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A library 'TeenS'cape' against the new callousness

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During the past year, two of the largest and most famous public scandals ever to rock a city have rocked Los Angeles. The police department's notorious Rampart Division threatens to bankrupt the city treasury from lawsuits. Recently unraveled corruption and misconduct has the Department of Justice threatening to take over. Then there is the Unified School District's Belmont High School catastrophe. Planned as the most costly high school in the nation, the half-built project must be scrapped entirely, due to mismanagement. The doubled-barreled ricochets of both scandals fit a far larger pattern. And in California it's looking like an old story.

In the 1980s, former Governor Pete Wilson gained national reputation by incarcerating more youth than in any other state and by raising fees and repealing Affirmative Action at the University of California. Despite the city's burgeoning numbers of young people (100,000 more today than in 1980) and population densities that rival Manhattan's, Los Angeles has failed to build a single high school since passage of the legendary Proposition 13 sparked a national anti-tax revolt in the mid-1970s. Meanwhile, the District Attorney has inspired a region-wide flood of dubiously legal "zero tolerance" crackdowns against youth: new injunctions, curfews, and youth-targeted "nuisance" ordinances control what teens wear, who they can be seen with, where they can and cannot be. L.A. arrests 12,000 youths every year for curfew violations alone. In addition to these anti-youth tactics, in March of this year, voters passed into law the jailing of fourteen-year-olds with hard-core career criminal adults.

Considering this anti-youth legacy, it is not difficult to see how L.A. regards its young people. National conservative columnist Arianna Huffington calls it part of "the New Callousness," where even with our own youth, retribution is the only answer. California State Senator, Democrat Tom Hayden, calls it "an emerging garrison state" for the poor and the young. I call it a "Geography of No." No place for youth to grow. No place to learn. No place to hide. And no room for mistakes.

This all-punishment-all-the-time age-profiling public policy flies in the face of facts gathered from every major category of youth behavior. As sociologist Mike A. Males tells us, teenage felony and murder rates are lower today among all races/ethnicities in L.A. than they have been in a quarter century, despite a doubling in youth poverty rates. Youth, Males rightly claims, are being "framed" and "scapegoated."

On the other hand, there is the Los Angeles Public Library, the unsung civic hero, standing up against this bitter wind for the young people it serves. As of March 14, 2000, the Library launched its spectacular TeenS'cape enlargement, which sits smack-dab in the middle of the city's cherished 1926 Central Library. At 3,780 square feet, TeenS'cape is arguably the biggest, the best, and most technically sophisticated library space for teens anywhere in the country. Set against the city's anti-youth Geography of No, this elegant and affirming gesture might find another name: reparations.

Local youth named TeenS'cape when it opened two years after the 1992 L.A. riots. They wanted the name not only to reflect a territory of escape but also to suggest a measure of ownership and community. In its small, experimental, cramped, leftover space, the original TeenS'cape received no redesign, no furniture, no permanent status, no directional signage, or even a place on the building directory. Still, during its incubation stage, the facility was popular with teens. Recent reports document a 26%

jump in computer usage between 1997 and 1998, and an even higher rise in reading material circulation.

However modest its beginnings, TeenS'cape served as a bibliobeachhead, seeking to correct the previous total "erasure" of young adults from their own library. Far more significantly, it initiated new criteria by which to assess library space programming. In Los Angeles, at least, teens no longer get leftover library space. Triple the size of the original, the enlarged and renovated TeenS'cape embraces visitors with exciting post-modernist architecture—juxtaposed against, yet respectfully nested within the building's historic walls and ceilings.

TeenS'cape is executed in six separate "zones." In Cyber Zone, the department's signature element, one enters under a metal mesh awning—sleek, scalloped, teal-colored, and decoratively lit from beneath. No slapdash acoustic-tile drop ceiling and institutional fluorescent lighting here! The awning creates a room-within-a-room. Together with colorful patterns of wall-to-wall carpet, it raises conversation comfort while suppressing ambient background noise. Design here evokes the emerging new wave of Silicon Valley's ultrahip "dot-com" start-up spaces. Cyber Zone also playfully anticipates tomorrow's techno-savvy collaborative work spaces. Four circular blond wood cafe tables support nineteen flat-screen Virtual Library computer terminals connecting teens to the Internet, as well as to over five hundred electronic databases, LAPL's online book and magazine catalog, and a state-of-the-art array of electronic resources. Peripheral wall alcoves cuddle eleven multimedia computers for private music listening and computer gaming, as well as accessible message boards and glass-enclosed display cases.

The Living Room is another TeenS'cape zone, well-appointed with a fifty-inch plasma-screen television; DVD, CD, and video equipment; a Dolby surround-sound system; and un-library seating options such as plush sofas and movable cushy lounge furniture. The Living Room encourages solitary recreational reading, complete with adjacent magazine display shelving. It is also a versatile space capable of hosting small performances and class visits. During a bevy of re-opening activities, for instance, TeenS'cape hosted a dramatic performance by New York's American Place Theater. Local high school classes comfortably enjoyed the production of Claude Brown's 1965 classic, *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Undisturbed by activity in other zones, the Living Room's great sound system ably accompanied the performance with the beats and pulse of period jazz.

The Lounge zone provides space for out-of-the-way activity. Here TeenS'cape meets history. Appointed with the same custom furnishings that appear in the Living Room, the Lounge perches just behind a low-slung curved wall, adjacent to the Library's historic domed rotunda with its stunning 1930s Federal Artist Project murals of California history.

For all its size, however, TeenS'cape surprises at every turn and in every corner. Life-sized blowups of Spiderman, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Star Wars' Yoda entreat the city's youth to use the library to "get the bad guys" and to stay in touch with The Force. On the way from the Cyber Zone and into the Lounge, young adults pause at the automated "Self-Check" bay to borrow library materials without waiting in lines with all those—well—adults downstairs. As one young man, quoted in the Los Angeles Times, characterized it, "This is way off the scale. It's like landing on Mars!" In TeenS'cape, the hip, the mod, and the magnificent come together in a monumental civic structure.

But TeenS'cape is not all fun, games, and kicking back. The Study Lounge zone provides eight dedicated word-processing computers adjacent to shelves of ready reference volumes. Another zone offers three canvas-roofed small group Study Rooms

that face a reference desk staffed by professional young adult specialist librarians and devoted paraprofessionals. The TeenS'cape collection includes nearly 30,000 books, a fantastic magazine collection of 150 different titles, graphic novels, videos, and CDs. That collection only serves as a springboard, however, to the Central Library's massive holdings and to the almost six million items housed in LAPL's expansive sixty-seven branches.

Los Angeles City Librarian Susan Kent says that "TeenS'cape demonstrates the Los Angeles Public Library's commitment to meeting the educational and recreational needs of our city's teenagers." But Kent does not go far enough. The energy propelling TeenS'cape also rejuvenates the way in which new branches design space. Voters recently approved a bond measure to rebuild many of the huge library system's older facilities. Blueprints now inscribe young people into the plans rather than erase them.

With TeenS'cape, LAPL shows a kind of courage. The Library assumes a more fitting role within the community and in the lives of the young people it serves. Envisioning teens on this higher and more optimistic ground—more true to evidence about youth culture—rejects prevailing anti-youth hysteria. Furthermore, beyond serving as response for damage done to teens elsewhere, TeenS'cape also nails young adult spaces to the public library design agenda. Isn't it about time!

ADDED MATERIAL

Currently a Young Adult Specialist for the Los Angeles Public Library and a doctoral candidate in history at the University of California, Irvine, Anthony Bernier is also co-editing a book on teens and library space equity with Catherine M. Ortiz. In 1994, together with colleague Ann Hoffman, he executed the service plan for LAPL's original TeenS'cape.

PHOTO CREDIT: Russell Garrigan
Cyber Zone's Virtual Library Terminals.
The versatile Living Room Zone.

To submit your YA dream space for consideration, request a YA Spaces submission form from Cathi Dunn MacRae at toll-free phone (888) 4 VOYA 97 or e-mail cmacrae@voya.com.