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**Libraries in Public before the Age of Public
Libraries: Interpreting the Furnishings and Design
of Athenaeums and Other ‘Social Libraries,’
1800-1860**

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THE LIBRARY AS PLACE

History, Community, and Culture

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Libraries in Public before the Age of Public Libraries: Interpreting the Furnishings and Design of Athenaeums and Other “Social Libraries,” 1800–1860¹

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the origins of the public library in America, there is no easy answer. As Jesse Shera described in his authoritative history *Foundations of the Public Library*, depending on whether the emphasis is on municipal ownership, free access and use, location or social function, many institutions could vie for the title of “first public library.” Shera argued that early public collections, held in district courts, state houses, or even in colleges, hardly seem to lead up to the opening of the Boston Public Library building in 1859. Instead of tracing mere governmental control, Shera told the history of the public library as an institution through the history of “social libraries,” a term he applies to the founding, in 1731, of the Library Company of Philadelphia (31). Given the intellectual and social goals of Benjamin Franklin’s “Junto,” this was a social library indeed—a place to converse as well as read, debate publicly as well as study quietly. In short, the earliest American libraries in public were a space apart, from both work and home—and their special uses can inform us how the space of libraries is used to this day.

This paper examines the design, decoration, and furnishing of “social libraries” and searches for what these material forms can tell us about the social function of these libraries in the years of their prominence, 1800 to 1860. Using the methods of Barbara G. Carson’s *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* to embed the analysis of architecture, furnishings, decoration, and design into the historical narrative of library development, I bring forward a variety of statements and insights from the documentary record. My work also uses a variety of sociological, anthropological, art-historical and historical approaches to illuminate the lost details of these vital institutions, and to see what they suggest about the leisure activities of urban workers. By understanding the character of the architecture and furnishing of the social libraries, in conversation with private forms as well as with other

newly created public spaces, I hope to provide a rich picture of what libraries in public meant in the first half of the nineteenth century.

UNCOVERING THE PLACE OF SOCIAL LIBRARIES

I focus this study on “social libraries” because I agree with Shera’s insight, namely, that these institutions set the tone for the development of the modern public library, especially in this period. In fact, the founding librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, C. C. Jewett, conducted a remarkable study of libraries in 1851, where he singled out “athenæums, lyceums, young men’s associations, mechanics’ institutions, mercantile libraries, &c.,” as “social libraries,” which he defined as “generally composed of popular works for reading rather than for reference” (189). These were semiprivate, membership-only institutions, established by the leading merchants of a community, either for their own exposure to fine arts or for civic debate—the athenæums and lyceums—or for the benefit of their workers, educating clerks striving to join the elite—the young men’s associations and mechanics’ institutions. Mercantile libraries, a more ambiguous term, could describe either type of institution. (While Shera has included public institutions like court libraries in his use of “social libraries” and has described these groups by mode of organization as either proprietary, partnership libraries, or subscription libraries [58–62], I will use “social libraries” to describe these overlapping types, and my term “libraries in public” for the broader group.)

The social library emerged at a time when young men seeking their fortunes moved into the cities, redefining the American landscape. America in the nineteenth century was an exceedingly diverse place, as freed blacks, Irish and German immigrants, Texan ranchers, and Southern planters populated a contentious, changing landscape. Yet this will be a narrower tale. In the nineteenth century, Americans opened trade to China, conquered land from Mexico, and crossed a continent in search of gold and farmland, but social libraries remained New England in spirit and, often, in geography. The product of young, white, middle- and upper-class aspiring entrepreneurs, social libraries sprouted up in the Northeast and, to a lesser extent, through the “Yankee Diaspora” where they sought their fortunes, from the Ohio Valley to St. Louis and California. Espousing a free-thinking, confident tone and valuing education and debate, these men built institutions free and open to their peers but exclusive, as Dana Nelson has argued—shunning those who were not white, not English-speaking, and, at times, those who were not male (Nelson). Regrettably, this account will ignore those that the social library ignored, but it felt fitting to mark the absence.

The organization of social libraries reached its peak in the Northeast in the years 1825 to 1835, and aspiring merchants moving West continued to found these libraries until the end of the nineteenth century (Shera 72–79; Glynn 371; Beckerman 5; Luckingham). These social libraries appeared at the same time that rooms in private homes were being specialized into libraries and parlors, sitting rooms, and bedrooms. In the following decades, weaker institutions closed or merged: for example, the amalgamation of the elite Social Library of New Haven and the New Haven Young Men’s Institute, in 1841, or the joining of the books held by the St. Louis Lyceum with the St. Louis Mercantile Library collections in 1851 (New Haven Young Men’s Institute; St. Louis Mercantile Library). Leaders of the social libraries also came to concentrate their efforts on the founding of modern public libraries, notably in the involvement of the Boston Athenæum members in the creation of the Boston Public Library and other public

libraries in the region (Story 196–197; Breisch). Some of those leaders even suggested donating their own institutions' collections to start the public libraries (Shera 123–124). By the time the Boston Public Library opened its own building in 1859, the era of the modern public library had begun, and the importance of social libraries as libraries in public had waned.

Perhaps because of this later fadeout, the layout and construction of social libraries have received scant attention, often placed among other libraries in public, and examined only for how their components are reflected in later modern public libraries. Kenneth Breisch's *Henry Hobson Richardson and the Small Public Library in America: A Study in Typology* described the "small libraries" H. H. Richardson planned and built, often for benefactors who were members of the Boston Athenaeum. Breisch considered the confluence of social factors, particularly class concerns, at play in the architecture and design of these "small libraries," and in his introduction, he approvingly quoted historian Dee Garrison's *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920* arguing that public libraries were a "rich focus for expressive meaning in Victorian America." The history of libraries is revealing, Garrison wrote, because

the belief that America was a radical democratic experiment in government; the sense of urban crisis and chaos; the fear of immigrant intruders; the emphasis upon family as guarantor of tradition; the discontent of women and labor; the hope that education would right the wrongs of poverty and crime; the hunger for education among the poor; the ambiguous paternalistic and humanitarian motives of reformers—all were as important to the content of library ritual [and decoration and design, we might add] as the need for a contented, disciplined, and busy wage force (Breisch, 14–15).

Yet when Breisch turned to predecessor libraries in public, he grouped the Redwood Library in Newport, Rhode Island (1748–1750), with Jefferson's Rotunda library at the University of Virginia (completed 1826), and the Yale College Library, the current Dwight Hall (1842–1846), in a run-up to declaring the first Boston Public Library building "the vanguard of modern library design" (56–77). Though three social libraries, the Redwood Library, the Library Company of Philadelphia's 1790 building, and the Boston Athenaeum's edifice (built 1847–1859) received mentions, Breisch's survey does not consider their design and decoration in any serious way. My work here is to recover some of that history.

THE LIBRARY IN THE HOME

In antebellum America, any reasonably successful young man could hope to own a home. While room specialization—separate rooms for different classes of activity—was just beginning to take hold, by the Civil War, the elite home would include a personal, private library (Clark 40). But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, ownership of books and a writing desk would not necessarily mean a dedicated library, even for the elite. In a painting from 1801 (Figure 3.1), James Prince, a wealthy merchant from Newburyport, Mass., gathered with his son by a desk for a portrait. Though the desk has shelves of books, the eye focuses on the quill and letter in Prince's hand, suggesting the importance of business over erudition. Historical records confirm that Prince and his son, at this early date, sit not in a library but merely in the corner of a first-floor, multipurpose room (Brewster, *James Prince and Son, William* [1801]; printed in Peterson, 1979, plate 13).



Figure 3.1 John Brewster Jr., *James Prince and Son, William*, oil, 1801. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Old Newbury.

Room specialization was a product of material prosperity. The various tasks of the eighteenth-century room, from entertainment and business during the day to sleeping at night, could now be parceled out to bedrooms and drawing rooms, parlors and libraries (Clark 40). Even with differentiation, though, a separate library was not the highest priority. In their influential pattern books for new standalone houses, neither Samuel Sloan nor the partnership of Alexander Jackson Davis (designs and illustrations) and Andrew Jackson Downing (strident text) included designated libraries in any of their more modest designs (Davis and Downing; Sloan). “Few cottages of moderate size have a room specially set apart for a library,” Downing wrote, and he suggested that a hanging bookcase in any spare corner would suffice (432). For Sloan, the fourth ground-floor room after the dining room, parlor, kitchen, marked “C” “would make a delightful sitting-room or library, according to the choice of the occupants” (Figure 3.2), while only larger homes could provide both a drawing-room and a library (166, 172). Only in Downing’s “villas”—houses with five rooms on the ground floor and “requiring the care of at least three or more servants”—did he clearly designate a room as a library (257).

Beyond having enough rooms, there was the question of what the library was for. Sloan described it as a “library or office, where the gentleman of leisure can enjoy his books and newspapers, or inhale the essence of a fragrant ‘Havana’” (83). The library was male space, where the comforts of elite life could be relished. For the aspiring class, the library was a refuge from both home and work responsibilities. Architecture historian Bainbridge Bunting, in describing life in Boston’s Back Bay, noted that the merchant’s exchange would close at two in the afternoon and dinner would not be served until three, so the library could “provide a quiet retreat where [the man of the house] might spend his afternoon in study or with his accounts” (Bunting 130). Downing, in contrast, saw the

DESIGN XX.
Country House for any Climate.



FIG. 79.

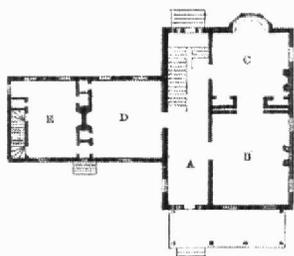


FIG. 80.—PRINCIPAL FLOOR.

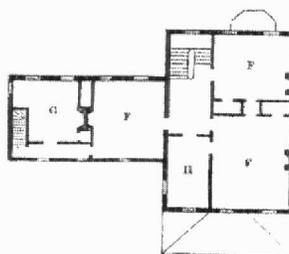


FIG. 81.—SECOND FLOOR. (170)

Figure 3.2 Design XX, “Country House for any Climate,” Figs. 79, 80, and 81, engraving, in Sloan, p. 170. The room marked “C,” Sloan wrote, “would make a delightful sitting-room or library, according to the choice of the occupants.” Samuel Sloan, *Sloan’s Homestead Architecture*, 1861, p. 172.

library more broadly: as “a separate apartment . . . devoted to intellectual culture,” it was merely “a retired and secluded room,” one that was “cosy and home-like,” which “will probably be the sitting-room of the family” (359, 324–325). For Downing’s audience, the male, business concerns of the library were shared with its role as an informal gathering place for family.

Whatever its use, everyone agreed on what made a room the library—the books. As a room for reading, good lighting and space for bookcases were necessities. Sloan prescribed “tastefully arranged and decorated book-shelves,” telling us that they should be “of course incorporated as a permanent fixture of the room” (153–154). Downing noted that, with a bay window, the room “will be lighted more agreeably than if the walls on each side were pierced with two smaller windows,” while on the other walls “an unbroken space is afforded on both sides for books” (306). Downing and others feared that the towering bookcases threatened to make the library “stiff,” but suggested it could remain “a room pleasant to work or play in” (Edis 189–190). This could be effected through the use of subtle colors “that never tire and always please,” utilized in wallpaper and stained glass (Davis and Downing 335–336). A place for the husband to

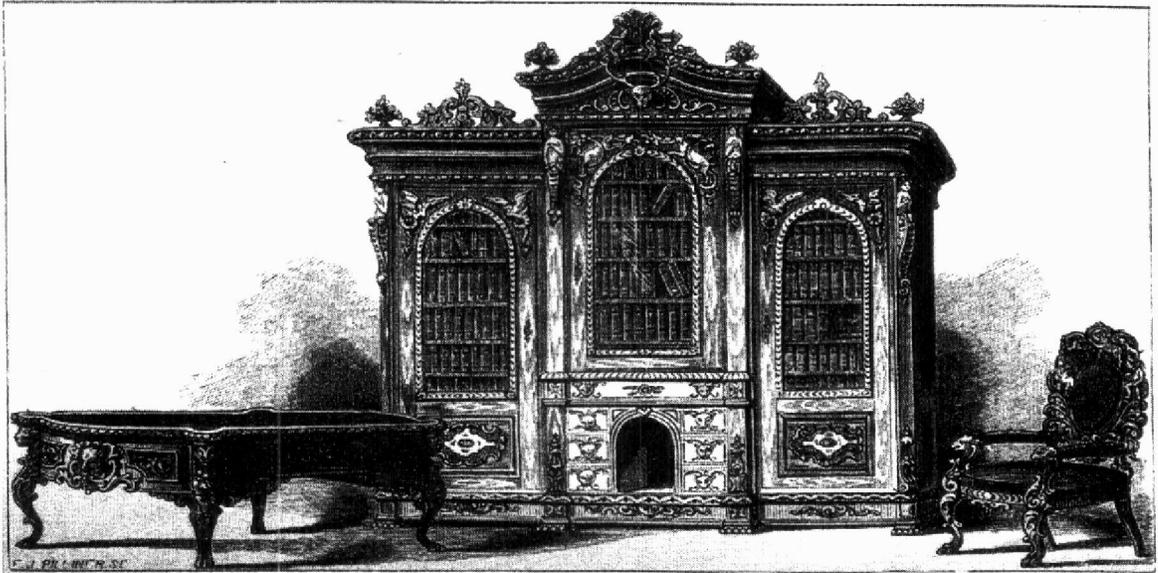


FIG. 197.

Figure 3.3 “Library Furniture,” Fig. 197, engraving. Sloan, *Sloan’s Homestead Architecture*, 1861, opposite p. 345.

work as well to relax, a refuge for the family and a place of education—the library could fulfill all of these duties if it could “partake of a mixed character” (Cooper 8).

Sloan suggested stately libraries; Downing was attuned to their mixed uses. But in their sections on furniture, both provided the ideal, elite-coordinated suites of furniture, beginning with the finest individual items. “Library chairs should be rather heavy and solid, compared with those of the drawing-room or dining-room,” Downing explained. Bookcases were similarly weighty, shielding books with “glazed cases,” and were topped “with Grecian architraves and mouldings.” Library tables were “more massive than any other tables,” “inlaid upon the top with morocco or cloth, to afford a smooth surface for writing.” The businessman would of course need the pedestal library table, with its “drawers on both sides” and “a rising flap on the top, which may be raised to any height, to write or read upon; and when not required, it can be let down flush with the top of the table” (424). “A quaint arm-chair,” chosen for comfort, would be “very suitable for the library,” Downing wrote, while for novelty, he suggested the “tête-à-tête,” a chair which “holds but two persons . . . to face each other in conversation” (455). The tête-à-tête suggests a social space for courting, but Downing averred, saying it was “an agreeable piece of library furniture in the winter evening,” so that “the wife can sit towards the light, sewing, while her husband sits towards the fire with his book to the light, in the best position for reading” (455–456).

The pattern book illustrations held the full complement of library furnishings, done in the best ways. Downing noted that in these elite libraries, the Elizabethan style was often chosen, and antiques were much sought after. “Oak or black-walnut” were the woods of choice, with “a richly-carved bookcase, sofa, and table” providing the basic set (457, 348). Sloan upped the ante by providing a sense of “the most elaborate character” of these items (Figure 3.3), showing a bookcase with carved finials, a kneehole desk, and ornately decorated drawers, illustrating the full extent of the table and the texture on the chair (facing 345). The lavish library of this type at Lyndhurst, a Hudson Valley mansion,



Figure 3.4 Jack Boucher, “General View of North Library,” 1971, Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS NY, 60-TARY, 1A-38, Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division. Accessible online via: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/hhh.ny0869>.

which was designed by Davis for New York merchant George Merritt (Figure 3.4), has been restored, while an 1838 portrait of General Stephen Van Rensselaer—amidst signs of opulence like a marble bust, velvet table coverings, and large collection of ornate books—provides a contrast to the portrait of James Prince discussed earlier (Boucher, “General View of North Library” [1971], Historic American Buildings Survey; see also Peterson plate 141; Chester Harding, attrib., *General Stephen Van Rensselaer* [c. 1838] in Peterson, plate 52). These libraries brought all the proper elements together—the portraits and the glazed cabinets, the hefty pedestal table, and the carpeting. An illustration from Henry Lawford’s 1856 furniture catalog went even further, showing an impossibly large library, filled with an enlarged suite of coordinated furniture and holding books behind ornately carved cabinet doors (plate IV). These arrangements show that, even though often not practical for the individual to own, the elite merchant thought clearly about how to construct the ideal formal space for reading and writing.

These scenarios would be mere dreamscapes for all but the very rich, of course. For the middle class, able to afford a home with a library but unable to purchase these elaborate suites of furniture all at one time, the documentary evidence suggests that they assembled a workable set of chairs and desks, bookcases, and ornaments. The library of Philadelphia’s Episcopalian bishop, William White, was such a room, painted by John Sartain as it looked after White’s death in 1836 (John Sartain, *Bishop White’s Study*

[1836] in Peterson, plate 50). Un-upholstered Sheraton chairs and a Windsor chair filled the room, though perhaps they were brought in from the dining room visible through the doorway; in any case, they were not a suite for the library. The late bishop's best chair seems to fit Downing's model of a "quaint arm-chair," designed to recline for the reader, but White's desk was modest in size, and he clearly had more books than he could (afford to?) put away in bookcases, stacked as they are above the cabinets. Small paintings and prints, rather than vases and busts, marked the mantle. Similarly, the library of the Smithsonian Institution Secretary Joseph Henry's residence on the Mall, photographed in the 1860s after his death, showed glass-fronted bookcases on undecorated walls and next to two mismatched chairs, one of them a cane-bottomed folding chair (*Joseph Henry's Library* [1860–1870] in Peterson plate 123). These imperfectly stylish libraries, decorated with as-available items, may nevertheless seem more "cosy and home-like" to the modern viewer than the fancy furniture of the idealized, "stiff" elite libraries.

This brief investigation of the library form in the private home provides a number of lessons for the more general question at hand. Given that a library was the fourth or fifth room specialized in mid-nineteenth-century designs, it is clear that a library was a luxury, one where furnishings could further articulate the level of refinement the family could afford (Ames). For the wealthy, a whole suite of specialized furnishings, with valued objects and classic tomes, promoted the idea of the library as a preserve, a place where the man of the house could do his reading or bookkeeping without interruption. For others, notably those of more modest means, the library could provide some of these functions while also allowing for family leisure activities from conversation to sewing. There, a mixed set of chairs and utilitarian items for holding books would do. A library, after all, was about the books; Downing wrote that "the walls of an humble cottage sitting-room," hung only with a small set of bookshelves, "have a higher meaning there than those of the most superb picture-gallery in a villa." This, he insisted, was because "we know that it [a bookcase] signifies intellectual taste in the former case, while it [the picture gallery] *may*, perhaps, be only a love of display in the other" (423). The library was a site of tradeoffs and compromise in the private home. An examination of libraries in the public realm demonstrates similar tensions that, as in the home, are reflected in the way library rooms were furnished.

PARLORS IN PUBLIC

The pattern-book authors took the country villa as their model: standalone homes set on ample parcels of land, far enough from their neighbors but close enough to the city so as to allow the man of the house access to his business. As those who could afford it moved to "streetcar suburbs" in this ideal middle distance, others drawn to work in the city found residence in newly constructed rowhouses or rented rooms in early apartment buildings. Convenient but small, these arrangements did not allow for a personal library, of any size or decor. Yet residents of these apartments—in this era, the familiar demographic of white, single young men, who had come in to the city from farms or from abroad in search of a livelihood—also needed a place to relax in the evening, to read, or to converse with friends (Luckingham; Barth). Social reformers, grappling with the challenges of the industrializing city, understood that, in the words of historian Tom Glynn, "education would provide an alternative to drinking, gambling, and other dangerous and immoral pursuits" (351). How could these need be fulfilled in the public sphere?

One way was by simply providing the private rooms on a public scale. In her study of the parlor and its furnishings, art historian Katherine Grier noted that the first half of the nineteenth century was “a world full of parlors,” not just at home but on steamboats and trains, in hotels and attached to theaters (Grier 53). Grier found “astonishingly elaborate and expensive” parlors established in the cities by working-class groups, such as firefighters, to provide places where they could socialize (51–54). These spaces, decked out with oil paintings, a fancy sideboard, the company’s “award silver,” and populated in engravings by firefighters in top hats, represented allegiance to middle-class aspirations—even if they had to be fulfilled in fraternal, rather than individual, terms (53).

In her catalogue of such public parlors, Grier included an account of the New York Athenaeum reading rooms from the November 15, 1850, *Daguerreian Journal*, where the author described “three very spacious rooms” of “great size and height.” The rooms, he said, “had a costly look” and created “the imposing effect of interiors devoted to social intercourse”—that is, much like a sitting room or library in the elite home (qtd. in Grier 51). Grier described how, in the following decades, the parlor would be co-opted for commercial purposes, often in the guise of a “palace,” mentioning the “palace hotel” and “dry goods palace” as examples (56). But Grier argued that from 1830 to 1850, public parlors “were essentially large-scale versions of the fashionable drawing-rooms in private houses.” Different in room size, but not in type of decoration, these parlors in public held repeated individual furnishings, like upholstered chairs and pier tables—rather than immense individual items that Grier called “more grand and less home-like,” like a gargantuan chandelier or an endless sofa, as became the custom in hotels and other public halls beginning in the 1850s (57). Grier included athenaeum reading rooms in her review of *parlors*, despite the greater similarity between the athenaeums and private *libraries*. By including the athenaeum with the firefighters’ parlors and session rooms, re-creations of the home parlor in public, Grier’s work suggests a model for understanding the social library as a private library in public.

Before returning to the question of libraries and reading rooms directly, it is interesting to consider whether the parallel between the hotel parlor and the library in public is a good one, and how public spaces provided a different sort of refuge than a home library. This task is best begun with Paul Groth’s book *Living Downtown*, which investigated the history of residential hotels from the beginning of the nineteenth century through 1930, the end of their heyday. Groth found that residential hotels were often the place newcomers chose to live. Located close to the commercial and social centers of the city, they provided easy entrance into the right circles. In the early nineteenth century, slave markets and stock exchanges often were located in hotel lobbies, uniting the residential with the commercial (57, 59). In describing how the public spaces in hotels were furnished, Groth quoted an 1855 account on how these rooms were “furnished in a far more costly manner than a majority of young men can afford,” a comment that echoes Grier’s findings (qtd. in Groth 61).

Groth argued that the combination of modest private rooms and more ornate public parlors made it difficult to determine the class markers of boarders, lodgers, and apartment-dwellers. The use of public places for socializing, dining, and relaxing—the functions of a private drawing-room, dining room, and library, now projected into public space—allowed hotel dwellers a degree of mobility (5–8, 20–22). Groth wrote that “there was little of the social and cultural opposition that theorists require for a true division between classes” (22). Instead, the middle class “often emulated the truly wealthy,” and

“with their best clothes and manners . . . could infiltrate the palace hotel dining room for a memorable meal,” even though, Groth reminded us, “they could not live like that every day” (21; see also Bourdeiu). The hotel, therefore, allowed the young man residing there to live out part of his dream of a home of his own. The ability for urban young men to move in such surroundings was seen as a privilege of city life—and it was one that the elite tried to curtail (Levine). When, in 1844, a New York hotel began to offer hotel guests meals in private dining rooms, a newspaper editor sternly protested that private dining was an affront. “Going to the Astor and dining with two hundred well-dressed people and sitting in a splendid drawing room with plenty of company” afterward, the editor argued, was a privilege of city life, a sign of the “tangible republic” that marked America as different (qtd. in Groth, 29–30). For this editor, the public dining room had a civic function; it was more than merely a substitute for the private dining room of those staying at or living in hotels. This was not just a private room on a public scale; to call it a sign of the “tangible republic” suggested more was at stake than individual aspirations.

THE SEARCH FOR A GREAT GOOD PLACE IN THE CITY

Thus, while Katherine Grier, focusing on the decorations, made parallels between the private and public parlors, the mid-nineteenth-century social commentators which Paul Groth cited suggest that there was a communal need being served in the public parlors and social libraries—that these places had a public identity unrelated to a private form. In *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg focused on the social function of the “third place,” his term for one of “a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg 1989 16). Chronicling the importance of the French café, the German *bier garten*, the English pub, and modern American coffeehouses, bookstores, and diners, Oldenburg said that the third place provides “the kind of thing Tocqueville marveled at” in his descriptions of voluntary associations on the American landscape in the 1830s (Oldenburg 2001 2).

Oldenburg argued that third places tend to share certain features. A third place is on “neutral ground” (i.e., not in someone’s home); it has a group of regulars; it is accessible, both nearby and open convenient hours; and it is a “playful” place, where conversation is shaped by the “exercise and display of wit” (Oldenburg 1989 37). While some of these characteristics may be hard to judge about a third place of two centuries ago, other ideas on Oldenburg’s list speak quite clearly to the nature of social libraries. In third places, the urge to converse dominates, and regulars feel “at home,” perhaps more so than in their own houses—ideas reflected in the privilege and pride that the newspaper editor felt about the hotel dining room and its place in the “tangible republic.” The third place is a leveler, Oldenburg wrote; “the charm and flavor of one’s personality, irrespective of his or her station in life” is the coin of the realm, and people can be “enjoined, accepted, embraced, and enjoyed” in the third place “despite their ‘failings’ in their career or the marketplace” (24, 25). While nineteenth-century third places were far more likely to maintain class divisions in their focus on individual improvement and material as well as social success, Oldenburg’s basic outline is familiar.

In considering how the social libraries of the nineteenth century might be understood as “third places,” it is also important to remember how new the need for a third place would have been. Young men were, for the first time, confronted with the anonymity and strangeness of the city. Though loneliness may be an accepted fact of contemporary life,

it was a revolution in the nineteenth century. No one knew they needed a third place until they contemplated the reality of the city: far from friends, off from work, the prospect of an empty rented room held little comfort (Rotundo). To find their third place, these men had to find a community; they had to understand that others were facing the same challenges. That they could do so in part through an “imagined community” of print provides a hint into the power of social libraries in these years.

Anthropologist Benedict Anderson’s now-classic book *Imagined Communities* focused on the development of nationalism and “that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern states,” but his work has been particularly helpful to cultural historians interested in how modes of communication helped create *real* communities as well (Augst). Anderson described how novels and newspapers ask the reader to link simultaneously occurring events and imagine their relation; such forms serve as more than an analogy to nation when “the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours is continually assured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (Anderson 35–36). With the market revolution, literacy became more common; with innovations in papermaking, the invention of the novel and the penny presses vastly expanded what was available to be read (Davidson). While Dana Nelson, among others, has indicated how such local and national membership could be restricted on racial, gendered, and class-based grounds, the fact that social libraries purchased novels and newspapers and could lend them out to all who asked nevertheless suggests the importance of the library as both a third place for these young aspiring men and its role in knitting them together as a community (Nelson).

Oldenburg and Anderson’s theories ultimately point to separate, if complementary, aspects of social libraries. Oldenburg described the necessity of a “third place” refuge, especially, if not exclusively, for those without such recourse in their own home. Anderson found that such places were fed by a need for association among strangers, and demonstrated the importance of the local, “tangible republic” in shaping the national one, limited in the ways Nelson delineated. In turning to how the library in public evolved, it will be helpful to keep in mind the question of how social libraries interact with both the pressures of urbanization and the search for community. As we shall see, these factors shaped the library not just in its conception, but also in its decoration and design.

THE MEANINGS OF BOOKCASES AND THE “FICTION QUESTION”

The well-furnished private library and the more modest one; the private room writ large; the third place and the “imagined community” made real—all of these spaces serve as valuable models for understanding the construction and design of libraries in public. Our embedded analysis will begin with a seemingly benign description of how library bookcases should be constructed, taken from the 1859 Smithsonian report of William Rhees. For information on library construction, Rhees reprinted a section of a treatise on libraries from the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. After a quick description of bookcase materials, focusing on their strength and fire-proofing (“If it be determined that the book-cases shall be wholly unflammable, the shelves may be made of enameled slate, and the others portions of galvanized and perforated rolled iron.”), the article’s author briefly mentioned that “for the bulk of a great collection of books, I see little or no advantage in the use of closed cases, whether wired or glazed.” A casual reader might

continue to roll through the admonition that “in all cases, the rarities and choice contents of a library should be protected by glass,” but, given our interest in what quotidian library decisions meant in this era, it is necessary to examine the question of bookcases more closely (qtd. in Rhees ix–x).

Both of the private libraries we have examined, that of George Merritt at Lyndhurst and Joseph Henry at the Smithsonian, featured closed-case bookcases, suggesting that the books were as reassuring in display as edifying in use. Open shelves imply more frequent use; by advocating open shelves, the *Encyclopædia* author envisioned a library which, as Jewett defined, held “popular works for reading rather than for reference”—that is, a utilitarian-minded social library. The open bookshelf, then, suggested the social libraries could be Downing’s “cosy and home-like” space, where casual conversation could mix with casual reading of popular works. Yet such casual reading was only accepted by some of the social libraries; the choice of shelving and what it stood for became a controversy between “elite” and “clerk’s” social libraries over the “fiction question.”

Dee Garrison, in her celebrated *Apostles of Culture*, described at length the late nineteenth-century controversy over fiction. Her distinction between a “censorship model” and a “consumership model” in the history of public library librarianship maps well to the earlier era’s differences between “elite” and “clerk’s” social libraries (Garrison; Denning 48–50; Carrier). In 1826, the inaugural year of the New Haven Apprentices Literary Association, a mercantile social library, the members considered for debate the question “Are novels injurious to a reader?” (New Haven Men’s Institute). The town’s elite Social Library had passed a resolution in 1808 stating that novels, romances, and plays were to be banned from the library unless approved by a vote of two-thirds of the membership (Shera 108–109). In the divide between the elite and their clerks, the fiction question served as a central issue for how the “dominant genteel culture” would choose to deal with the working classes, as Michael Denning has argued in *Mechanic Accents*. When it came to social function, the place of the library, Denning noted, was “contested terrain” (47–48).

Elite libraries, like the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Library Society, the Social Library of New Haven, and the Apprentices’ Library Company of Trenton, chose to ban novels, passing up that which is “so apt to captivate juvenile imaginations,” in the words of the Trenton board of managers, in favor of purchasing “works of sterling value and lasting usefulness . . . on religion, morality, and science” (Beckerman 5; Glynn). As if to show the extent of these preferences, members of the Boston Athenaeum supported the founding of the Boston Public Library in part because they felt that institution could buy the popular literature, leaving the athenaeums to remain “repositories of exclusive culture” (Story 196–197).

In contrast, social libraries for clerks, such as the Cincinnati Mercantile Library, the Rochester Mechanics’ Association, the New Haven Young Men’s Institute, and the New York Mercantile Library, welcomed novels and the ephemera of magazines and journals (Augst; Barringer and Scharlott). They understood that patrons wanted not an esteemed collection of rare books but the popular items they saw in the bookstores but, perhaps, were unable to buy for themselves. Other libraries, such as the Apprentices’ Library of New York City, the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, and the San Francisco Mercantile Library Association, tried to strike a balance between a small collection of novels and a larger educational collection (Luckingham; Glynn). In many ways reflecting the ambiguity of the name “mercantile,” these libraries tried to provide for clerks while



Figure 3.5 John C. Browne, “Artifacts in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,” photograph, c. 1868. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

holding a cache for merchants—a strategy that still differentiated them from the most elite libraries.

FURNISHINGS AND DESIGN: ELITE SOCIAL LIBRARIES

In the heated atmosphere surrounding the fiction question, the difference between a bookcase with a closed case and open shelves loomed large, helping to differentiate elite and clerk’s social libraries and serving as a key as to how social meaning can be drawn from differences of furnishing, decoration, and design. The location of the Boston Library Society, founded in 1794 and housed in the rooms over the arch in Charles Bulfinch’s new and tony Tontine Crescent, indicated an immediate unity between the most fashionable and luxurious of urban dwellings and the elite library society (*The Boston Library Society Rooms in the Tontine Crescent* [c. 1857] in Wentworth 34). With the neoclassical design matching fashionable taste of the era, the library served to crown the project and drew from the prestige of those living there. As the library stood over and above the houses, the space expressed just the right sort of haughty-yet-refined message for the “elite” library audience.

Though no images of the interior of the Tontine Crescent rooms can be found, the library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Figure 3.5), founded in 1824, may serve as a fair parallel (*Artifacts in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* [c. 1868]; reprinted in Finkel 113). In a room filled with scientific and cultural artifacts (the photographs show a teepee in the left background, a mortar and pestle in the right foreground), the walls were lined with closed-case bookcases, dark wood with a simple arch design. A

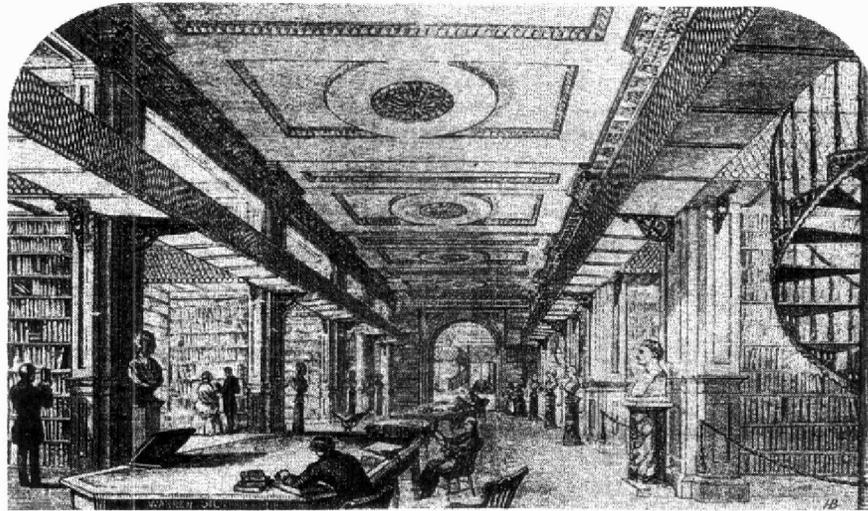


Figure 3.6 “The Athenaeum Reading Room, 1855,” engraving. Charles Knowles Bolton, *The Athenaeum Centenary*, 1907, opposite p. 132.

rug was laid out on the floor, and, above the bookcases, portraits were lined up, recalling the grandeur of General Van Rensselaer’s library portrait. Membership in these societies may have been to support civic advancement, but clearly the furnishing of these rooms suggested their importance as communal show-spaces even for the elite, who could do as well at home.

The Boston Library Society was ultimately subsumed by the most successful elite library in the United States, the Boston Athenaeum. Founded in 1807 by a group of aspiring businessmen from good families, the Athenaeum members began at the top and simply kept pushing up the bar of gentility. The limited number of shares rose in price throughout the nineteenth century, and were generally passed down “like Family silver from generation to generation,” as one commentator put it (Story 192). The Athenaeum was first housed in a fashionable mansion on Pearl Street; in the 1850s, a purpose-built building on Beacon Street, at the nexus of commercial and political power in Boston, housed the reading room as well as a picture gallery (Story, Breisch). The Athenaeum, like the Library Society, towered over its neighbors, evoking the civic authority of neoclassicism through its engaged pilasters. The size and number of paintings in the picture gallery, and the draw the gallery provided for women, indicated something of the cultural cache of membership.

Most instructive, though, was the view of the reading room (Figure 3.6), with the space seemingly stretching on forever (Bolton opposite 132). When considering the private library, the furniture in Lawford’s catalog seemed far too large, but here, in a room at least three times as large, we can see the idea of such a private library extended to its grand, dream-like scale. Busts and scrolled ironwork provided decoration, and the matched chairs and large working tables allowed for all that one could ask for in a library—with the added benefits of the community of Athenaeum members. This engraving showed how the Athenaeum reading room in 1855 was a distinctly male space. The men sat at ease while the women, all accompanied, had to be in search of a specific item. In fact, the women were escorted because they were not allowed under Athenaeum rules to enter the reading room alone; the chief librarian “reacted with shock



Figure 3.7 “Interior View of Appleton’s Book Store,” engraving, *Illustrated American Advertiser*, 1851, p. 305.

and horror” when such a suggestion was made in 1855 (Van Slyck 225). The bookcases were roped off, suggesting even men had to request the items they desired. The control of the space suggests both the sense of the library as male refuge in the home and the restrictiveness of membership, as described by Oldenburg and Nelson. If elite social libraries were attended by those who could afford to have their own elaborate libraries, the bonds of elite fraternity and the cache of such “conspicuous education” served as attraction (see Veblen 1889). When the first Boston Public Library reading room was completed, with a long hall adorned with classical statues and two rows of ornate tables, the mark of the Athenaeum’s members in its construction was clear (*Boston Public Library, Bates Hall, Main Reading Room* [c. 1895] in Breisch 75).

These elite spaces also influenced commercial construction. Just as Katherine Grier found the “dry goods palace” and the steamboat parlor borrowing from the hotel’s use of the parlor in public, advertisements showing the interior of some contemporaneous bookstores reveal the influence of the Athenaeum reading room. The Phillips, Sampson & Company display house had a grand table and the same arched doorways, and boasted of “facilities for furnishing PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIBRARIES,” while at Appleton’s Book Store (Figure 3.7)—the publisher of the works of Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis—the perspective and the ceiling ornaments matched the Athenaeum reading room almost exactly (*Illustrated American Advertiser* 1856 421, 305). Marketing is about aspiration, and so expanding the rich man’s private library to the gargantuan proportions of the elite social library served as the perfect model for the booksellers’ store design.

FURNISHINGS AND DESIGN: CLERK’S SOCIAL LIBRARIES

From the architecture to the furnishings to the social functions, the contrast between elite social libraries and the retreats of aspiring clerks is striking. In 1847, the Nantucket Athenaeum built a new building, but the library only received a section of the space. The

entire upper floor was dedicated to a lecture hall; the meeting room and museum took up much of the first floor, indicating that the priority in this space was education, not ornament. The library received adequate light from its windows on three sides, but it was not arranged to impress. The long views down the aisles in the Boston Athenaeum were not repeated in this building, which was far more utilitarian in character (Nantucket Athenaeum).

Clerk's social libraries were also far more likely to occupy a floor in an office building than to build a structure dedicated only to their use. This is true of the New Haven Young Men's Institute building to this day; it was also true of the nineteenth-century buildings of the New York Mercantile Library and the St. Louis Mercantile Library, each of which maintained floors above commercial space, even in buildings they owned (New Haven Young Men's Institute; Fletcher 1894 facing 50; St. Louis Mercantile Library). The clerk's social libraries often found space through the generosity of members made good; for example, when William A. Reynolds, the president of the Rochester Mechanics' Association, plowed his profits from wheat into a downtown business center, the Arcade, Reynolds gave the library space to house their books (Arenson 26).

Scholars have linked clerk's social libraries to a general interest in personal and civic improvement, a mindset that linked education not so much with refinement and pretension as with success in business and prominence in social circles (Augst; Barringer and Scharlott). In 1839, the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade was founded in that city's mercantile library, demonstrating the link between these institutions and the ambitious new business organizations (Barringer and Scharlott 393). That these libraries had been incorporated through state legislatures—using the same language as any new business—furthered this link (Shera). It was through “the education of young men,” crowed a member of the San Francisco Mercantile Library Association, “that civilization, with its attendant blessings, will be carried upon the wings of commerce” (qtd. in Luckingham 32).

In the St. Louis Mercantile Library's first building, completed in 1854, the Delivery and Reading Room held some marble sculptures, glass-paned cabinets, and a vaunted death-mask bust of Napoleon, but photographs reveal modest desks, placed far closer together in a room smaller than the Boston Athenaeum and certainly without its imposing vista, as posts supporting the ceiling sprouted haphazardly throughout the room. As plans and views for a design competition held by the St. Louis Mercantile Library demonstrate, plans for a wide, symmetrical reading room and two-story bookcases were envisioned, but the funding to carry out the grand plan for the reading room was evidently not within reach. (*Delivery and Reading Room, St. Louis Mercantile Library* [1854–1887] and Architectural Drawings in St. Louis Mercantile Library Archive)

The utilitarian bent to clerk's social libraries is suggested by both the written and visual evidence. The keynote speaker at the reopening of the New York Apprentices' Library suggested how “a poor, little ragged apprentice boy” would look into the library and find a “rich repast spread before him,” but that repast was less ornament and more earnest content of the books, freely available (qtd. in Glynn 35). In San Francisco, the mercantile library president reported in 1856 that the rooms were “well filled with members every evening, quiet, respectful, and attentive, giving their time and attention to the cultivation of their intellectual faculties” (qtd. in Luckingham 33). An engraving of the San Francisco Mercantile Library reading room from that year (Figure 3.8) presented a strikingly different picture from that of the Boston Athenaeum (“Library and Reading Room of the Association,” Hutchings' *California Magazine* [May 1860], 491; reprinted

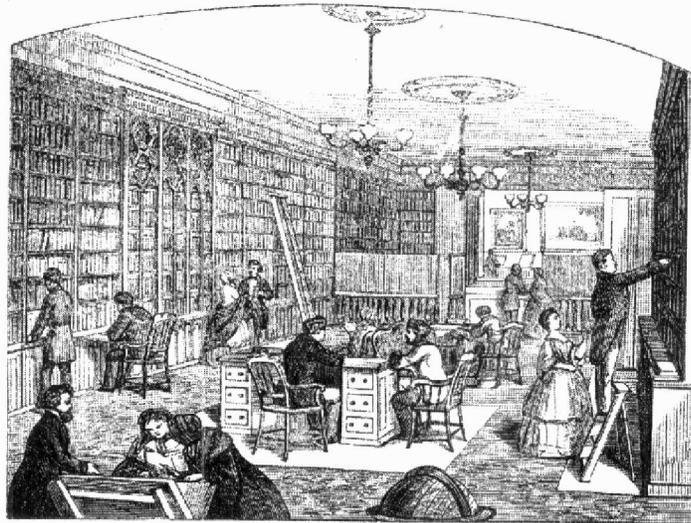


Figure 3.8 “Library and Reading Room of the Association,” *Hutchings’ California Magazine*, May 1860, p. 491. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

in Luckingham 31). Here, the reading room again was far more modest in size; all but a few cases had open shelves, and there were no ropes preventing patrons from retrieving their own books. In the busy room, there was a minimum of ornament; as men sat at small desks, much like those in private homes, the space had been subdivided, to allow men to privately conduct their business. Though some women seem to be assisted by the men who accompany them, two other pairs were merely socializing, using the library as a parlor in public, to converse as would not be possible in their rented rooms. While seemingly modest compared to the Athenaeum reading room, this clerk’s social library nevertheless served its members exactly as they needed.

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF LIBRARIES IN PUBLIC IN THE AGE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

When the era of the modern public library began with the opening of the Boston Public Library in 1859, the concerns of both elite and clerk’s libraries appeared there as well. For the elites, the library had been male space; if women were to be allowed, they reasoned, some “protection” needed to be created. It was, as architecture historian Abigail Van Slyck found, the separate ladies’ reading rooms that were created reflected the goals of the elite library benefactors of the public library, who found a way to “manage” the presence of women in the library without disrupting its feel as a “gentlemen’s club” (228, 224, 227). The elite benefactors had complained about women talking and giggling in their elite social libraries; that such behavior would likely be encouraged by the talkative, ambitious men in the clerk’s social libraries indicated the breadth of their differences.

The separate ladies’ reading rooms also entailed changes in design. “The decor . . . was noticeably less institutional,” with rooms Van Slyck described as “inviting, cozy, homelike”—the exact terms Downing used to describe the private library. The ladies’ reading rooms often had a “domestic character,” Van Slyck said, with a fireplace, plants,

and low bookcases marking the space as different from the rest of the library (230). Furniture in ladies' reading rooms was far more likely to match, as a suite, and often included the only upholstered furniture in the public library, sitting on the only carpet and near the only draperies. Even if a public library could not afford a completely different treatment, one could tell which reading room was which because, quipped one librarian, "the women's reading room held a potted palm" (qtd. in Van Slyck, 234).

Van Slyck draws many insights from these comments and described the gendering of these public libraries, but I want to focus on what they can tell us about men's reading rooms in public libraries. To contrast with the descriptions of these "domestic" female reading rooms, the main, male reading rooms, then, were starkly utilitarian, with mismatched furniture and no draperies or carpets. They served a private need in a public space, concentrating resources on buying books, not on ornamentation. In short, the men's reading rooms in the public libraries sound much like reading rooms in the clerk's social libraries, functioning as a space where function overtook form. As young aspiring men were always entering cities, these third spaces for private thought were always needed; if an elite merchant needed such a space, he could simply go to his home library. Hence the athenaeums that still exist are often more like museums, displaying fine art and utilizing their books, often rare and unique, as a research library—and further than ever from the clerk's library of circulating novels, and the branch public libraries we know today.

Social libraries were a fundamental influence on the design of the modern public library. Often intended to serve the men and women of the "clerk's republic"—those who had come to the cities, aspiring to social and business success—the first public libraries found sponsors among the ornate designs of elite social libraries, while building on the decorative as well as organizational models of the clerk's social libraries, spaces more utilitarian and modest in their design. While the elite could build on the spectacle of their own private libraries by investing in fine arts and rare books for their athenaeums, the furnishings and collections of many young men's institutes became ever more utilitarian, geared toward providing a third space for those in modest urban housing, regardless how shabby it became. In something as simple as a bookcase design, the difference between an elite library built on a grand scale and a clerk's library accessible to all is evident. Only by placing the modern public library alongside the rare-book room, the high-school library, the community-college atrium and even the airport bookstore—placing it into a full vocabulary of architectural and design forms, historically and today—can we see how the library functions as a place, embedded in the dreams of city life, vital to commercial success as well as intellectual pursuits.

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