Victoria Kline Musmann, "Women and the Founding of Social Libraries in California, 1859–1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1982), p. 33, citing Sophonisba P. Breckenridge, *Women in the Twentieth Century: A Study of Their Political, Social, and Economic Activities* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933). The connection between women's clubs and library organizing has been well documented; see Scott, "Women and Libraries"; Louise Caldwell Bockock, "Texas Libraries and the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs," *Texas Library Journal* 62, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 26; Deanna B. Marcum, "The Rural Public Library in America at the Turn of the Century," *Libraries and Culture* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 91; David Taylor, "Ladies of the Club: An Arkansas Story," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 59, no. 5 (January 1985): 324–27; June O. Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas: Women's Organizations, 1880–1920," *Kansas History* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1984–85): 300.

raised the specter of the library loafer to explain his opposition to the scheme. Writing to the editor of the *Otago Daily Times*, he complained of conditions in the Wellington Public Library, "where wharf loafers, the unemployed, the unemployable, and the unwashed made their presence known in many offensive ways. I have personally had drunken and snoring visitors turned out of the rooms by the attendants on more than one occasion . . . in all the public libraries, this class of objectionable visitors is more or less in evidence and cannot entirely be kept out." Four years later, the American Library Association's *Library Journal* published reports of a British conference at which librarian W. E. Doubleday decried the fact that opponents of the public library continued to characterize it as "a reading room for tramps, a shelter for loafers of all kinds, and the haunt of betting men." "Loafers and Loungers" was even a subject heading in H. G. T. Cannons's *Bibliography of Library Economy*, which indexed English and American library science periodicals issued from 1876 to 1920; this section included eleven articles on the subject published between 1883 and 1915, more than three times the number of articles listed under "Ladies' Rooms." It is not clear to what extent the "loafer" stereotype fit many actual readers, but library officials were forced to confront the perception that such men existed and that they represented a serious threat, both to library order generally and to female readers in particular.¹⁶

Ladies' Reading Room as Strategy

The tendency to take a protective stance toward female readers was exacerbated somewhat by the cultural politics involved in establishing and administering public libraries in late nineteenth-century America. In large cities, public libraries were controlled by trustees drawn from the ranks of the native-born social elite who had dominated the boards of private libraries and athenaea. Like their predecessors, they tended to claim the pursuit of culture as an upper-class activity and to see even publicly supported libraries as essentially elite institutions that could be opened to the pub-

¹⁶ "Absorbing the Athenaeum," *Otago Daily Times*, February 1, 1908, p. 13; W. E. Doubleday, "Public Libraries and the Public," quoted in *Library Journal* 37, no. 12 (December 1912): 681; H. G. T. Cannons, *Bibliography of Library Economy* (Chicago: American Library Assoc., 1927), p. 506.

lic only with the benefit of fatherly wisdom and foresight. In smaller towns, the paternalistic quality of the public library could be even more acute, especially when the richest man in town bequeathed a small fortune to finance the building of a library that would carry his name. The libraries that H. H. Richardson designed in the 1870s and 1880s for the Massachusetts towns of Woburn, North Easton, Quincy, and Malden are perhaps the best-known examples of this phenomenon but are only a few of the many small-town libraries financed by and named for a prominent local philanthropist. In a number of other Massachusetts towns, elite women played a substantial role in library affairs, often serving on boards of trustees in the place of fathers, husbands, and brothers who fell in the Civil War. Yet they continued to see the town library as the domestic library writ large and to support the family metaphor that sustained the library activities of their male counterparts. Women also played a prominent role in many western towns, where they established town libraries as an extension of their participation in study clubs.¹⁷

The architectural containers for these institutions were typically constructed without the advice of professional librarians, a state of affairs that infuriated members of the newly formed American Library Association. Because few women's clubs could afford to erect a purpose-built structure, libraries in small western towns were typically ad hoc arrangements on the upper floor of the courthouse, city hall, or one of the town's commercial blocks. In larger cities and in towns where a local philanthropist offered the library substantial financial support, library trustees often selected an architect, oversaw construction, and finally hired a librarian after the building was complete. At midcentury, these library buildings often followed the lead of earlier private athen-

aea, adopting the classical vocabulary and exterior image of the Renaissance palazzo; the first Boston Public Library is a case in point. After the Civil War, however, it was more common for library trustees to express their paternalistic vision in designs that drew heavily on the domestic imagery of houses in the Queen Anne style. Richardson's design for the Winn Memorial Library in Woburn, Massachusetts, is a particularly clear example of the phenomenon. On the exterior, a sheltered porch, steeply sloping roofs, and irregular fenestration were all design elements that also appeared in houses of the period. Inside, the double-height book hall lent the building the monumental scale of a public place, but the reading room, with its inglenook and its massive fireplace, displayed a domestic scale and the coziness that played such an important part of the Victorian ideal of home (fig. 2). In other libraries, a painting of the founder hung above the mantel like an ancestral portrait, enhancing the illusion that familial ties bound grateful library users to the generous, paternalistic philanthropist.¹⁸

For some library boards, a ladies' reading room stocked with fashion and home advice magazines seemed to be an appropriate means of accommodating female readers. As early as 1856, the first American manual of library arrangement and administration recommended the provision of "a smaller reading room which may be used exclusively by females" in the library basement. This room placement is telling in that it seems to parallel contemporary assumptions about the lower order of reading in which women engaged. The author of this manual, Nathaniel Shurtleff, was a trustee of the Boston Public Library, which subsequently opened its first building in 1859 with a small ladies' reading room relegated to the floor below the general reading room.¹⁹

In the flurry of public library building that followed the Civil War, however, ladies' reading

¹⁷ For the elite nature of nineteenth-century public libraries, see Michael H. Harris, "The Purpose of the American Public Library: A Revisionist Interpretation of History," *Library Journal* 98, no. 16 (September 15, 1973): 2509–14; Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow*, pp. 206–19; Phyllis Dain, "Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City," *Libraries and Culture* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 219–50. For Richardson's library commissions, see Breisch, "Small Public Libraries"; Ann Melissa Gilkerson, "The Public Libraries of H. H. Richardson" (Honors thesis, Smith College, 1978). For the role of women in Massachusetts libraries, see Kathleen James, "Masculine and Feminine: The Shifting Image of the Public Library in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, 1985). For the library activities of women's study clubs, see note 15.

¹⁸ For the physical form of ad hoc libraries established by women's clubs, see Abigail A. Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 128–33. For purpose-built libraries, see Breisch, "Small Public Libraries"; and James, "Masculine and Feminine." For more on the Winn Memorial Library and the architectural expression of paternalistic philanthropy, see Abigail A. Van Slyck, "'The Utmost Amount of Effectiv [sic] Accommodation': Andrew Carnegie and the Reform of the American Library," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 50, no. 4 (December 1991): 359–83.

¹⁹ Nathaniel Shurtleff, *A Decimal System for the Arrangement and Administration of Libraries* (Boston, 1856), quoted in Breisch, "Small Public Libraries," pp. 91–92.



Fig. 2. Reading room, Winn Memorial Library, Woburn, Mass., 1891. (Photo, Baldwin Coolidge, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.)

rooms were by no means ubiquitous. Indeed, most New England libraries failed to follow the lead of Boston. Perhaps the prominent role played by elite women in the region ensured that other women would feel comfortable in any public room in the library. Certainly, none of Richardson's Massachusetts libraries included such facilities, perhaps because the relative social homogeneity of the towns involved meant that most prospective library users could be expected to adhere to the code of genteel behavior demanded by the middle class. Indeed, to the extent that Richardson and his clients embraced a paternalistic model of philanthropy that cast library users into the role of dependent relations, they may have seen a ladies' room as irrelevant. After all, if all library users were connected by fictive family

ties, easy social intercourse offered no threat to female respectability.²⁰

In the 1880s, the idea of the ladies' reading room was reintroduced into the American public library with the support of the newly organized library profession, which was dominated by men who were highly critical of Richardson's library designs and who increasingly claimed library planning as one of the cornerstones of their special expertise. Chief among them was William Poole who wrote frequently on the subject in the *Library Journal*, the official organ of the American Library Association. In 1885 he published his rec-

²⁰ Negative evidence is always difficult to interpret, so I am grateful to Kathleen James for suggesting this explanation for why so few Massachusetts libraries included ladies' reading rooms.

ommendations and plan for a small public library, including “a reading-room for ladies, if such a room be thought desirable by the directors,” and a double-length delivery desk with two windows, “the men being served at one, and the women at the other.” Thus sanctioned, the ladies’ reading room became an accepted part of American library design. Between 1884 and 1897, at least one third of the forty-four American library buildings pictured in the *Library Journal* included ladies’ reading rooms. (These libraries, as well as others identified from other sources, form the basis of this analysis and are listed in the appendix.)²¹

Yet what was the purpose of the ladies’ reading room? The obvious answer—that it provided library facilities for women—is only a partial explanation. How did library facilities intended for the exclusive use of women serve the purposes of the institution? Were they intended to minimize the impact of the large number of female readers who already patronized the library, segregating them from the “serious” readers at work in other parts of the building? Or were they intended to increase the number of female readers by making a place where respectable, middle-class women could read without mixing with men whom they found unsavory? Did library boards interpret the female presence as an effective means of raising the tone of the public library, thus enhancing its ability to uplift? If so, how did the library resolve the conflict inherent in trying to protect middle-class women from lower-class men while exposing lower-class men to the purifying influence of middle-class women? To what extent did the ladies’ reading room signify a willingness to accept women as full and active participants in the public realm?

Furnishing the Ladies’ Reading Room

The physical arrangement of ladies’ reading rooms offers some clues to the social conventions associated with the room type. Despite the diversity of nineteenth-century library buildings, la-

dies’ reading rooms shared a number of common characteristics. The decor of the ladies’ reading room, for instance, was noticeably less institutional than the rest of the library. Contemporary observers often described these rooms as harmonious, handsome, inviting, cozy, homelike, elegant, and tasteful. Such adjectives were, of course, often associated with the domestic parlor and suggest that library boards may have followed the lead of other Victorian commercial entities—photographers, steamboat and railroad companies, hotel proprietors, and restaurateurs—who created “parlors” for the exclusive use of their female clients. This equation was explicitly stated in descriptions of the Seattle City Library when it moved onto the fifth floor of the Collins office building in June 1894; according to a *Library Journal* article published the next year, the ladies’ reading room was “furnished as beautifully as the drawing room of a private house.”²²

The almost ubiquitous hearth played an important role in supporting the analogy between the ladies’ reading room and the domestic parlor, where it symbolized the closeness of family ties. Sometimes the fireplace in the ladies’ reading room was the only one in the building. Such was the case at the O. B. Dodge Library in Dixon, Illinois (designed by W. A. Otis and M. H. Vail, opened 1901), where the domestic character of the fireplace was enhanced by the low bookcases, adorned with potted plants, that flanked it on either side (fig. 3). Other libraries included multiple fireplaces but typically gave the one in the ladies’ reading room special attention. This was done either through elaborate ornamentation, as in the Minneapolis Public Library (designed by Long and Kees, opened 1889; fig. 4), or through its central placement in the room, as in the Peoria Public Library (designed by Richardson and Salter, opened 1897; fig. 5), or by doubling the number of hearths, as in the Buffalo Public Library (designed by Cyrus Eidlitz, opened 1887; fig. 6).²³

Furniture was an equally important means of creating a parlorlike setting for female readers. The seating furniture in a ladies’ reading room

²¹ William F. Poole, “Small Library Buildings,” *Library Journal* 10, nos. 9/10 (September/October 1885): 250–56. The *Library Journal* was first issued in 1876. Between that time and 1897 (when ladies’ reading rooms began to disappear from American public libraries), the *Library Journal* published illustrations (plans or elevations or both) of 44 American public library buildings. Of these, 14 definitely included ladies’ reading rooms. In 6 other cases, the information provided in the *Library Journal* is insufficient to determine the existence of a ladies’ reading room.

²² R. R. Bowker, “Some Libraries of the Northwest,” *Library Journal* 20, no. 3 (March 1895): 79.

²³ O. B. Dodge Library, *Architectural Review* 9, no. 1 (January 1902): 49; “The Minneapolis Public Library,” *Library Journal* 16, no. 6 (June 1891): 176–79; “The Peoria Public Library,” *Library Journal* 22, no. 3 (March 1897): frontispiece, 145; *The Buffalo Library and Its Building, Illustrated with Views* (Buffalo, N.Y.: By the library, 1887), p. 30.



Fig. 3. O. B. Dodge Library, Dixon, Ill., ca. 1901. (Photo, Dixon Public Library.) Ladies' reading alcove at left.

was often upholstered and carved to match—more like “a parlor suit” than the institutional furniture that dominated the rest of the library. What is more, the ladies' reading room often included seating types not commonly used in public places. Upholstered settles were featured in the Newark Free Public Library (designed by Van Kampen Taylor, opened 1889) and in the Minneapolis Public Library, while rocking chairs were a part of the ladies' reading rooms in the Buffalo library (where there were at least five such chairs) and in the Tacoma library when it was housed in the City Hall in the mid 1890s (see figs. 4, 6). Tables, too, are noteworthy. While the general reading rooms provided serious readers with large rectangular tables that encouraged extended, solitary examination of hefty tomes, ladies' reading rooms typically provided tables that suggested a very different interaction with books. In Tacoma, for instance, the tables in the ladies' reading

room were smaller than their counterparts in other parts of the library and, in some cases, were designated for letter writing rather than for reading and note taking. In Newark, the ladies' reading room included a large round-top table—the only round table in the building—that mimicked the shape of the parlor center table (fig. 7). In the ladies' reading room in Minneapolis, tables were almost nonexistent, and most of the chairs in the room, with their low, upholstered seats, were not intended to be used with tables at all (see fig. 4).²⁴

Other furnishings often completed the parlorlike atmosphere. The ladies' reading room was often the only public room provided with carpeting and draperies, furnishings particularly associated with domestic comfort in that they softened, at least visually, the hard, architectonic edges of

²⁴ Bowker, “Some Libraries of the Northwest,” pp. 78–79.

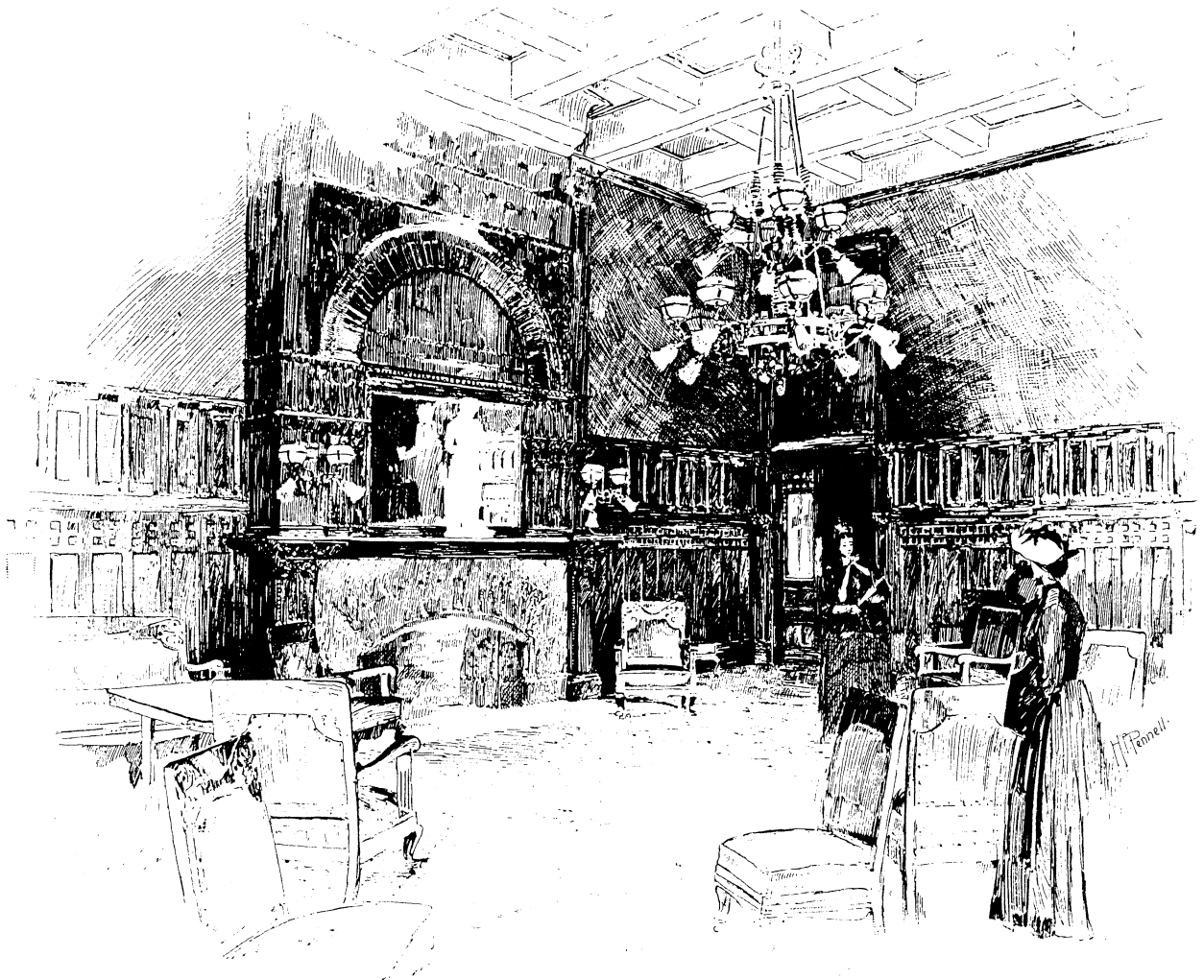


Fig. 4. Ladies' reading room, Minneapolis Public Library. From *The Public Library, Minneapolis: Described and Illustrated* (New York: Exhibit Publishing, 1890).

the building. This was explicitly stated in contemporary descriptions of the ladies' reading room in the Buffalo library, which noted that "its floor is made soft with rugs, and it is furnished with the most comfortable of chairs." Like the domestic parlor, the ladies' reading room was also devoted to the celebration of beauty, as revealed in both art and nature. Not only were such rooms favorite places to display individual works of art (including plaster casts of classical sculpture, paintings, prints, and photographs of historic monuments), but they were often fitted out with the most ornate and "artistic" furnishings in the library (see figs. 3–6). Thanks to contemporary aesthetic theory, which interpreted nature as the ultimate

source of beauty, natural motifs were particularly popular and appeared in many media, including stained-glass windows, elaborately carved mantel-pieces, and frescoes. Indeed, at the Hackley Public Library in Muskegon, Michigan (designed by Patton and Fisher, opened 1890), the ladies' reading room was decorated with frescoes depicting "sprays of roses and other flowers to lighten the general effect." In many libraries, the beauty of the natural world was introduced into the ladies' reading room with a vase of cut flowers or a potted plant (see fig. 3). Although plaster casts, paintings, and plants sometimes appeared in other parts of the library, ladies' reading rooms were particularly associated with beauty, thanks in



Fig. 5. Peoria Public Library, Peoria, Ill., ca. 1897. (Photo, Peoria Public Library.) Ladies' reading alcove in rear.

large part to the highly visible role of women's clubs in furnishing these rooms with things artistic. In Seattle, for instance, published accounts noted the effort of the ladies' society, "which has special charge of this room, and provides a special fund for pictures and books on art, which are displayed in it."²⁵

In some cases, the analogy with parlor fittings was remarkably thorough. In 1889 in the Newark library, the ladies' reading room was a relatively small space (22' × 23') with a wide fireplace and tiled hearth flanked by built-in oak settles in an arrangement that mimicked the domestic inglenook that was often a part of contemporary houses in the Queen Anne style (fig. 7). Upholstered in Spanish leather and supported by carved ends, these settles matched the other furniture in the room, including a sofa, chairs, and a large round-top table. Other ornamentation in-

cluded a "richly moulded and carved" chimneypiece, stained-glass windows over the mantel shelf, and handsome wrought-iron andirons. On the floor, Oriental rugs "of harmonious coloring" completed the homelike atmosphere of the room. In the public library building in Minneapolis, the ladies' reading room was more than twice that size, but its elaborately carved mantelpiece, works of sculpture, carpeted floors, draperies, and informal arrangement of chairs evoked both the culture and comfort associated with the domestic parlor (see fig. 4).²⁶

Not every library board was willing to provide such capital-intensive displays of hominess, but many did include one or two parlor elements as a material culture shorthand for domesticity and,

²⁵ *Buffalo Library*, p. 30; *The Hackley Public Library of Muskegon, Michigan* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1891), p. 89; Bowker, "Some Libraries of the Northwest," p. 79.

²⁶ "Newark (N.J.) Library," p. 440. For the symbolic associations of the domestic parlor, see Katherine C. Grier, "The Decline of the Memory Palace: The Parlor after 1890," in Jessica Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds., *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), pp. 53-54.



Fig. 6. Ladies' reading room, Buffalo Public Library, Buffalo, N.Y. From *The Buffalo Library and Its Building, Illustrated with Views* (Buffalo, N.Y.: By the library, 1887), opp. p. 30.

by extension, femininity. For instance, when the public library in Paterson, New Jersey, opened in the converted Danforth house in 1890, the ladies' reading room was the only public room with carpeting. By the early twentieth century, the librarian in San Diego quipped that the only way to tell the difference between the sex-segregated periodical rooms "was that the women's reading room held a potted palm."²⁷

How are we to interpret these material trappings of domesticity? Were they an attempt to anticipate female tastes? Were the upholstered chairs, round tables, draperies, and sculptural busts simply intended to make middle-class female readers feel more comfortable by giving them the sorts of furnishings that they themselves

might have selected for their own homes? Was it inevitable that public facilities for women mimic the domestic parlor?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to consider the town libraries established by women's study clubs in the trans-Appalachian West in the late nineteenth century. While these libraries have recently been recognized for the important part they played in the growth of the public library movement, they also constitute an unusually good example of a public space furnished and administered by middle-class women without male interference. Although such libraries often depended on the good will of male elected officials to secure rent-free rooms in the city hall or county courthouse, they were otherwise under the control of club women who volunteered their time to furnish, arrange, and supervise the library facilities. Despite the frequent use of furnishings cast off from private households, these town libraries were often devoid of domestic imagery.

²⁷ G. F. Winchester, "The Danforth Library Building," *Library Journal* 16, no. 10 (October 1891): 308. Althea Warren, San Diego city librarian 1916–26, quoted in Clara E. Breed, *Beginnings: San Diego Public Library History, 1882–1970* (San Diego: By the library, 1970), p. 3.

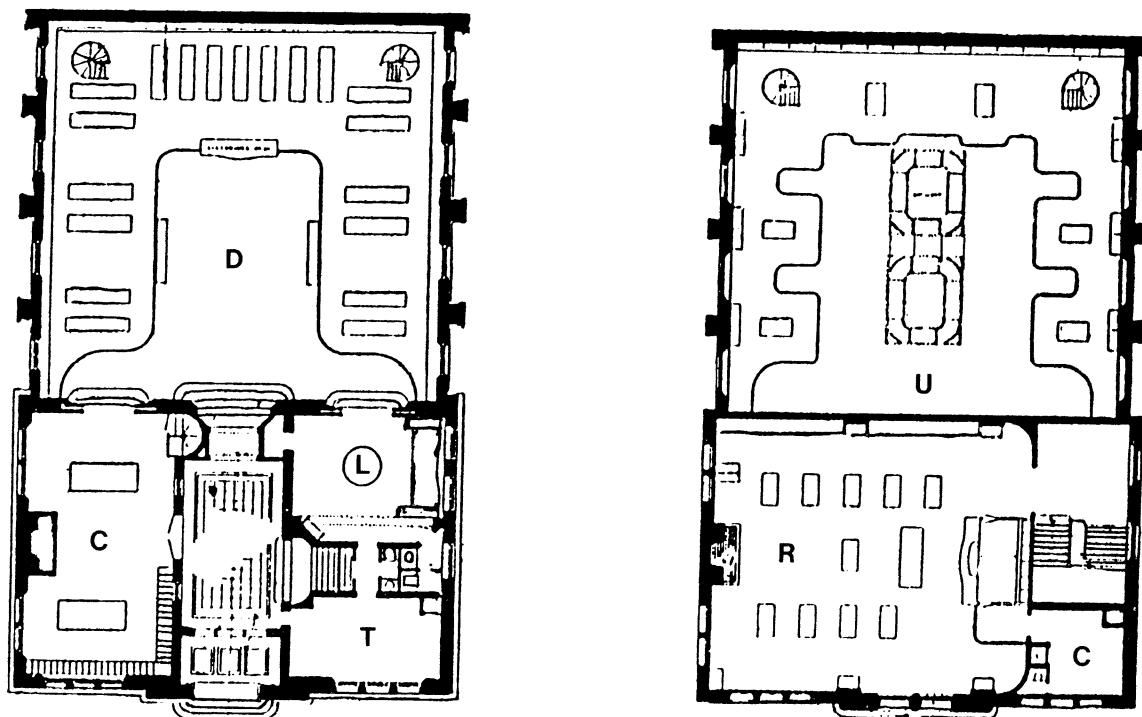


Fig. 7. First- and second-floor plans, Newark Free Public Library, Newark, N.J. From "The Newark (N.J.) Free Public Library," *Library Journal* 14, no. 11 (November 1889): 439. *Left (first-floor plan)*: C = catalogue room; L = ladies' parlor; T = trustees' room; D = delivery area and book storage. *Right (second-floor plan)*: R = general reading room; Co = coat room; U = upper part of book storage.

The turn-of-the-century library room in Xenia, Ohio, is a case in point. As Helen Hooven Santmyer remembered it, the old library was

a great rectangular room; windows in the side wall looked down behind and beneath the stairs to the alley below; those at the end offered a view of a jumble of roofs, ending with the sheriff's house and the barred windows of the county jail. In the center of the floor was a railed enclosure and the librarians' desk; two rows of round posts, painted public institution brown, held up the ceiling, and bookcases—tall walnut bookcases with glass doors—stood against the wall all around the room . . . the top shelves were not only out of reach—they were out of sight; however much you suspected that those were the best books, you could only hope that Miss McElwain put up there the ones that no one wanted.

The floor-to-ceiling glass-front bookcases that figure so largely in Santmyer's description, the railed enclosure, and other spatial barriers limited the readers' freedom of movement and emphasized the library's institutional quality. Their presence suggests that club women aspired to create settings that were more like the professional

and commercial offices of their husbands and brothers than the domestic settings they arranged at home. In short, a parlorlike setting for the ladies' reading room was hardly inevitable. Rather, it suggests a culturally significant choice on the part of public library organizers.²⁸

Locating the Ladies' Reading Room

The ladies' reading room may have been furnished like the domestic parlor, but it functioned in very different ways. The domestic parlor was ar-

²⁸ Helen Hooven Santmyer, *Ohio Town* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1963; reprint, New York: Berkley Books, 1985), p. 202. For late nineteenth-century commercial spaces, see James M. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store: The Business Evolution of an Architectural Space* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 52–54; William Leach, "Strategies of Display and the Production of Desire," in Simon J. Bronner, ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1989), pp. 100–106; Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America," in Bronner, *Consuming Visions*, pp. 339–56.

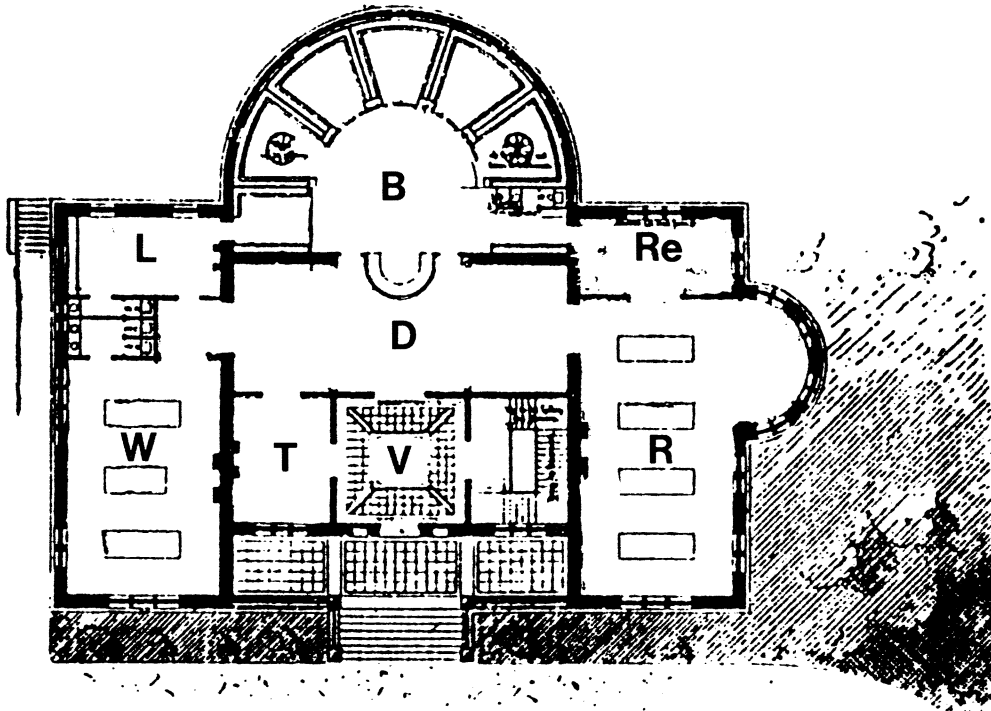


Fig. 8. Cummings and Sears, first-floor plan, unbuilt competition entry for Woburn, Mass., public library. From "Design for the Woburn Library," *American Architect and Building News* 2, no. 63 (March 10, 1877): between pp. 76 and 77. W = women's reading room; T = trustees' room; V = vestibule; R = general reading room; L = librarian's room; Re = reference room; D = delivery area; B = book storage.

guably the most important room in the middle-class house, its importance marked by its large size, by its prominent location at the front of the house, and by the expense and care devoted to its furnishings. The setting for the most intense social interaction between residents and visitors, the parlor was the public face of a private space. In some circumstances, the parlor was the only part of the house that visitors would see, and in those cases, it was called upon to represent the whole house. In contrast, the ladies' reading room played no such central role. In fact, its size, shape, and location reveal its somewhat conflicted position in the hierarchy of public library space.

An important consideration for the ladies' reading room was its relationship to the newspaper reading room, a place that conventional library wisdom identified with the library loafer, who came to the library primarily to consult the racing news. The loafer's threat to library respectability was real enough that by the 1890s some British librarians began to advocate blacking out the betting news from library newspapers, while

in the United States many small towns opted to forgo the newspaper reading room altogether. Libraries that maintained their newspaper subscriptions sought to isolate the loafer from respectable female readers by placing the newspaper reading room at some distance from the ladies' reading room, often on another floor. In Buffalo, for instance, the ladies' reading room was located on the second floor, directly over the newspaper reading room. In Minneapolis the ladies' reading room shared the main floor with the other polite functions of the library while the newspaper reading room was consigned to the basement. If the ladies' reading room was figuratively and literally placed in a secondary position to the general reading room intended for the use of "serious readers." This hierarchy of spaces was sometimes difficult to maintain. In the first Boston Public Library building, the general reading room occupied the entire second floor in order to accommodate the multilevel galleries that allowed serious readers to enjoy visual access to the entire book collection. In such an arrangement, the la-

dies' reading room was relegated to the floor below, uncomfortably close to the periodical and newspaper reading room.²⁹

In subsequent decades, American libraries increasingly used differences in room size and shape to signal the secondary importance of the ladies' reading room. Not only were ladies' reading rooms smaller, but they were also often planned as simple rectangles. In contrast, the general reading room was often given a special shape, and by the 1880s and 1890s, it was common to see such rooms with large curved bays and bow windows. This was the case in two unbuilt designs by Cummings and Sears for the library in Woburn, Massachusetts (a commission that eventually went to H. H. Richardson), at the Minneapolis Public Library, and at the O. B. Dodge Library (figs. 8, 9).³⁰

Finally, adjacencies were often used to distinguish between ladies' reading rooms and general reading rooms. In many cases, the general reading room communicated directly with the reference room, while ladies' reading rooms were more likely to be adjacent to less intellectually stimulating library facilities, either the children's room (as in the San Diego Public Library, designed by Ackerman and Ross, opened 1902), the trustees' room (as in the Newark library and in the later of the two Cummings and Sears plans for the Woburn library), or the librarian's office (as in the Minneapolis Public Library). It is unclear whether this placement was intended to protect female readers from the library loafer or whether it was to allow library officials to supervise female readers who were increasingly maligned—especially in the British press—as the class of reader most likely to deface library property by cutting out fashion plates and other illustrations from magazines (see figs. 7–9).³¹

²⁹ For British discussions of the newspaper room, see J. Elliot, "Extinction of the Betting Evil in Public Newsrooms," *Library* 5 (1893): 193–94; R. K. Dent, "Introduction to Discussion on Blacking Out of Sporting News in Libraries," *Library* 6 (1894): 127–29. For the Boston situation, see Breisch, "Small Public Libraries," pp. 91–93. According to Walter Muir Whitehill, "the high standard of decorum among users of the library made such segregation of the sexes unnecessary" (Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956], p. 57).

³⁰ "Design for the Woburn Library," *American Architect and Building News* 2, no. 63 (March 10, 1877): between pp. 76 and 77.

³¹ "Free Public Library, San Diego, California," *Architectural Record* 9, no. 1 (January 1902): 48. For women as library criminals, see "Ladies in Libraries," p. 420; B. Wood, "Women's Reading Rooms," *Library* 4 (1892): 108–11; Amian L. Champneys,

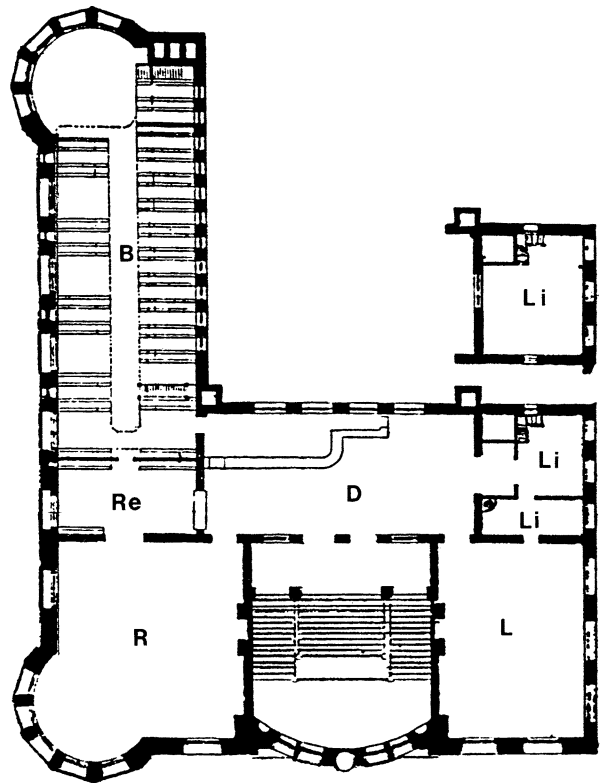


Fig. 9. First-floor plan, Minneapolis Public Library. From "The Minneapolis Public Library," *Library Journal* 16, no. 6 (June 1891): 177. R = general reading room; L = ladies' reading room; Re = reference room; D = delivery room; Li = librarian's room; B = book storage.

Ladies' Reading Room as Spectacle

The issue of the visual connection between the ladies' reading room and the rest of the library was of particular concern to Victorian Americans, for whom the unwanted male gaze—the leer—was taken as a serious threat to female purity. Women who called attention to their bodies—through dress, through demeanor, or through the simple use of public conveniences—were particularly vulnerable. Thus, ladies' reading rooms were often arranged to provide female readers with discrete entrances to toilet facilities. A case in point is the Brooks Library, which opened in Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1887. There, reading rooms for men and women were identical in size and shape, but the ladies' reading room provided direct access to the ladies' toilet via a corner door

Public Libraries: A Treatise on Their Design, Construction, and Fittings (London: B. T. Batsford, 1907), p. 88.

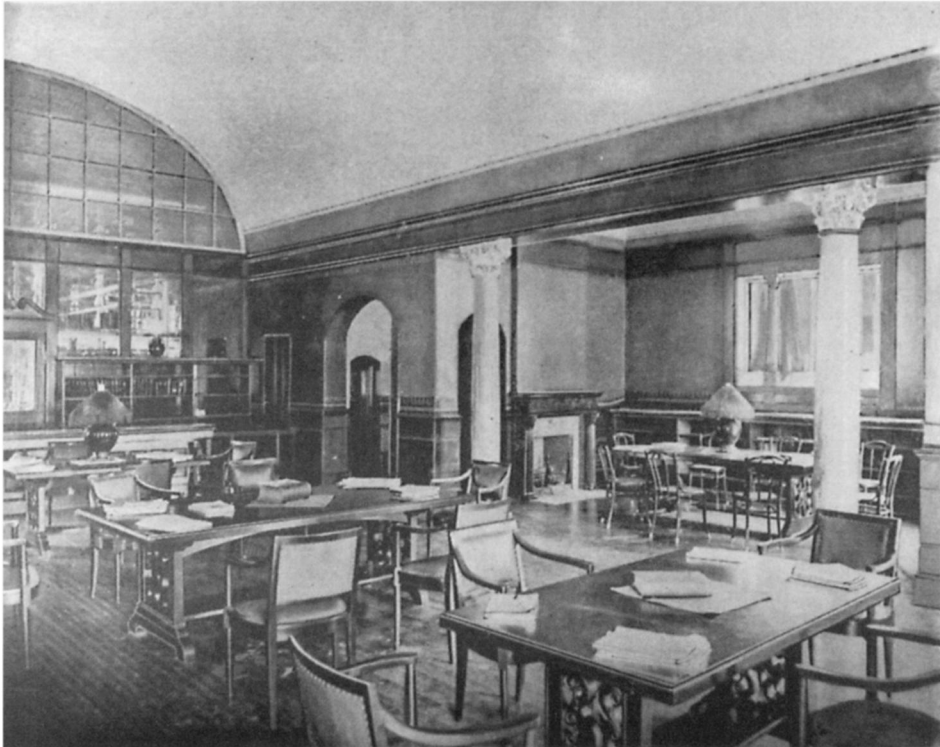


Fig. 10. Stratford Library, Stratford, Conn. From *Stratford Public Library: Dedication Exercises* (Bridgeport, Conn.: By the library, 1896), opp. p. 16.

that was invisible from other parts of the library. In contrast, the toilet facilities for men opened directly into the public delivery room. There was a similar arrangement at the Carnegie Free Library (designed by Smithmeyer and Pelz, opened 1890) in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, where a small reading alcove for ladies provided access to what one newspaper account described as “a cozy resort where all the operations of the toilette can be performed in agreeable seclusion.” Ladies’ reading rooms in the Portland, Oregon, Library Association Building (designed by William M. Whidden, opened 1893), in the Buffalo Public Library, in the Newark Free Public Library, and in the Cummings and Sears designs for the Woburn library likewise shielded the door of the women’s toilet from general view (see figs. 7, 8).³²

³² For Victorian prohibitions on calling attention to bodily functions, see Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, pp. 124–26. For British debates about public toilets for women, see Walker, “Vistas of Pleasure,” p. 77. On Allegheny City situation, see “Andrew Carnegie’s Gift,” *The Bulletin*, clipping preserved in the Carnegie Corporation Archives, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. It is also worth noting that the men’s toilet could be reached either through the public delivery room or directly from the librarian’s private office, a clear indication that librarianship was still understood to be a male profession in the 1880s. See also “The Brooks Library Building,” *Library Journal* 12, no. 3 (March

Yet protection from the male gaze was rarely absolute. In many cases, the ladies’ reading room was not a separate room at all but rather an alcove off the main reading room. Such rooms allowed male scrutiny of female readers and, in some cases, actually encouraged visual contact by framing the view into the ladies’ reading room with elaborate architectural elements. In the Stratford, Connecticut, library (designed by W. H. Miller, opened 1896), the ladies’ reading room was as open for general viewing as the periodical room; both areas were located in alcoves off the main reading room, with wide openings framed by “columns running from floor to ceiling, of the same materials as the outside walls, but highly polished, and finished with elegantly carved caps” (fig. 10). The O. B. Dodge Library was arranged in a similar way, with the ladies’ reading room and a “file and reading room” located in alcoves on either side of the general reading room; in this case, a centrally placed fireplace in the ladies’ reading room emphasized the symmetry of the space, giving it the character of a shad-

1887): 130–34; “Portland Library Association Building,” *Library Journal* 20, no. 3 (March 1895): opp. p. 79.

owbox (see fig. 3). At the Peoria Public Library, female readers found themselves in a stagelike area, brilliantly lit by windows on two sides and carefully framed by three round-head arches (the only round-head arches on the main floor) supported by classical columns (see fig. 5). In Minneapolis the ladies' reading room was a self-contained room, but the prominent position of the mirror over the ornate fireplace may have served to remind female readers to consider themselves on display (see fig. 4).³³

The frequency with which ladies' reading rooms were visible from the other public areas of the library suggests that not every incidence of the male gaze was construed as a leer that threatened to disrupt the social order. The male gaze, appropriately directed, could also maintain the social order. On one hand, it reinforced female virtue by policing behavior of women. On the other, it encouraged male morality by exposing men to the uplifting image of female respectability. In this sense, the goal of the ladies' reading room was never the total physical segregation of the sexes. Instead, the ladies' reading room provided a carefully constructed stage on which female readers were encouraged to enact an ongoing spectacle of respectable femininity, perusing light literature, in relaxed postures, surrounded by material symbols of their essentially domestic nature. Like *tableaux vivants* that often used the silent, motionless female form to educate and enlighten a predominantly male audience, ladies' reading rooms facilitated and even celebrated a public enactment of private virtues. To the extent that such virtues were understood to be class and gender specific, segregated ladies' facilities were an important tool for introducing orderliness into the heterogeneous city.³⁴

The Decline of the Ladies' Reading Room

The practice of providing sex-segregated reading facilities began to decline in the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. To be

sure, a few new library buildings were designed with ladies' reading rooms around the turn of the century, including the previously discussed O. B. Dodge Library and the Carnegie-financed library in San Diego. Likewise, the Danforth library building in Paterson, New Jersey, retained its ladies' reading room after undergoing a substantial enlargement in 1901, as did the Carnegie Free Library in Allegheny City. Yet ladies' reading rooms were increasingly dismantled, often with so little fanfare that it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date. The Cleveland Public Library had provided a separate area for women when the library facilities in the Cleveland Board of Education building were rearranged in 1893, but no such accommodation was provided when the library moved into new quarters in 1901. In Portland, Oregon, it is unclear how long the ladies' reading room in the 1893 building functioned as originally designed; certainly, a new central library building opened in 1913 without a ladies' reading room. In the San Diego Public Library, the men's and women's reading rooms were combined into one periodical room in 1915, while at the Carnegie library in Allegheny City, the ladies' reading room was dismantled sometime before 1931.³⁵

In large part, the decline of the ladies' reading room was hastened by the professionalization of librarianship and its new emphasis on public service. Like workers in many middle-class occupations who aspired to professional status, librarians increasingly linked their work to progressive social reform efforts, redefining the library as an integral part of the scientifically determined process of public education. In so doing, they enhanced their public image and found an unsailable argument for finally wresting responsibility for library design away from library trustees and trustee-hired architects.³⁶

Allowing readers direct access to the books and providing service to children were two of the most important innovations associated with the social reform efforts of the American public library. Both had profound implications for library

³³ "The Stratford Library," *Scientific American, Building Edition* (June 1896): 95. For the mirror as a device to remind women that they were on display, see Brucken, "In the Public Eye."

³⁴ For *tableaux vivants* and other parlor theatricals, see Karen Haltunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 174-87; Robert M. Lewis, "Tableaux Vivants: Parlor Theatricals in Victorian America," *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 8, no. 36 (April 1988): 280-91.

³⁵ "Danforth Library Building," *Bulletin of the Paterson Free Public Library* 4, no. 1 (December 1901): 13; *Eleventh Annual Report of the Carnegie Free Library, Allegheny City* (n.p., 1901); *Plans, Views, and Descriptions of the Free Public Library Building of Cleveland* (Cleveland: Free Public Library, 1893); *Annual Report of the Cleveland Public Library* (Cleveland: By the library, 1901), pp. 60-62.

³⁶ For links between librarianship and social reform, see Garrison, *Apostles of Culture*, pp. 196-225; Van Slyck, *Free to All*, pp. 174-76.

facilities in the early twentieth century. Communities lucky enough to erect a new building in these years (often with the aid of a Carnegie grant) tended to dedicate a substantial part of the main floor to a children's reading room. In fact, guidelines for library planning published by the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 1911 recommended devoting a full half of the library's main floor to the use of young readers but ignored completely the once-common practice of providing a room for the exclusive use of women. For communities that eked out space for new library services in nineteenth-century library buildings, instituting a children's area could mean losing a ladies' reading room. At the Hackley Library in Muskegon, Michigan, the children's department was opened on the second floor in 1922 in a room that had originally served as the director's office. That function was, in turn, eventually moved into the space that had been designed in 1888 as the ladies' reading room.³⁷

Equally important, these changes in library philosophy prompted professional librarians to temper their fear of the library loafer. Indeed, in order to defend the library's social usefulness (as well as their own), they needed to maintain their faith that working-class readers were redeemable, susceptible to the library's power to uplift. It is true that many leaders in the field, men such as Arthur Bostwick of St. Louis, continued to complain about the tendency of newspaper rooms to attract "the tramp element—rough and often dirty persons who come to lounge or rest, perhaps to sleep, rarely to read." Yet, in identifying homeless "tramps" as the problem group, librarians had made a subtle shift in their thinking. Untrustworthy library users certainly still existed, but they were now defined as outsiders rather than community members, as the exception rather than the rule. To the extent that the specter of the library loafer faded from the library imagination, so too did the stereotype of the vulnerable female reader in need of protection in a sex-segregated reading room.³⁸

At the same time, twentieth-century librarians

were less likely to embrace the idea of innate female moral superiority. Given the new emphasis on professional training as the basis for their claims to professional status, librarians—including a growing number of female librarians—were loathe to accept the suggestion that the mere presence of any woman might enhance the library's efficacy at social uplift. Certainly, those who encouraged women's entry into the profession argued that some aspects of librarianship were particularly well suited to innately feminine qualities. John Cotton Dana, Newark's librarian, called upon conventional female stereotypes to support his claim that women were well suited to many aspects of library work, including cataloguing, classifying, indexmaking, and book repair. Yet the characteristics that he identified as particularly female had nothing to do with moral superiority, stressing instead a view of the ideal woman as pleasant, malleable, accurate, and detail oriented. Even when women rejected these passive roles in favor of more active participation in work with children, they were careful to use the new field of child psychology—not innate moral superiority—as the theoretical basis of their claims to professional expertise.³⁹

In short, modern library theory turned the tables on all of the arguments that had once supported the ladies' reading room. Where library order had once been maintained through the provision of a number of small reading rooms, modern libraries maintained order with open planning. Where libraries had once sought to limit (but not eradicate) the visual contact between readers of different sexes and different classes, modern libraries equalized all clients and sought to facilitate surveillance by the library staff. Where women were once perceived as potential victims who threatened to disrupt library order by attracting the unwanted leers of fellow readers, women increasingly adopted a professional persona in modern libraries, enforcing library order by deploying a stern glance of their own. Where women's primary role in the library had once been as passive spectacle, they emerged in the modern library as active participants in the library scene.

³⁷ For the impact of the Carnegie library program on children's reading rooms, see Van Slyck, *Free to All*, pp. 179–92. For the rearrangement of the Hackley Library, see Marilyn Andersen, *The Hackley Public Library: A Centennial History* (Muskegon: Marilyn Andersen, Hackley Public Library, and Public Schools of the City of Muskegon, 1990).

³⁸ Arthur E. Bostwick, *The American Public Library* (New York: D. Appleton, 1910), p. 67.

³⁹ John Cotton Dana, "Women in Library Work," *The Independent* 71, no. 3270 (August 3, 1911): 244–50. For women and professional librarianship, see Van Slyck, *Free to All*, pp. 173–92; Garrison, *Apostles of Culture*, pp. 207–17.

Conclusions

Ladies' reading rooms established in American public libraries in the late nineteenth century did not welcome women as full participants in the public sphere. Rather they played an active role in reproducing a particular set of gender assumptions. Their design and location suggest that they constituted a partitioning of the public sphere through the provision of specially arranged settings that encouraged female readers to assume culturally prescribed postures of genteel femininity. Like the *tableaux vivants* that were a favorite activity of the study clubs organized by middle-class women, such public enactments were primarily for the consumption of a male audience; the stretching of a woman's mind was not prohibited, but it certainly was not the primary goal of the exercise. Indeed, the ladies' reading room marked its users as a special category in the library world, confirming the assumption that serious readers and female readers were two distinct groups. Offered as a means of protecting female respectability in the public realm, the ladies' reading room also served to reinforce—even to naturalize—a socially constructed hierarchy of library readers based on class and gender.

The decline of the ladies' reading room in the

public library marked important changes in the social dynamics of the American city, changes that point to the close connection between attitudes toward class and ideas about gender. When the Victorian world had sought social stability by maintaining class distinctions, respectable women were deployed to police the line between classes. On display in the ladies' reading room, middle-class women were boundary markers between the genteel world of the trustees and the suspect world of the loafer. In contrast, the Progressive generation hoped to produce social stability by eradicating class distinctions (although in practice they often confused a classless society with one that achieved universal adherence to middle-class standards of behavior). In this setting, respectable women—as librarians—were now expected to bridge a gap that they had once helped maintain. Working at the circulation desk or in the children's room, middle-class women played mother to immigrant children and were instrumental in campaigns to introduce them to middle-class modes of gentility. In the early twentieth century, middle-class women were still deployed along an unstable cultural frontier, but the frontier itself had shifted away from the confrontation between the lady and library loafer that had once been staged in the ladies' reading room.

Appendix

American Public Libraries with Ladies' Reading Rooms

Date	City	Building	Architect	Building status
Opened 1859	Boston	First Boston Public Library	Charles Kirk Kirby	demolished 1899
Designed 1875	Woburn, Mass.	competition entry 1	Cummings and Sears	never built
Designed 1876	Woburn, Mass.	competition entry 2	Cummings and Sears	never built
Opened 1883	San Diego	Commercial Bank, second floor	—	library moved to fourth floor, 1889
Published 1885	—	ideal plan	William Poole	never built
Opened 1887	Buffalo, N.Y.	Buffalo Public Library	Cyrus Eidlitz	demolished
Opened 1887	Brattleboro, Vt.	Brooks Library Building	J. M. Currier	demolished 1966
Opened 1887	Belchertown, Mass.	Clapp Memorial Library	H. F. Kilburn	standing
Opened 1889	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Public Library	Long and Kees	demolished 1961
Opened 1889	Newark, N.J.	Newark Free Public Library	Van Kampen Taylor	demolished
Opened 1889	San Diego	Commercial Bank, fourth floor	—	library moved out of building, 1893
Opened 1890	Allegheny City, Pa.	Carnegie Free Library	Smithmeyer and Pelz	standing
Opened 1890	Paterson, N.J.	converted Danforth house	—	demolished
Opened 1890	Muskegon, Mich.	Hackley Public Library	Patton and Fisher	standing
Opened 1893	Portland, Oreg.	Library Association Building	William M. Whidden	library moved to new quarters, 1913
Opened 1893	Tacoma, Wash.	City Hall	Hatherton and McIntosh	standing, city vacated in 1959
Rearranged 1893	Cleveland	Board of Education Building	—	demolished, ca. 1901
Opened 1894	Seattle, Wash.	Collins office building	—	—
Opened 1894	Hoboken, N.J.	Free Public Library and Manual Training School	Albert Beyer	standing
Opened 1896	Stratford, Conn.	Stratford Library	W. H. Miller	standing
Opened 1897	Peoria, Ill.	Peoria Public Library	Richardson and Salter	demolished 1966
Opened 1901	Dixon, Ill.	O. B. Dodge Library	W. A. Otis and Morrison H. Vail	standing
Enlarged 1901	Paterson, N.J.	converted Danforth house	—	—
Opened 1902	San Diego	San Diego Public Library	Ackerman and Ross	demolished 1952