

Library as Platform

For millennia libraries have acquired resources, organized them, preserved them and made them accessible (or not) to patrons. But the forms of those resources have changed — from scrolls and codices; to LPs and LaserDiscs; to e-books, electronic databases and open data sets. Libraries have had at least to comprehend, if not become a key node within, evolving systems of media production and distribution. Consider the medieval scriptoria where manuscripts were produced; the evolution of the publishing industry and book trade after Gutenberg; the rise of information technology and its webs of wires, protocols and regulations. 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.

Libraries have also assumed a host of ever-changing social and symbolic functions. They have been expected to symbolize the eminence of a ruler or state, to integrally link “knowledge” and “power” — and, more recently, to serve as “community centers,” “public squares” or “think tanks.” Even those seemingly modern metaphors have deep histories. The ancient Library of Alexandria was a prototypical think tank, and the early Carnegie buildings of the 1880s were community centers with swimming pools and public baths, bowling alleys, billiard rooms, even rifle ranges, as well as book stacks. As the Carnegie funding program expanded internationally — to more than 2,500 libraries worldwide — secretary James Bertram standardized the design in his 1911 pamphlet “Notes on the Erection of Library Buildings,” which offered grantees a choice of six models, believed to be the work of architect Edward Tilton. Notably, they all included a lecture room.

In short, the library has always been a place where informational and social infrastructures intersect within a physical infrastructure that (ideally) supports that program.

Now we are seeing the rise of a new metaphor: the library as “platform” — a buzzy word that refers to a base upon which developers create new applications, technologies and processes. In an influential 2012 article in *Library Journal*, David Weinberger proposed that we think of libraries as “open platforms” — not only for the creation of software, but also for the development of knowledge and community. Weinberger argued that libraries should open up their entire collections, all their metadata, and any technologies they’ve created, and allow anyone to build new products and services on top of that foundation. The platform model, he wrote, “focuses our attention away from

the provisioning of resources to the foment” — the “messy, rich networks of people and ideas” — that “those resources engender.” Thus the ancient Library of Alexandria, part of a larger museum with botanical gardens, laboratories, living quarters and dining halls, was a platform not only for the translation and copying of myriad texts and the compilation of a magnificent collection, but also for the launch of works by Euclid, Archimedes, Eratosthenes and their peers.

[image]

Domnique Perrault, La bibliothèque nationale de France, literally elevated on a platform. [Photo by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra]

Yet the platform metaphor has limitations. For one thing, it smacks of Silicon Valley entrepreneurial epistemology, which prioritizes “monetizable” “knowledge solutions.” Further, its association with new media tends to bracket out the similarly generative capacities of low-tech, and even non-technical, library resources. One key misperception of those who proclaim the library’s obsolescence is that its function as a knowledge institution can be reduced to its technical services and information offerings. Knowledge is never solely a product of technology and the information it delivers.

Another problem with the platform model is the image it evokes: a flat, two-dimensional stage on which resources are laid out for users to do stuff with. The platform doesn’t have any implied depth, so we’re not inclined to look underneath or behind it, or to question its structure. Weinberger encourages us to “think of the library not as a portal we go through on occasion but as infrastructure that is as ubiquitous and persistent as the streets and sidewalks of a town.” It’s like a “canopy,” he says — or like a “cloud.” But these metaphors are more poetic than critical; they obfuscate all the wires, pulleys, lights and scaffolding that you inevitably find underneath and above that stage — and the casting, staging and direction that determine what happens on the stage, and that allow it to function as a stage. Libraries are infrastructures not only because they are ubiquitous and persistent, but also, and primarily, because they are made of interconnected networks that undergird all that foment, that create what Pierre Bourdieu would call “structuring structures” that support Weinberger’s “messy, rich networks of people and ideas.”

It can be instructive for our libraries’ publics — and critical for our libraries’ leaders — to assess those structuring structures. In this age of e-books, smartphones, firewalls, proprietary media platforms and digital rights management; of atrophying mega-bookstores and resurgent independent bookshops and a metastasizing Amazon; of Google Books and Google Search and Google Glass; of economic disparity and the continuing privatization of public space and services — which is simultaneously an age of democratized media production and vibrant DIY and activist cultures — libraries play

a critical role as mediators, at the hub of all the hubbub. Thus we need to understand how our libraries function as, and as part of, infrastructural ecologies — as sites where spatial, technological, intellectual and social infrastructures shape and inform one another. And we must consider how those infrastructures can embody the epistemological, political, economic and cultural values that we want to define our communities.

[image]

Hammond, Beeby and Babka, Harold Washington Library Center, Chicago Public Library. [Photo by Robert Dawson, from Public Library: An American Commons]