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## Marginalia: Little Libraries in the Urban Margins

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A few years ago libraries were flying high. I wrote a book about the so-called "third wave" library-building boom of the '90s and early aughts, a boom made possible in part by the dot.com bubble. Today, nearly a decade later, our cities and their libraries find themselves in a very different situation. While libraries are welcoming record numbers of visitors and breaking circulation records, library budgets are facing drastic cuts, some of those flashy new buildings are often shuttered, and cities are resorting to the privatization or outsourcing of library services. Meanwhile, many services that patrons once relied on libraries to provide — specifically the provision and preservation of information in multiple formats — are now accessible elsewhere, including in our living rooms, and even in the palms of our hands.

Libraries are about much more, of course; they exist not simply to store and provide access to information. Advocates argue that libraries continue to serve crucial civic and social functions, and their tenacious faith is reinforced by a flurry of recent street-level library activity. The last few years have seen the emergence of myriad mini, pop-up, guerilla and ad-hoc libraries, which are part of the phenomenon that Mimi Zeiger, in her Interventionist's Toolkit series for this journal, calls "provisional, opportunistic, ubiquitous, and odd tactics in guerilla and DIY practice and urbanism" — to which I might add, librarianship. Nowadays we have libraries in phone booths and mailboxes, in public parks and train stations, in vacant storefronts and parking lots. Often these are spaces of experimentation, where new models of library service and public engagement can be test-piloted, or where core values can be reassessed and reinvigorated. They are also often an effort to reclaim — for the commons, for the sake of enlightenment (or does this term now carry too much baggage to be used without scare quotes?) — a small corner of public space in cities that have lately become hyper-commercialized, cities that might no longer reflect the civic aspirations of a diverse public. As DePauw University librarian Mandy Henk puts it, "They ... show the power of self-organization and what people can build working together, outside of traditional institutions. Building and using them is a form community empowerment." [1]

These new library projects might seem to emerge from a common culture and uphold a common mission — a flurry of press coverage in late 2011 represented them as a coherent "little library" movement. But in fact they don't. They have varied aims and politics and assumptions about what a library is and who its publics are; their collections and services differ significantly; and their forms and functions vary from one locality to another. I want

to attempt here to identify a loose, and inevitably leaky, typology of "little libraries" — to figure out where they're coming from, how they relate to existing institutions that perform similar roles, and what impact they're having on their communities.

I spoke with nearly a dozen librarians, including a few "little librarians," and everyone celebrated the fact that these projects are drawing attention to important civic concerns and highlighting issues that our public libraries and public officials would do well to address. Little librarians regard their projects as ancillary to the public libraries, highlighting the valuable roles they serve in communities; "we always tried to make clear that no temporary project could ever substitute for a real library," said Jerome Chou, one of the founders of the Brooklyn-based Branch: A Public Space Project. [2] Still, some critics have wondered if equating a "library" with a "bunch of books" might suggest that librarianship is merely a hobby that anyone can take up, and that libraries can survive on donations and micro-financing, rather than public funding. Nearly everyone I talked with brushed away these concerns. Melissa Morrone, a public librarian in New York, argued that pop-up libraries are "primarily about art and/or positive disruptions in public space and as such [are] fundamentally different from institutional libraries. I would hope that none of these artists thinks they're doing the work of librarians." [3] Chou echoes the thought: "I hope nobody sees a few books in a phone booth and thinks, Who needs a library?"

Yet I think these concerns are still worth taking seriously, if only to keep open the possibility that the affective experience these little libraries cultivate can be translated into political consciousness. Certainly we can't allow our propensity to romanticize the nimble and provisional, and to admire the ingenuity of "pop up" culture, to blind us to the fact that operating a library is a logistically complicated endeavor that requires significant infrastructure and professional expertise — and public support. My daily interactions with university students, who access mind-bogglingly expansive stores of research resources from the comfort of their own apartments, suggest that few of them are aware of the vast physical and social networks that support those collections of resources. And few stop to consider that the access they enjoy is not universal. To these students, a library is simply an interface. Why not a doghouse full of books, too? We need to seriously consider how these little libraries might constructively partner with the big, bulky, bureaucratic institutions. And academic and public librarians need to consider that there are things they might learn from their pop-up counterparts.

### The People's Library

The recent interest in DIY libraries has lately been sparked by the riveting stories of the People's Library at Zuccotti Park. Some observers were surprised that a movement so rooted in the social-media ethos would construct an old-fashioned library, but libraries played vital social and political roles at the various encampments. The People's-Library-as-place — albeit unassuming, with plastic bins organized by subject and stored on tables or

modular shelving units, with only a tent sheltering everything from the elements — embodied the crucial values of Occupy Wall Street. The fact that this embodiment was spatial and material was only fitting for a movement whose chief tactic was occupation.

Often as not the Occupy library functioned as a de facto community center with resources that helped protesters pass the time, and more importantly, as librarian Barbara Fister argued, helped also to "define the community through a culturally meaningful form of sharing." [4] It was understood that the books belonged to everyone, and there were few restrictions on circulation. The individual titles in the collection, catalogued on LibraryThing, helped to codify Occupy's identity in various cities (Boston's library, which housed the minutes for the nightly General Assembly and included sections on labor and unions, activism and organizing, and poetry, among others, was known fittingly as the Audre Lorde-Howard Zinn Library).

Yet, Fister continues, in her assessment of the Occupy libraries, "[i]t's not just the books and it's not just the place where they are collected; it's a combination of space and information bound together by physical proximity, conversation, and [the] sharing of something held in common." This principle — of providing a place where people can congregate and access media that inform, challenge and codify their beliefs — has been one major thread in the history of libraries, and it's figured into theories of the public sphere and Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and the civic value of public reading. It's also a central and animating principle of many of the little libraries we'll examine here, even those less radically activist than the People's Library.

As proclaimed on a sign behind the reference desk at Zuccotti Park, the very existence of the People's Library offered "Literacy, Legitimacy and Moral Authority" to the movement. A post on the Occupy Wall Street Library website implied that those same ideals define the library-as-institution, even in an age that questions its relevance:

Libraries have served as a haven of academic pursuit, an access-point for the underprivileged, and the professionals thereof have valiantly defended against the encroachment of censorship and obfuscation. Somehow, despite the offerings of libraries to a free society, they have come under the scrutinizing eye of appraisal. Some would have you believe that libraries are beginning to decay and that funding their interests further is merely a drain on resources. Others would have you believe that the era of information has ushered in a time where the practice of librarianship is merely redundant, given the skills of a tech-savvy public. As such, the premise is that libraries have lost relevance and should be forgotten. Yet here we stand, on the dawn of revolution, where a brave and active some have taken charge on reform, come together as a united front and have moved to start anew. ... The uniting thread of dissatisfaction has given birth to a fresh emphasis on the right to knowledge, and the first institution of the people has been given form: The People's Library. — What is to be said of relevance now?

The library is the People's. And just as the 99% have reasserted their relevance, so too has the library that serves them.

Although in principle our public libraries are ideological kin of Occupy, sharing a commitment to democratic access and opportunity, the Occupy libraries offered, for some, an alternative to the big institution. Among the camps' volunteer librarians were many professionals disheartened by the challenges facing their field. Mandy Henk, the DePauw librarian, who volunteered at Zuccotti Park, has pointed out that in recent years librarians have "lost more and more control over budgets and collections. The information resources that people need are controlled by corporations, while we keep getting hit by the push for austerity." For patrons, these challenges translate into decreased access, unpredictable service and, ultimately, disenfranchisement. For librarians, participating in Occupy has been, Henk said, a way to "begin taking power back ... the power to create collections and to define what a library is for." [5]

The power they've seized is a form of resistance; it is "guerilla librarianship," from which we can draw parallels to the guerilla urbanism tactics discussed so widely over the past year. Guerilla librarianship's central tenets include the rejection of hierarchy in favor of a horizontal organizational structure, and the provision of "space in their collections for ideas that are not typically well-represented in other kinds of library collections." Guerrilla libraries are usually underground, "created without the approval or support of the state or other authority," and they're "usually a common[s], a place where materials are held by the community at large for the joint benefit of all members." Both the form and the contents of the library, we might say, belong to the commons. [6]

On the morning of November 15, 2011, the protesters were evicted from Zuccotti Park, and many of their books and computers were seized. What became known on Twitter as the #BloombergBibliocide attracted international attention and incited condemnation, yet the librarians quickly adapted: they went mobile, taking their library to the people, to as many Occupy actions as possible, in bins and carts (the books also occupy a back room at Unoppressive Non-Imperialist Bargain Books in the West Village). The itinerant library might seem a fitting response to this age of locative media and (supposedly) barrier-free mobility — but of course mobility has long been a part of the public library's history: many libraries were born on the backs of donkeys or in mule-driven carts, shipped by crate to remote settlers and lighthouse operators, and later motored into neighborhoods via Bookmobile. [7] With their collection on wheels, the People's Library can keep moving with the movement.

### Little Library Exhibits

There is a kind of little library whose *raison d'être* departs notably from that of the People's Library. These libraries aren't necessarily apolitical, but they aren't typically motivated by

a desire to effect change, and they don't usually recognize as their charge the creation of sustainable public spaces or civic entities. Their interest is largely aesthetic and occasionally self-promotional.

The library has become a popular muse for art and publishing projects. Several museums and galleries have hosted libraries and reading rooms as art projects in themselves, or sponsored temporary libraries as supplemental resources for exhibitions. The art publisher e-flux used artist Martha Rosler's books to create a temporary library in its New York space, and then, in Berlin, it organized yet another reading room featuring books donated by international art institutions. The architectural/graphic design collective common room and the Los Angeles-based art/book/music store Ooga Booga have made reading rooms for the Goethe-Institut and the Swiss Institute, respectively. The Proteus Gowanus gallery and reading room in Brooklyn exhibits many library-inspired works. Art and culture publication Cabinet installed a filing-cabinet library out in the scrubland of New Mexico, while its fellow publisher Bidoun has created reading and listening rooms in book fairs and museums around the world.

In 2010, the Canadian journal *Fillip* partnered with AAAARG, an “an online platform for the [free] redistribution of [critical, theoretical, and philosophical] textual material,” to create the AAAARG Library at the fifth annual NY Art Book Fair at PS1 in Long Island City. As *Fillip* publisher and library “curator” Jeff Khonsary explains it, the AAAARG Library “existed alongside the paid economy of the Fair, offering an extra-institutional space that developed through a symbiotic (rather than an oppositional) relationship with the systems of exchange that structured the Fair.” [8] Khonsary draws a useful parallel between the political-economic position of the Fair library and the way the virtual AAAARG describes itself in relation to established institutions, using provocatively architectural similes: “Rather than thinking of it like a new building, imagine scaffolding that attaches onto existing buildings and creates new architectures between them.”

MoMA bibliographer David Senior isn't so convinced of such projects' productivity. “Libraries were de rigueur in 2011,” he wrote in an early 2012 issue of *Frieze*, “or at least they were in the small world of artists and designers relating back to books and publishing as part of their practice. I don't mean that sarcastically. It seems like the library provides an opening for a physical space that mimics a book itself — a passage into an elsewhere that includes as many narratives and conversations as possible books.” [9] Yet he wonders about the “suspect economics” and politics of projects such as those described above, and of design duo Dexter Sinister's *Serving Library*, which make available their own publications both online, as pdfs, and in a physical library space. “[B]uilding a library space for people to visit, raising money for it to subsist and to grow? That's the business of Carnegies — not artists and designers, and especially not during our tidal movement onto digital shores of past and future books and current economic implosions.”

While it may be in our best interests to avoid confusing the library-as-art-project with our Carnegie-supported institutions, I must acknowledge that it's often difficult to distinguish between little library exhibitions or installations, on the one hand, and the DIY libraries intended to function like "real" libraries beholden to patrons, on the other. There are plenty of projects that combine aspects of both types, and that use innovative aesthetics and design to draw in users, to whom libraries can then provide their core informational services and resources.

Consider Brooklyn's Reanimation Library, which revives out-of-circulation books for use by artists, writers and researchers. Founder Andrew Beccone, himself an artist and a librarian, takes pride in the fact that his library is a "bit of a platypus" — both art project and library. [10] Although it is indeed unorthodox in its orientation, he doesn't count the Reanimation Library among the recent crop of guerilla/DIY projects; partly because it has a semi-permanent home and collection (which began to take shape nearly a decade ago) and also an established acquisition policy and cataloguing system, i.e., the infrastructure to sustain itself as a functioning library serving various publics. Many of the projects that have attracted recent press coverage, Beccone says, "are collections of books, which in a very superficial way look very much like libraries, but without some kind of cataloging system in place, they don't actually qualify as such, in my opinion." [11] He continues:

In general, I find the phenomenon of pop-up or guerilla libraries to be a good thing because they seem to spring from both a love of print media and a DIY approach – two characteristics that I can relate to with my own work at the Reanimation Library.... My biggest problem is that all this has a tendency to water down the meaning of the word library. And at a time when many people are questioning the continued need for libraries, this is problematic.

### The Birdhouse Collections & Micro Book Exchanges

Artist Colin McMullan's Corner Library Project, which is catalogued on a Tumblr, consists of mini-libraries in commercial-news-rack-sized, weatherproofed sheds on street corners. Sometimes, to evade zoning restrictions, the libraries rest on hand trucks chained to stationary objects like light poles, although future models might connect to sidewalk tree guards. Members are granted access to the padlocked libraries and encouraged to contribute to the collection. McMullan has installed corner libraries in New Haven and New York, including a clapboard-sided construction at the corner of Leonard and Withers Streets in Williamsburg, and a Seed & Recipe Library, disguised as a planter, in East Harlem. He'd like to expand to other neighborhoods.

McMullan's libraries, which have attracted a lot of attention — including from The Wall Street Journal — represent another "species" of little library: what I'm calling the "birdhouse collections." These micro-scale, user-cultivated collections reside in tiny, often

hand-made, bird- or dog-house like structures sited in parks and street corners and marginal spaces. For McMullan, the Corner Library is one of several projects undertaken by his larger initiative, The K.I.D.S., or the Kindness and Imagination Development Society, which defines itself as a group "for people committed to developing (or redeveloping) their childhood selves" by "approaching life with a sense of wonder, with boundless energy and interest." The Corner Library is one means to this end — the group also throws costume parties and builds boats — and its ends are not necessarily those of a public library; the desired effects are, instead, emotional and ethical. [12]

McMullan sees his Corner Libraries as a new iteration of the book swap. In the digital age, as our "books and other hard media are starting to feel a little superfluous," we might turn to these little libraries to share our excess goods. [13] The opportunity to share might be especially appealing, McMullan suggests; drawing inspiration from the open-source movement, little library founders and patrons aim to transform books that were purchased as commodities into resources for the local commons. What's more, because members are encouraged to donate not only used publications but also "self-published zines, comic books, manuscripts, etc.," the Corner Libraries "can potentially offer literature that wouldn't be found in a public library, because it doesn't (yet) bear the stamp of official recognition from a publishing house." These birdhouses house an alternative economy of information.

McMullan's project plugs into a larger network of Little Free Libraries, which sells both construction plans and pre-fabricated structures ranging from \$300 to \$800 dollars (see also the Neighbourhood Bookshelf in British Columbia and Leon Reid IV and Julia Marchesi's "Hundred Story House" in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn). The network started in Madison, WI, spread to Minneapolis, and now stretches across the country. The Little Free Library's ethos echoes McMullan's: it recognizes both individual rights and personal property, yet sees a transcendent value in the ideal of the commons. To this end the LFL encourages the circumvention or *détournement* of restrictions in order to situate these libraries in public space: "You can apply for permits, variances and approvals but it could take a long time. ... The best strategy is to avoid needing to ask permission," but to always "be considerate of other people's rights." As for the books themselves, they belong to everyone. Responding to potential library proprietors' concerns about stolen merchandise, the LFL says simply: "You can't steal a free book." These libraries carry meaning, they assert, because of their "unique, personal touch" — the collections often contain not only books, but also personal notes and bookmarks, and the structures are often decorated with original art — and because patrons understand that "real people are sharing their favorite books," which means the collections are continuously refreshed.

As a reporter in Wisconsin put it: "In an era of laptop screens and eBooks, happening upon a Little Library can have its own special magic." Given the rise of proprietary platforms and ephemeral content, the LFL believes that the tactility, the originality, the aura of these

structures — plus the fact that they're communal property — generates an affective response. Ideally, that affect would translate into politics; it would inspire citizens to question why the presence of freely accessible books in public space elicits such emotion. McMullan regards the Corner Libraries as ancillary to the public system, reminding people of the value of traditional libraries, and perhaps inspiring a sustained citizen response to the atomization and privatization of cultural life and the inadequacy of public resources.

Yet some critics regard the "cute factor" — particularly of the "birdhouse" libraries, I would say — as a potential threat. "I don't have a problem professionally with the little libraries," said Lauren Comito, Director of Communications and Operations of Urban Librarians Unite, "but libraries are more than [sharing books in a doghouse], and that's what gets lots of attention." [14] Most of the public and little librarians with whom I spoke agreed that the general public is aware that no birdhouse collection could ever provide the resources and services of a public library system. But they're not so sure about policy makers. "I don't want politicians to see these tiny libraries and think, 'Oh, we don't need the big public libraries,'" Comito said. "We don't want those who control budgets to think that that librarianship can be reduced to a hobby, or that libraries can all be modularized and distributed, crowd-sourced and privatized."

### Storefront Library Redux

The commercial dimension of the Little Free Library — its website is essentially a store — makes it akin to a public-private enterprise. There are others like it. The Brooklyn Art Library, in Williamsburg, houses the complete collection of the Sketchbook Project, an enterprise wherein thousands of artists worldwide submit their sketchbooks (for a fee!) for cataloguing and publication. The library's aesthetic is pure Brooklyn: 19th-century-apothecary-meets-Carnegie-library, complete with letter-pressed publications and terrariums, old-school crayons and vintage U.S. Army rifle targets, etc. Many of these nostalgia accoutrements are for purchase, since this library doubles as an art store — "so if you're feeling inspired after browsing through the archive of visual inspiration, we'll have everything you need to start working on your own projects."

To be sure, the library has never been a stranger to commerce. Melvil Dewey's Library Bureau, which he founded in the 1870s, made library-outfitting a lucrative business; and even earlier, in the 17th and 18th centuries, American and European booksellers, as well as dry-goods merchants and other shopkeepers, often maintained circulating libraries to attract customers. Today, San Francisco's Ourshelves marries the storefront tradition with that of the social subscription library, another precursor to public libraries. Started in July 2011, Ourshelves is a membership-only collection occupying a few shelves, some curated by local authors, in the appropriately vintage-y Viracocha antique store, in the Mission district, where readings occasionally happen, "over tea, coffee and sometimes whisky." The organization aims to become a not-for-profit, and to use membership dues to set up



libraries for disenfranchised communities — including victims of domestic violence and the homeless — who, they argue, don't have access to a public library. This last claim is, to say the least, debatable; I would counter that all populations have access to the public library, and the homeless in particular make regular use of community libraries. The real question is whether there is sufficient branch service to reach some of these marginal populations.

### DIY Branches & Special Collections

Subscription libraries proved unsustainable for various reasons — including the reliance on individual initiative — and, starting in New England in the early 19th century, cities and towns began dedicating funds for public libraries. Later in the century branch libraries emerged, spurred by the movement toward decentralization as well as by Progressive-era programs that extended amenities into disenfranchised neighborhoods (bookmobiles were a later part of that tradition). And many current-day little libraries — like Luis Soriano's Biblioburro in Colombia, in which books are transported to poor children in villages via donkeys, and Raul Lemesoff's Weapon of Mass Instruction, in Argentina, which houses a portable library in a demobilized army tank from the '70s — revisit the original motivations behind branch service and craft imaginative responses to existing (or non-existent) local systems.

As have the citizens of the Charles Village neighborhood in Baltimore. When the branch library closed, in 1997, community members arranged to lease the building from the city for \$1 per year, provided they staffed and ran it themselves. The mostly-volunteer operation built the collection, planned programs, and together created the Village Learning Place, now a vibrant, award-winning lending library and learning center. A similar narrative has unfolded cross the country, in San Jose, California, where four new public libraries, planned during the dot.com boom of the '90s, opened in 2010, in a much diminished economic climate. Some of these branches were planned as joint projects with the city's Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services; these would be hybrid library-community centers, with city offices, exercise equipment, community meeting rooms, and, of course, books. The marriage emerged in part from a desire to cut costs, but also through recognition that there's a "natural partnership" between these two civic institutions, which, as San Jose Public Library Division Manager Katie Dupraw notes, both provide "community gathering space." [15]

The San Jose system has a history of such frugal partnerships: its main library, opened in 2003, also serves San Jose State University. But finances had become so tight by 2010, when the new branches were completed, that some were unable to hire staff and therefore unable to open. In Seven Trees, volunteers banded together to run a donation-based book-lending program in a small room in the Parks & Rec portion of the still-unopened branch. Dupraw told me that the Seven Trees branch is scheduled to open in early 2013, and the others throughout the following year.

We can find a similarly engaged public in Magdeburg, Germany, where, in 2005, public-minded citizens constructed a model of an open-air library out of beer crates in a struggling district. Over the next three years, they collected more than 20,000 books, opened a reading café, and attracted federal funding to support the transformation of the beer-crate model into an expanded permanent structure with a stage for public events. The shelves are open and accessible 24/7, no registration necessary. Equally heartening is the open-air library in the Mehboob Gulshan Public Garden in Gulbarga, India. A local journalist, Subash Banagar, started the newspaper library in 2000 to provide English-language periodicals so young readers could improve their English and prepare for exams; at least 15 other libraries have opened across the region since then. (See also the phone booth libraries in Westbury-sub-Mendip in Somerset, UK; Clinton, NY ; and scattered throughout New York City.)

The DIY energy that motivates these unconventional "branches" can be hard to sustain; those who aim to operate outside the local library system often discover how difficult it is to run an institution with volunteered services and donated resources. In 2009, in response to the Brooklyn Public Library's shortened weekend hours, Jerome Chou of Design Trust for Public Space set up his Branch community library in a parking lot in Fort Greene. "We wanted people to see underused public spaces differently, and think about why budget cuts always seem to hit libraries," said Chou. [16] Branch was "always intended to be a short-term, temporary, low-cost public space intervention." They had no trouble collecting free books, he said, but "storing everything at the end of a Sunday shift ... and unloading everything again at the beginning of a shift" presented the biggest challenge. He partnered with Architecture for Humanity NY to develop plans for a weekend space offering books, computers and performances; Chou says that they worked with two architects "who wanted to create a pretty elaborate shelving/table/shelter structure out of wooden crates," but who eventually realized that the plan was "probably too ambitious" and crafted a structure out of cardboard boxes instead. Branch closed up shop in December 2009, after a four-month run, and donated all their children's books to a local elementary school and the rest to Books Through Bars, which supplies reading material to prisons.

Chicago's Underground Library was likewise challenged by its itinerance. The donation-funded library, dedicated to building and maintaining an "all-inclusive collection of Chicago-specific [print] media, produced by and for the community," has moved six times in as many years — from an apartment to a coffee shop to an art gallery to a storefront to a church theatre, and finally, in late 2011, to a storefront in Humboldt Park. The librarians will accept diverse donations (academic books, artists' books, zines and eventually media in other formats), and volunteers catalogue the collection in detail — including all the people and places involved in a publication's creation, from editors to typesetters, from the place of publication to the places mentioned in a story — in an attempt to map social networks and geographies of influence and exchange among Chicago's media-makers. The

new space has prompted a new identity: with its street-front presence, the Underground Library has been renamed the Read/Write Library. The new moniker emphasizes that the library is a space of consumption and production, that visitors, too, can contribute to Chicago's culture and include their work in the collection.

Read/Write's move brought new challenges, including the need to sustain the space financially. According to assistant director Margaret Heller, the R/WL is considering offering co-working space, to "play off the nostalgia people have for doing homework at the university library." [17] Again, as in other projects discussed here, aesthetic or affective nostalgia is being commercialized to fund the complex and detailed work of running a library: the acquiring, cataloguing, digitizing, circulating, preserving, etc., of media in multiple formats. The R/WL did not respond to my attempts to contact them, and although the library wasn't open when I attempted to visit in early January, they seem now to have a more regular schedule of weekend hours.

### Library as Exchange Network

Some "libraries" actually forego traditional programmatic activities and emphasize the library as a geographical-social network of exchange. In this, they resemble Read/Write, with its aim to map Chicago media culture. But most little exchange libraries have no thematic connection to a particular physical place. Brooklyn's Underground Library defines itself as a "book-making and distributing community project circulating non-established words, art, films and music, mysteriously." In other words, it facilitates the sharing of hand-made books through direct, personal exchange — what the organizers call an "heirloom" distribution style, a system more controlled and deliberate than the all-things-to-all-people-at-all-times distribution that characterizes the Internet. The library publishes the books and distributes them to members, who sign the check-out cards inside the front covers and, if so inclined, annotate the pages before passing the books along to others.

BookCrossing uses a different distribution model and, rather than making use of purpose-published books, encourages readers to share books from their own collections. Here's how it works: One downloads a label with a BookCrossing ID and information about the project, affixes the label inside the front cover of a book, and then either shares the book with a friend or colleague (a "controlled release") or "release[s] it into the wild," into any public place, for anyone to find it. Patrons can track the book, via its ID, on the project website to see whose hands it passes through (thus far, books have traveled through the U.S., Canada, Western Europe and Australia). The International Public Space Library operates on a similar model, although it emphasizes anonymity by specifying that books are to be "left in a public space somewhere in the world" for discovery by a random someone. In adopting alternative, small-scale distribution models — often with public space as the medium — these projects propose alternatives to digital distribution, and, in the case of the Brooklyn

Underground Library, with its hand-made books, they refashion the book as something other than a mass-produced commodity.

## The Uni Project

Our final example — a category all its own — is, I must admit, a personal favorite, largely because it embodies smart thinking about diverse issues that have informed and challenged many of the aforementioned projects. The Uni Project is the work of Sam and Leslie Davol and a host of volunteers, donors and institutional partners. Leslie, who has worked with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the New York Historical Society, and Sam, a musician and former attorney for the Legal Aid Society, began the project in Boston, where, in their Chinatown neighborhood, there was "lots of space, [but] not a lot going on," Sam Davol told me. [18] They harbored concern about the city's spreading commercialization, yet saw tremendous possibility in the relative "emptiness" in their vicinity. They decided to fill that emptiness by organizing, with projectionist Jean Lukitch, a Kung Fu and Chinese language film series in a vacant lot.

We "started with the space," Sam Davol said; we "didn't really have an agenda about books." Yet their neighbors had been hoping for decades that the Boston Public Library would replace their branch, which had closed in 1956. The Davols saw an opportunity; they found a 3,000-square-foot storefront on Washington Street, partnered with design students at Harvard to create shelving and furniture, drummed up local support and attracted volunteers and accepted donations — and the Chinatown Storefront Library was born in 2009. The group shelved 4,100 books, issued 540 library cards, hosted community meetings and offered innovative programming, including a Drawing Lab and zine-making workshops led by the Papercut Zine Library. Because the space was small and community-focused, and because the Davols were present to oversee the space and the collection, they were able to adapt and improvise. As Sam Davol puts it, "The Storefront Library was R&D" for what came next. Appreciating the potential extendibility, flexibility and portability of their creation — and inspired by the Project for Public Spaces' call for "lighter, quicker, cheaper" urban development — they hatched an idea for the Uni.

The Davols knew they wanted to create small public spaces for urban neighborhoods, but they weren't sure what the space would be. Perhaps a portable community center or a library — although they were reluctant to carry or imply the weight of either institutional type. While they wanted to partner with libraries and other public entities, they were reluctant to call themselves a "library." So they chose the name Urban Neighborhood Institution — or Uni, for short.

Although innovative design is a critical component, the Uni was not conceptualized as an art or design project. As Davol says, "We never thought of ourselves as artists; we are producers." The Davols partner with designers because "good design brings people

together and helps us achieve our mission." The Uni folks teamed up with the Boston-based Hōweler + Yoon architects and with students at MIT, which also offered support in the form of a Haas grant, to develop a prototype. By the time they sought Kickstarter funding (as have a few other little libraries), they had settled on a description: a "portable ... reading room for public space." As Davol explained, the pitch emphasized the project design — apparently a successful strategy, given that they exceeded their \$20,000 goal.

The Uni structure consists of 144 open-faced, trapezoidal cubes stackable in various configurations depending upon the site and program; thus far the Uni has been installed at the New Amsterdam Market in Manhattan and at the Brooklyn Book Festival on Borough Hall Plaza. Each 16-inch cube can hold 10 to 15 books, and each is outfitted with a weather-resistant protective cover which, when removed, can double as a bench, a table, a podium, or a display surface. The design is always evolving. Currently the Uni team is developing sturdier covers that will function more effectively as tables, and experimenting with designs that will make the structure more secure when unattended, which would allow the Uni to stay outside overnight or remain longer at a particular site.

The non-circulating collection, consisting of donated new and used books managed by volunteer librarians (some from the Simmons Graduate School of Library Science), is organized into "modules that help librarians adapt the Uni to different locations and communities, and even change content over the course of a day." Art books, children's literature, reference volumes, and anthologies of short stories, essays and poetry comprise the bulk of the collection, in large part, Davol says, because they're "what works in public space" — i.e., books that are visual, browseable, perhaps a little eccentric, and with multigenerational appeal. The next step will be to offer multilingual material. Having a clear vision for the collection, Davol suggested, is essential for managing donations, so well-meaning contributors won't saddle you with their unwanted books.

The Uni also features special collections for which the 16-inch cubes offer a convenient "spatially determinist" limit, forcing concision and focus; these mini-collections, each curated by an organization or individual, ideally "convey a sense of passion and depth," and also feature new voices that speak to the Uni's immediate context. One collection-in-progress will focus on the history and uses of knots, another on deafness and sound. I asked Sam Davol how the curators were chosen, and he explained that they typically work with institutions with a kindred ethos and goals. They want to develop an open and democratic selection process, but, he said, the directors and librarians do have a clear vision, and ultimately "somebody has to make a decision." Yet it's not only the invited curators who play a creative role; the Uni's directors ascribe similar agency to the volunteer librarians, "whose expertise and passion is the arrangement, presentation, and display of the books across the course of a day and in different locations."

The project website paints a vivid picture of why such a space, with such a program, is needed:

Many urban residents, especially children, do not have easy access to books and places to read outside of school. Bookstores are closing. Public libraries in many cities are underfunded. Electronic communication, video games, and online socializing are sapping more and more of our attention. We seem to be losing touch with books at the very moment, and in the very places, we need them the most.

What's more, they say, "What we see at street level in many urban neighborhoods does not reflect our aspirations for ourselves and our society. If we're serious about having a well-educated society, let's build cities where learning experiences are prominent, accessible, and enjoyable." The Uni places books and reading front and center, in prime public space, sans logos and advertisements.

But as Sam Davol told me, "it wasn't just [about] books; libraries are more than just books." It was also about a space where people could "learn, exchange ideas and share expertise," and where young people could "discover new affinity groups and find alternative ways of socializing." So this "reading room" hosts other kinds of public gatherings — talks, screenings, classes, afterschool programs, hands-on workshops, etc. — which are either spontaneous and organic or planned by the Uni staff in partnership with external groups or individuals. This commitment to sharing and making — to doing something with the things one might learn from the books — is embodied in a handful of Uni cubes dedicated to, for lack of a better term, "praxis." For instance, artist Deb Putnoi's Drawing Lab fit into four Uni cubes and features drawing activities and a working zoetrope, a "big visual pull ... to draw people in," said Davol. Eventually the Davols would like to make more connections between the collection and these activity spaces, perhaps, for example, adding a cube with resources on the history of animation. And the Uni is not unique in this kind of "thinkering"; some progressive public libraries, like the Fayetteville Free Library in New York, are experimenting with new spaces for making and tinkering — tech shops, fabrication labs, hackerspaces and the like.

The Uni team has made institutional partnerships central to their mission: they recognize that many established institutions, like museums and libraries and schools, want to try out new programs or expand their reach, but often lack either resources or flexibility. The Uni plans to deepen a current partnership with the Brooklyn Public Library; to develop new relationships with the Queens Museum and the New York Department of Transportation; and to create "blueprints" for replicating the Uni structure, collection and team in other locations." It also aims to work with small upstart groups that might lack a venue to make their work public; in these cases it's ready to "share a reliable, outdoor-ready infrastructure which is specifically designed and equipped for successful street-level engagement."

Richard Reyes-Gavilan, director and chief librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library, regards the Uni as a critical partner in helping his own institution remain relevant and responsive to its multiple publics. The BPL worked with the Uni at the 2011 Brooklyn Book Festival, where, he says, the Uni was “extremely popular.” [19] The BPL, burdened with branch buildings with “HVAC problems, leaks, long leases, problematic landlords,” and other bureaucratic responsibilities, Reyes-Gavilan said, is now “looking to get more nimble.” He is looking to the Uni because it “represents the bare essentials of what a library is”: “a cube with information that someone wants to interact with.” In neighborhoods where branches are underused and facilities inadequate, the BPL would like to test the Uni, to see if and how it draws and engages patrons, and then consider how the library might translate these insights into a more (semi-) permanent structure.

Reyes-Gavilan is particularly keen on collaborating with the Uni because of its commitment to evaluation — which is relatively unusual in the DIY urbanism movement. According to the Boston Street Lab, the Davols' non-profit, “We measure everything we do in an effort to do it better.” The measurement is both quantitative and qualitative: the directors do head counts, which yields the numerical data that funders want, and the librarians assess circulation. To be sure, the circulation data are derived in part through appropriately DIY, lo-fi means: the librarians place a checkmark in each book as it's being reshelved, so they can track which books, and which kinds of books, prove most popular. Because the operation is small-scale, they can flag patrons' questions and requests and respond quickly. “The anecdotal evidence you get by standing in front of a line of kids,” Davol says, is priceless. Davol is interested in “the type of experience people are having,” so that he can see what works and what doesn't, and refine the operation accordingly. Reyes-Gavilan is optimistic that this evaluative information could influence the BPL's development of new, more flexible branches, perhaps including some with irregular hours to reflect the community's rhythms, and with staff rotations adjusted to fit the populations who visit at different times of day.

While the Uni does hope to achieve some degree of permanence throughout cities and within neighborhoods, that permanence would be a mobile one. In this vision the Uni would always be there, but in a different park, or farmer's market, or schoolyard, or storefront, moving every so often. Some of the other little libraries we've examined have aspired to put down roots, to find a home, but in the Uni's case, mobility and ephemerality are essential to its mission to “temporarily transform almost any available urban space into a public reading room and venue for learning.” To become stationary would mean losing the capacity to show how any space, if designed and programmed as a space of exception, can become a momentary utopia, dedicated to the values defining our ideal societies and better selves. This might sound naïve, but as librarian and author Matthew Battles said of the Occupy libraries, and which applies equally well here, claiming space for such activities is “especially forcible” now:

In a time when the virtual has grown so magically, richly figured, while the texture of public space becomes ever more inhospitable to the all-but-forgotten kinesthetic dimension of the public sphere. ... Perhaps the best word for it after all is utopia — ephemeral, tactile, tactical.

### Centering the Margins

We might say that all these little libraries — some intentionally fleeting, some semi-permanent; some taking shape in dedicated spaces and others spread through geographically-distributed social networks — have the seed of a utopian vision at heart. Betsy Fagin, librarian of the People's Library at Occupy Wall Street, says, "What pleases me most about the phenomenon is people reclaiming their own authority to collect, organize and share with others in their communities." [20] A few of the projects we've examined are born out of frustration — frustration with the privatization of public space; the weakening of our public institutions; the spreading corporate control of media, both its content and conduits — and the organizers regard their little libraries as a means of spotlighting these forces and rallying folks around the public library and the transparent circulation of information. Professional librarians, too, are often drawn to little libraries by the opportunity to explore alternative models of service. Librarian Melissa Morrone admits that:

Public libraries are bureaucratic, beholden to governments and other funders and broad community norms, and, especially given the bad economy and shrinking municipal budgets, becoming more and more open to corporate elements in their buildings and operations. A DIY library, whether political or artsy, can be accountable to a much smaller base of like-minded people and function as a cohesive project. As a public librarian, I want to encourage radicals to make use of their public libraries and demand collections and services that reflect their needs. But as an activist, I can totally understand people's desires to be DIY about libraries as with other things. [21]

Marcia Warner, president of the Public Library Association, regards these little libraries as her organization's partners; "any collaboration that extends the reach of the regional library is fabulous," she says. [22] But of course, some of the projects we're examined seem to be less about the library in particular than about public space and public culture in general; the library is simply a fitting "form" that can embody larger, more amorphous social concerns.

Some little libraries are driven by nostalgia; they lament the loss of tactile media, of real-time, face-to-face social interaction, of a visible print-based public sphere. This impetus gives the Brooklyn Public Library's Reyes-Gavilan some pause; he wonders if the rise of little library projects is like the resurgence of vinyl LPs. In other words, are these libraries cropping up as a kind of homage to an institution just as it is becoming obsolete? And



which, as Walter Benjamin might argue, now has only exhibition value, in the form of a “library aesthetic”? Morrone agrees that there is something melancholy about the little library; “the DIY library projects that are really about community are both inspiring and sad, as they try to revive [values] that [are] in decline ... the public sphere and noncommercial public ‘goods’ such as free libraries.” [23] Yet perhaps some of this nostalgia is based on an outmoded vision of the public library. In a time when even our largest, most august and bureaucratic libraries can envision the emergence of a Digital Public Library of America and the creation of spaces that incorporate 3D printers and CNC routers, these little libraries, with their vintage aesthetic, can indeed seem reactionary.

Bracketing the ambitious, high-tech initiatives, we might put into context the traditional information-provision roles of the public library, and remember that progress and access have been (as always) unevenly distributed. A significant part of the population, even in developed countries, lacks access to books outside of public schools, and many are without internet access at home. As Linda E. Johnson, president and CEO of the Brooklyn Public Library, stated in a recent panel discussion I organized at The New School, over 40 percent of Brooklyn households lack internet access. [24] And as noted, libraries continue to offer diverse services. Non-English-speaking communities often rely on public libraries to access foreign-language material and to find free language classes. The unemployed rely on public librarians to help them find job postings and format their resumes; Comito says she spends a good portion of her day providing these services.

But it’s not only the disenfranchised who continue to rely on the institution. [25] Material protected by stringent copyright and held in proprietary databases is often inaccessible outside libraries, even to the most “connected” among us; and as digital rights management becomes ever more complicated, we may come to rely even more on our libraries to help us navigate an increasingly fractured and litigious digital terrain. Many communities rely on their libraries to collect their local histories. And in cities and towns across the country, our public libraries are often one of the few — sometimes the only — freely accessible public spaces in town. In other words, the continued relevance of the public library means that it’s not worth nostalgizing yet. These little libraries are perhaps less “heirloom,” less “vintage” — less exercises in nostalgia — than we might assume.

Yet regardless of their aims — whether aesthetic or political or tactical or civic — these projects can’t help but raise big and important questions regarding the protocols of access, the ideals of knowledge and rules of intellectual property, the health of public institutions, the viability of public space and public life, and the definitions of civic values. Some little libraries, self-consciously precious, might seem mainly intended to charm; but ultimately they underscore the great and unbridgeable difference between a phone booth fitted out with books and cushions and potted plants, on the one hand, and on the other, a fully functional and sustainable public library system, with the infrastructure and expertise to serve the diverse publics of a great nation. The little library movement is enabling us —

sometimes unintentionally, sometimes not — to appreciate the distance that separates these ephemeral, marginal spaces and projects from the strong, stable public institutions that have been so central to our cities, and to our democracy. So perhaps the challenge now is to determine how these ever more prevalent "provisional, opportunistic and guerilla" projects can complement and strengthen our more traditional institutions and the cities they serve.

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### Editors' Note

We are pleased to publish "Marginalia: Little Libraries in the Urban Margins," as part of our ongoing exploration of the social, political and economic dynamics of public and private in America and beyond.

For more on this theme, see also *Housing and the 99 Percent*, by Jonathan Massey; *Housing Chicago: From Cabrini-Green to Parkside of Old Town*, by Lawrence Vale; *A Method of Living*, by David Schalliol; *Occupy: What Architecture Can Do and Occupy: The Day After*, both by Reinhold Martin; and *The Public Works*, by Nancy Levinson.

See also our Call for Articles on Public and Private.

### Notes

1. Email exchange with Mandy Henk, April 13, 2012.
2. Email exchange with Jerome Chou, April 12, 2012.
3. Email exchange with Melissa Morrone, April 7, 2012.
4. Barbara Fister, "Why the Occupy Wall Street Movement Has Libraries," *Library Journal* (October 27, 2011).
5. Quoted in Scott McLemee, "Guerilla Librarians in Our Midst," *Inside Higher Ed* (November 2, 2011).
6. Mandy Henk, "Occupy Libraries: Guerrilla Librarianship for the People" *Occupy Wall Street Library* (October 28, 2011).
7. See also Nikki O'Loughlin, *Bookish Territory: A Manual of Alternative Library Tactics*.
8. Jeff Khonsary, "Browsing the AAAARG Library" *Fillip* 13 (Spring 2011).
9. David Senior, "Looking Back" *Frieze* 144 (January – February 2012).
10. Museum of Modern Art, "Andrew Beccone | Reanimation Library" *MoMA Multimedia* (2012).
11. Conversation with Andrew Beccone, March 16, 2012.
12. See also Bonnie Tsui, "A Library Without the Building," *Atlantic Cities* (December 27, 2011).

13. Email exchange with Colin McMullan, April 12, 2012
14. Conversation with Lauren Comito, April 6, 2012.
15. Conversation with Katie Dupraw, April 6, 2012.
16. Email exchange with Jerome Chou, April 12, 2012.
17. Margaret Heller, "Social Networking the Catalogue: A Community Based Approach to Building Your Catalogue and Collection," Presentation at Library Information Technology Association National Forum, St. Louis, Missouri (October 2, 2011).
18. Conversation with Sam Davol, January 9, 2012.
19. Conversation with Richard Reyes-Gavilan, January 11, 2012.
20. Email exchange with Betsy Fagin, April 10, 2012.
21. Email exchange with Melissa Morrone, April , 2012.
22. Conversation with Marcia Warner, April 10, 2012.
23. Email exchange with Melissa Morrone, April , 2012.
24. See also New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations, Committee on Libraries, Hearing on the Preliminary Budget, March 13, 2012.
25. A recent discussion on Metafilter about library budget cuts elicited several heartfelt, eloquent comments regarding the vital services that public libraries provide.

[<http://places.designobserver.com/feature/little-libraries-and-tactical-urbanism/33968/>]