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# Public Libraries in the Smart City

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This book is the culmination of over two years of collaboration between us encompassing research, writing, interviews, and countless visits to public libraries. It began with a conversation about how strongly libraries seemed to be aligning themselves with wider visions of urban redevelopment and economic prosperity, and how little this had been addressed in the scholarly literature. Our observations evolved into a public seminar, a few conference papers, two research grants, a co-authored article, and a white paper. When we realised we had more to say on this topic, we embarked upon this book.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: More Than Just a Library

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the key argument of this book, which concerns the role of public libraries within the smart city. We argue that the expansion of the library into other sectors of social and cultural life is connected to the economic development strategies of the cities in which they are built. As we outline, this is becoming particularly apparent in ‘smart city’ visions, made possible by the ubiquity of networked technologies, which numerous cities are adopting to position themselves as efficient, innovative, and liveable. The chapter situates this trend within broader contemporary debates about the library’s social and cultural significance, and provides an outline of the structure of the book.

**Keywords** Digitisation · Public libraries · Smart cities

Frank (Frank Langella) is the ageing protagonist of Jake Schrier’s 2012 film, *Robot & Frank*. Suffering from dementia in a time marginally ahead of our own, he is being cared for by a domestic robot. His friend, Jennifer (Susan Sarandon), works at the local library. Early in the film, Frank visits the library to return some books. This vaguely Carnegie-style building looks familiar to us, a comfortable, shabby space where Jennifer duct-tapes the spines of some well-worn books on dusty wooden shelves. The only incongruous feature here is Mr. Darcy, a book-sorting robot, who, according to Jennifer, ‘does all the real work anyway’. Hunting down a book for Frank, Jennifer explains that she won’t be duct-taping

books much longer—‘a new non-profit is taking over the library, and they want to “reimagine” the modern library experience’.

Revisiting the library later in the film, Frank observes that this transition is well underway. Books are being removed from the shelves to be scanned, digitised, and recycled. Dusty shelving has been replaced with retro-futurist furniture, minimalist sculptures, and shared working desks. A cool white light suffuses the space.

This time, Frank is greeted by Mr. Darcy, who has replaced Jennifer at the reception desk. ‘Where is the librarian?’ Frank asks. Deadpan, Mr. Darcy responds, ‘I am not familiar with that title’.

When Frank locates Jennifer she is talking to Jake (Jeremy Strong), the non-profit founder funding the library’s renovation. Jake says patronisingly to Frank, ‘you must remember the days when this library was the only way to learn about the world [...] I’d love to talk to you some more about your history with printed information. You’re our connection to the past, buddy’.

The library depicted in *Robot & Frank* is not a vision of the near future. It is a commonplace experience for many library visitors today—robots and a few other features aside (for now, at least). Bookshelves are disappearing or receding into designated ‘collections’ zones. Borrowing and library queries are increasingly being replaced by screen interfaces and automated services. And the interior décor of libraries more often resembles an artfully decorated studio apartment or tech start-up’s office than the sober furnishings of the traditional Carnegie-model library.

This fictional vignette encapsulates the transformation libraries are currently undergoing around the world, capturing the visible changes many readers may have noticed taking place in their own local libraries. Libraries began to incorporate digital technologies and platforms into their spaces from the late 1990s onwards. And while this might have changed the library’s interior design, only in the past decade or so have these technologies begun to impact more fundamentally upon *what a library is*.

*Robot & Frank* also humorously taps into familiar anxieties about how these changes will impact on the experience of visiting libraries as we embark upon a future of ubiquitous connectivity, automation, and digital disruption. Frank’s lament to Jennifer about the disappearance of physical books—‘what’s the point of a library if you can’t check out the books?’—reflects concerns (whether empirically informed or merely nostalgic) about how a paperless future might influence how we consume, digest, and share information. Meanwhile, the experience of being

greeted by a robot feeds into a growing ambivalence about an increasingly impersonalised service delivery environment, as mundane labour is outsourced to machines, public help desks are closed, and service providers turn to digital-by-default service models.

*Robot & Frank* eloquently indicates that a study of the transformation of the library, the subject of this book, is tied to broader philosophical questions. It brings to the fore issues of social and economic value, questions around how we retain continuity with the past and with others in our society, and of how we find comfort and meaning in what feels like a less human-centric world. In part, when we talk about the library being ‘more than just a library’, these basic human concerns are never far from the surface. They are, in many ways, what is at stake in the transformation we explore here.

\* \* \*

For millennia, libraries have been understood as media centres, reinventing themselves around the technologies through which information is encoded, organised, and accessed. In our efforts to understand their more recent history as public institutions in liberal democratic states, the library’s need for technological innovation must be understood as intertwined with its necessity for social invention. Public libraries have always been responsive to the changing needs and ambitions of the societies they serve. As such, they form part of the social infrastructure through which technology is embodied in social life (Wajcman 2002; Wyatt et al. 2018).

Along with museums, galleries, and universities, public libraries have been foundational to consolidating a shared public culture. Providing universal access to information—however this might be materially embodied and defined—they support the capacity to critically engage and participate in society. But the public library is unique among other cultural institutions because of the way it has, as Shannon Mattern (2007: 1) identifies, ‘served multiple social roles’ at once, ‘even those that are not related to information services’. Public libraries have been charged with educating populations and conscripting them into a modern public sphere. They have served a range of more instrumental agendas, from childhood literacy to bridging the digital divide. And when economic conditions have necessitated it, they have contributed directly to local economies by establishing commercial and trade departments and supporting emerging industries (Black and Pepper 2012). As Mattern (2014: 4) has argued, ‘At every stage, the contexts – spatial,

political, economic, cultural – in which libraries function have shifted; so they are continuously reinventing themselves and the means by which they provide those vital information services’.

While institutional reinvention is intrinsic to the history of the library, it is clear that the last fifteen years has been a period of intensified transformation. This transformation has been widespread, following similar patterns across library networks in North America, Europe, the UK, and parts of the Asia-Pacific. Digitisation is central to understanding what contemporary libraries have become. But so are other broad social changes related to an increasingly heterogeneous and diverse culture and the impacts of neoliberal governance on the funding and management of public institutions (Dudley 2013). All aspects of the contemporary library have been influenced by these broad shifts: the way it looks as a physical space; the kinds of practices and behaviours it invites; the way it envisions and relates to its public; how it engages with other institutions and organisations; and the role it plays in the city, the neighbourhood, the community, and the economy.

Recent library developments reflect the library’s responsiveness to a rapidly changing technological landscape. Online archives seemingly threatened to make the library’s role as repository of knowledge redundant in the 1990s, and digital platforms challenged the dominance of the book as the medium for learning and information exchange. When access to collections was no longer dependent upon access to the library as a physical site, libraries were compelled to radically reimagine their institutional model. While they have digitised their collections, becoming increasingly mobile and networked, this dematerialisation of the library as archive has gone hand in hand with an intensified attention to physical space. As the need to manage books and physical collections declines, libraries have invested in the idea of themselves as ‘third places’ (Oldenburg 1989): vital sites of public gathering, relaxation, and leisure situated between home and work.

In multicultural cities where a shared culture cannot be assumed, libraries are particularly valued as places for face-to-face cross-cultural interaction and meeting (Audunson 2005; Audunson et al. 2011). Libraries have actively encouraged this kind of informal use, investing in flexible and attractive furnishings and technological affordances like public screens and free Wi-fi to make people feel comfortable and at home in their spaces. At the same time, they have used their spaces in a more deliberate manner to attract new user communities and stimulate new

forms of use through targeted programming. They have customised collections and services to address different language groups, age groups, and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds—like running homework clubs for school students, or digital storytelling workshops for migrant women.

Libraries are ‘meso-level’ sites (Mansell 2002) that mediate between the community and the state. In their expanded form, they are assuming wider social significance, not simply as platforms for distributing knowledge, or as places for building community. Rather, the library has become an important civic asset for addressing the opportunities and challenges of an emerging digital culture and the transition to a knowledge economy. They are places that can accommodate the expectations, practices, and pleasures of a new generation of users, disposed towards ‘customization and interactivity’ (Holmberg et al. 2009: 669). They are being relied upon by governments in supporting the digitally excluded—those who lack access to the basic technologies and literacies essential to participating in society as a citizen (Jaeger et al. 2012). And they are increasingly positioning themselves as innovation hubs of the new economy, supporting entrepreneurial activity and the skills required to thrive in a digital future.

The transformation libraries are undergoing is multifaceted. It can, at times, appear contradictory. This is partly because the library’s newer functions—developing infrastructure for connectivity and remote access to their collections; providing users with the digital skills they need to navigate an online world; and providing enhanced spaces for the creation of content—have had to be brought into productive relation with the more traditional aspects of the library as meeting place, archive, and repository of public memory. But also, as flexible and adaptive institutions, responsive to both community needs ‘on the ground’ and more abstract governmental agendas, libraries are attempting to hold an increasingly divergent assemblage of different functions together within the one institutional model. Paulina Mickiewicz, discussing the Rolex Learning Centre at a Polytechnic in Lausanne, could be talking about many contemporary public libraries when she says:

What is noteworthy about the Centre is that although it blends all the elements of modern library design, it is not called a “library,” providing a vast range of services and space – from the library and study areas to cafés and restaurants. This is significant, as it suggests the current discourse that

holds that libraries are no longer “just libraries,” but a hybrid of different specializations and services that have come together to create a new public space. (2016: 239)

Her account echoes much of the commentary on this new wave of library development, and the recent attempts to capture how this unwieldy institution should be framed and understood (Wyatt et al. 2018; Mattern 2014; Weinberger 2012).

The expanded remit of the library is visible in the many investments in high-profile public libraries occurring in cities across the world. Typically, these libraries feature in large-scale urban redevelopment initiatives aimed at reinvigorating urban centres, supporting jobs in the digital economy, and helping communities transition towards a ‘digital future’. As we recount in the next chapter, high-profile developments like the Vancouver Public Library (1995), Peckham Public Library (London, 2000), library@esplanade (Singapore, 2002), Seattle’s Central Library (2004), and Biblioteca Parque España (Medellín, 2007) typify this new status of libraries in the city. Architecturally celebrated, these libraries focus as much on providing high-speed broadband and digital literacy workshops as on their physical collections and book clubs.

Many are co-located with other community and commercial spaces: galleries, performing arts spaces, maternal and child health care centres, local council service desks, office spaces, shopping centres, and even public pools. While this may be, in many cases, a gesture to convenience—placing core services together to increase accessibility—it also signals ‘a world of collapsing boundaries’ (McRobbie 2016: 15), in which the fundamental categories that have historically organised social life are no longer distinct and separate. In contemporary public libraries, public space is permeated by private digital platforms, commercial spaces like cafés and bookshops, and other forms of private enterprise: social services overlap with cultural life. As new networked media makes it easier and cheaper for people to produce their own content, libraries are supporting people to turn their hobbies into commercial enterprises. Conversely, hosting makerspaces, coworking spaces, and meetups, libraries facilitate social networking through which independent professionals and freelancers are building social and creative communities. The hybrid nature of contemporary libraries is both a reflection of and contributor to this wider reconfiguration of the way we live, learn, and work.