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Informing the “Naive Triangle”: Evidence-Based Transformations in New Young Adult Library Spaces

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Abstract:

Given recent technological innovations the notion of serving teenage populations obliges libraries to aspire to new design and spatial visions. Youth, historically not deemed entitled to an equitable share of public environments, has frequently been viewed as creating conflict in libraries, or as librarian Lynn Cockett observed, “Inviting young people to a library that is architecturally not prepared to handle normal adolescent behavior can have some pretty negative consequences.”

Even under some of the best design processes, however, a kind of “Naïve Triangle” develops: architects, who frequently know little about libraries or youth aesthetics, work with librarians (with little architectural backgrounds or knowledge about youth spaces) try to work with young people (who know little about libraries or architecture). The results are seldom distinguishable from conventional designs.

This paper presents the first evidence-based research in pursuit of spatial equity for youth in libraries: surveys and video transcriptions from librarians and youth involving new libraries built between 2005-2010 in the U.S.. It focus on three important topics: the degree to which libraries incorporate youth participation in space design; youth seating options; and, what young people tell us is most important about library spaces designated for them.

This project also launches discussion in architecture, urban planning and design, and education, among other fields, provoking connections between space, culture, history, and power. The library’s physical environment thus represents valuable spatial capital. And in such discussions libraries do not need to follow. They can lead.

Keywords: Youth, Libraries, Space, Design, Research

I. Introduction

The good news is that urban centers in the United States are reviving again! Cities and commercial districts, moribund prior to 2000, are now bubbling as residential centers - repopulating and pulsating again with exciting destination attractions and entertainments. Yet, despite this urban renaissance so many of us have longed for, it is *a radically lopsided regeneration*, manifesting a decidedly anti-youth regime.

The numbers tell a clear story of age-based segregation increasingly swept clean of young people: only 13 percent of San Francisco is now under 18; 15 percent of Seattle; and 17 percent of Boston – compared to a national average of 24 percent. “In our rush to promote higher-density urbanism,” asks urbanist Kaid Benfield, “are we inadvertently creating child-free zones that are inhospitable to families with kids? ... If we’re as committed to diversity as we like to say, shouldn’t that include young people?”¹

And yet, one institution of civil society still strives to avoid age-segregated re-urbanization: our own public libraries. Libraries in the U.S. have traditionally been devoted heart-and-soul to children. But over the past 15 years at least, and in terms of trying to offer teenagers (“young adults,” or YAs in the U.S. - youth between ages 13-18) a space of their own, libraries have begun to demonstrated capacity to grow.

Indeed, over the past decade in the United States few library services have experienced more dynamic or transformative changes than those for teenagers. Public libraries remain free and essentially commercial-free environments. They facilitate rare spaces for intellectual exploration and offer a range of opportunities to access rich and well-organized informational and cultural resources. They provide connections to professionals trained to help them access information, allow for observation of and interaction within an age-integrated community, and thus facilitate the development of social capital. And, in the face of the culture’s increasingly privatized public experience,² libraries offer youth from poorer material circumstances access to well-maintained public environments.³ The library’s physical place thus represents valuable and unique *spatial capital* for youth.⁴

But this is not a simple library-as-hero story either. American libraries often trumpet these democratic ideals but do not always execute them in practice. First, historically, libraries have devoted less space and design consideration to restrooms than young people. Indeed, youth have not been entitled to an equitable share of the library’s public space, and frequently received blame for creating conflict.

Second, and more important to our point today, little of this recent growth in library YA space has advanced with a basis in evidence or analysis.

Finally, under the best of circumstances, and with the best of intentions, libraries do want to offer their young people spaces of their own, they may ask architects, librarians, and youth to meeting together in a room and come up with good solutions to this design question. However, architects frequently know little about the functioning of libraries or youth spatial aesthetics; librarians generally do not possess architectural backgrounds or know a great deal about how young people enact spaces of their own; and young people usually know little about the functioning of libraries or the needs of architects. What develops, then, is what I have termed a “naïve triangle” - destined under the best circumstances to produce mediocrity.

This is where our project comes into the picture.

2. Methods and Dissemination

A few years ago, I resumed the advocacy for YA space I'd pioneered at the Los Angeles Public Library in the 1990s⁵ and attracted a federal grant to support research into what the nation's libraries were doing for YAs. Together with three other researchers and 11 San Jose State library school graduate Research Assistants, we asked the newest and most recently renovated libraries to tell us what they were doing. What we got back represents the first empirical data supporting evidence-based evaluation of YA library space design.

I'll briefly excerpt from three of our recent studies today. But they have appeared now in top-tier scholarly journals, several practitioner journals, and have been presented at many conferences.

For those of you not explicitly connected to serving young adults, I would urge you to consider how our data and analysis might pertain to your library spaces. In other words, how well are you serving your users with the spaces you provide?

While I do not intend to overwhelm you with the statistics we captured - we approached nearly 800 libraries that were either new or had been renovated between 2005-2010 across the U.S.. We received responses from about 350 of them. The data came through surveys, video footage, and in data we derived from virtual experience in Second Life. We even asked young people *themselves* - to tell us what they thought about what libraries were doing.

3. Quantitative Data: YP Index

Our first study examined the role that youth participation played in the design of these new YA spaces. For many years, libraries have been claiming the need to better involve youth so it made sense to explore this aspect of service development.⁶ In response we created our own Youth Participation Index (YPI) to quantify and assess the patterns we found.

Nineteen of our survey's 30 questions addressed the topic of youth participation. Among many factors, we asked about the degree to which YA ideas and direct participation contributed to the development and design of YA spaces; were YAs participating through library design teams, volunteering, employment, or advisory boards; and were they active in the administration of their YA spaces.

Not surprisingly, libraries that reported higher youth participation said they achieved more successful spaces. Indeed, libraries with high YPI ratings reported service improvement across a wide range of outcomes, as well as higher staff satisfaction. To note only the highlights, libraries with higher YPI scores reported:

- more influence in attracting funding
- greater input on YA space design (contributing to larger proportion of total library square footage)⁷
- higher YA library use
- decidedly less reliance on behavioral rules or concern for line-of-sight spatial arrangements
- higher YA concern for libraries featuring more "green" construction

But also, and after years of library literature promoting youth participation, there were, overall, relatively *few* libraries to earn high YPI scores. At one end, 9% reported no youth involvement at all; 208 libraries scored “low” – reporting from 1-7 YPI factors; and only 27 (11%) indicated that YAs played substantial participatory roles.

4. Qualitative Data: Video Teachings “Learning from librarians and teens”

Because researchers know that deriving analysis merely from self-reported surveys raises methodological concerns, our second study (published in June the U.S. journal *Public Libraries*) included distributing 25 video cameras to libraries all over the country that had completed our online survey. We asked YA library staff, along with YAs, to record two- to three-minute video tours of their YA spaces. We received 42 videos back (22 librarians and 20 YAs) and then analyzed them for insights into the thoughts, feelings, and meanings of librarians and their YA users.

First, and different from our surveys, we asked what librarians and YAs wanted to show us about what *they* value. Second, we wanted to see the degree to which these two groups agreed on what they felt was important. If so, what? If not, how did they differ?

What we found built upon what we learned from our first study: that due to disconnections between staff and YAs, and the lack of youth participation in the design process, while there *were* similarities in what they found important, there were also some important differences as well.

To begin with, not surprisingly, librarians often focused on library materials and resources – even though we asked them to talk about *space*... they concentrate on their book collections. YAs, on the other hand, emphasized their *experiences* during visits to the YA space - indicating that they appreciate their libraries not simply for their resources but also for the social dimensions of their experiences in those spaces.

Here’s a sample of one of the YA tours: (show first 2:30)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wLJz5cB17M>

But an even more interesting finding was that slightly over one-third of the librarians (36%) emphasized the need for a clear demarcation of YA spaces from other parts of the library... In the U.S. libraries simply assume that teenagers want to be as far away from children as possible... But this assumption reveals a tremendous social class bias.

We found that while 36% of the staff assumed the importance of separation, only 10% of the teens expressed a desire for visual or physical separation from other library spaces like the children’s space.

Well, you may say, teens just forgot to mention it. Or, if we asked them directly, they would tell us they want separation.

But, remember, we asked them to use their videos to tell us what was most important to *them*. Separation did not appear important to YAs, yet it did to librarians.

This difference however, makes sense if we analyze it. In many of our buildings, particularly in urban areas, where population densities are high, or in areas populated by poor or immigrant families, parents send the kids to the library together, where the older youth

supervise the little ones. If libraries interpret space design through our assumptions for separation, though, we inadvertently place undue role strain on these kids – either preventing YAs from enjoying YA spaces (because they need to stay with younger children), or making them take their younger siblings into their YA spaces.

Thus, when we drive our own unexamined assumptions through design, especially without evidence, we risk inflicting barriers on our users.

At this point it might be useful to ask yourself if you are aware of your own assumptions about spaces and users?

5. Seating: “YA spaces and postural tyranny”

After looking at these conceptual ideas – about youth participation and disagreements between librarians and YAs – our third study detected a strong opinion when we asked a very practical question: “How can libraries improve seating for YA library users?”

The answer we found should not really surprise anyone. But at the outset, we must acknowledge that libraries in the U.S. have implemented seating design and policies, forever, without any research or evidence whatsoever. This legacy raises additional questions about unnecessary obstacles and postural limitations.

YAs gave us 3 insights that libraries can actually change rather easily:

- 1) offer a larger vocabulary of postural options;
- 2) that we can learn from their otherwise “fugitive postures;”
- 3) that fully one-third (given current choices) would rather just sit on the floor

In general, expanding the variety of seating opportunities, and increasing their control over their own postural enactments, remains a potent feature that libraries, even those with limited resources, can explore to tremendously improve spatial equity.

I’ve already mentioned the lack of evidence on library seating policies. One policy in particular, the “one-butt-to-a-chair” policy that libraries all across the US use, forbids chair sharing. Libraries say they have reasons for this policy yet the fact of the matter is that no evidence supports any of these claims. Further, young people demonstrate in many other venues the capacity to thrive while working together.

The best insight we gained from these youth data, however, is a desire for a wider array of postural choices.



[fugitive postures in conventional “comfy” chairs”]

Of course, we can easily observe the way young peoples’ bodies actually work every day, in every place, enacting postures that make them comfortable. Libraries, among other institutions, however, simply ignore – or worse, punish or forbid these postures.

Here are a few historical images of young people making themselves comfortable...



[1950s educational films]

These images are taken from instructional films shown to high school students during the 1950s. You may well recognize, or even remember yourself, preferring the floor and stairs as viable seating options. If not, you may recall this image:



[*The Breakfast Club*, 1985]

from the 1985 classic John Hughes film, *The Breakfast Club*. Young people from explicitly different social backgrounds enacting common convivial space not only on the floor, where they re-appropriate and rather consecrated community space, but it is the floor of *their library*. Note the depicted postural individuality and variety.

Our research group actually coined a name for this democracy-of-the-floor. We call it “dápeditaxis” – derived from the Greek: “*dapedo* = *floor*; “*taxis*” = *oriented or seeking*.



[floor groups]

Here are a few images of young people, even in institutional settings, demonstrating how they comfortably thrive in various floor configurations. The question that may quickly arise in your mind is this: How can libraries realistically promote this “dápeditaxis” thing?

Well, it’s not difficult to facilitate floor or floor-proximate seating options – particularly if these notions are integrated into design.



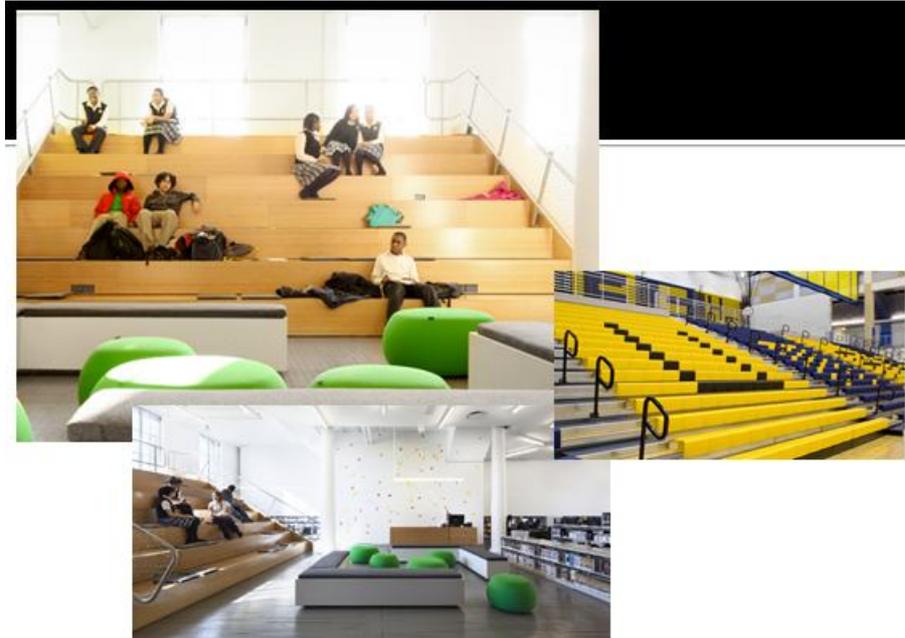
[Chavez Branch, Oakland Public Library, Oakland, California]

This is a modest two-tiered, carpet-covered wood base platform in a small branch library.



[81st Avenue Branch Library, Oakland Public Library, Oakland, California]

Here is a more sophisticated interpretation of platform seating – one promoting the postural liberation from task chairs and wooden tables. Note the two movable ottomans.



[New York Public Library, images courtesy of Michael Moran and Rice+Lipka Architects]

While this is not a particular creative execution, much like common gymnasium seating... likely it is still preferred over the “information trough” of standard tables and chairs because it offers more postural variety and greater social experience – and remember, it is the social experience that YAs tell us they value.



[Tio Trenton, Kulturhuset, Stockholm]

This is a particularly distinct design, from Stockholm. Please observe the multi-tiered on the far left and how the youth are arrayed comfortably on it.



[Scott's Valley Library, California]

Finally, here is the best example of a YA space in a recently-constructed county library – here, the architects, one of our grant's partners, incorporates a wide variety of seating options including a three-tier, carpet covered riser integrated into a rather small space but yet affording all of the features and flexibility YAs have told us, in so many ways and for so long, that *they* want. There is also a wheelchair ramp designed into the rear of this space. Here young people get options, variety, flexibility, and freedom – all without being convicted as postural fugitives.



[Scott's Valley v conventional table and chairs]

These contrasting images best represent what we've learned about YA seating.

Conclusion

In conclusion, on the one hand it is true that libraries demonstrate increasing awareness of the public value of young adult spaces. Today, unlike as recently as 10-15 years ago, new libraries will at least gesture toward representing YAs in their designs and floor plans. And libraries in the U.S. love to talk about innovative and electronically connected “learning commons,” “smart classrooms,” “learning labs,” and “maker spaces.”

On the other hand, new and recently renovated buildings also unfortunately exhibit a continuing inability to develop *evidence-based practice*, or respond to the aesthetic and postural preferences expressed by this user group. The continued lack of youth participation

in the design process certainly inhibits libraries and designers from advancing this thinking. But simply gathering youth, library staff, and space planners alone will not advance this work either – the “naïve triangle.” Instead, all three groups must engage the design process with knowledge, information, and a commitment to equitable *design for youth* not for libraries.

In most instances, the profession’s continued indulgence of its own assumptions, *ad hoc* policies, and privileging of collections continue *at the expense* of creating accommodating, hospitable, and purpose-built environments for young people.

In a larger context, however, like all public spaces, libraries demonstrate who counts and what activities matter in a community. And libraries *as* public spaces represent a unique civic experience for young people. What we’ve discovered in our examination of library spaces for YAs is just how poor our *general* knowledge base is about designing *and evaluating* library spaces for *all* library users. In many ways our learning – through the process of gathering and analyzing space and design data – is highly pertinent and applicable to other library types and users. Here our work could very well serve as a model, not simply for other library users, but for addressing public space design challenges in general. Here, libraries would not need to follow. Here we could actually *lead*.

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⁷ The average square footage for YA spaces reported in our data: 3% of total assignable library square footage.