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Guerrilla Librarians Making Noise

By ASHLEA HALPERN

Even in a neighborhood overrun with trendy shops and edgy galleries, the Corner Library stands out—and not just because it's four feet tall and shaped like a doghouse.

The guerrilla athenaeum, which appeared this spring at the intersection of Leonard and Withers streets in Williamsburg, has clapboard siding and sits on a hand truck chained to a one-way street sign—a clever skirting of city regulation by its founder, 31-year-old artist Colin McMullan. Instructions on the library's padlocked door explain how to obtain a membership card.

Inside, the shelves are lined with books, zines, cycling maps and other curiosities, including a CD filled with baby pictures of world dictators and a handwritten recipe card for skillet cornbread. The library boasts some 25 to 30 members to date.

While public libraries continue to struggle financially and bookstore chains succumb to the e-revolution, privately funded micro-libraries like Mr. McMullan's are popping up around the city. Their founders—mostly artists and bibliophiles who tired of Googling their way to enlightenment—share a reverence for conventional libraries and their tradition of community programming.

"The internet is an incredible information tool, and Kindles seem very convenient," Mr. McMullan said. "But they don't satisfy a need we have for local, real-space exchange. These libraries are meant to help neighbors meet, know, and help each other."

A second Corner Library, also operated by Mr. McMullan and dubbed the EAsT Harlem Seed & Recipe Library, was unveiled June 3 in front of the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center. It masquerades as a planter and is stuffed with seed packets and recipe cards. Volunteer librarian Christine Licata, a curator at the nonprofit arts space Taller Boricua, has watched flummoxed locals circle the planter several times before opening its hidden drawer. She said the project redefines "what is a library and what are the possibilities of interpreting that word." A third Corner Library, destined for Coney Island, is in the works.

Micro-libraries are not unprecedented. In 2009, Jerome Chou, director of programs at the Design Trust for Public Space, set up the temporary BRANCH community library in an empty parking lot in Fort Greene, in part as a reaction to the Brooklyn Public Library's diminished weekend hours. Elsewhere, the Underground Library, founded in October 2009

by two anonymous New Yorkers ("the librarians"), circulates handmade works through in-person trades; it has 200 members and counting. And Steven Peterman, founder of the Brooklyn Art Library in Williamsburg, plans to open a semi-permanent outpost for thousands of art journals, solicited via the International Sketchbook Project, in San Francisco next year.

The king of micro-libraries, however, is indisputably Proteus Gowanus, an interdisciplinary arts venue located in a former box factory overlooking the Gowanus Canal. It houses six non-circulating collections, including a Cold War reference library and an Oulipo archive (a dozen or so books exploring the French method of constrained writing).

The most established of Proteus's archives is the Reanimation Library, founded in 2006 by Andrew Beccone. It catalogs some 1,300 books that have fallen out of mainstream circulation—like 1976's "Sex Lives of Animals Without Backbones" and 1982's "The Great Pantyhose Crafts Book." Cosmetology textbooks share shelf space with tomes on Tibetan grammar, bowling and palmistry.

"The effort is modest in scope compared to many public libraries, but it does provide a place to house and reactivate overlooked gems from the sediment of print culture," said Mr. Beccone, 36, who is in the process of launching branch libraries in Portland, Ore., Providence, R.I. and Paris. "The only resistance to the project that I ever encounter is from librarians," he said, "and usually from librarians of a specific vintage."

Lauren Comito, a Queens librarian and communications director for advocacy group Urban Librarians Unite, sees niche libraries as a threat that "perpetuate the myth that libraries are 'a bunch of books on a shelf' and that anyone could be a librarian, you just have to like to read."

"At least one of these 'DIY' libraries is a doghouse full of books," Ms. Comito said. "Well, if people confuse [public libraries] with being just a bigger version of a doghouse full of books, then yes, they could weaken our finances by cheapening our value from a profession to a hobby."

Not every librarian agrees. Melissa Morrone, who works in the city's public system, understands the need for some creative types to think beyond the public system. "Public libraries are bureaucratic, beholden to governments and broad community norms, and becoming more and more open to corporate elements in their buildings and operations," she said. "A DIY library can be accountable to a much smaller base of like-minded people."

Indeed, said Proteus Gowanus co-founder Sasha Chavchavadze, rogue collections "enhance and cultivate an interest in the disappearing medium of the book, and could possibly even lead to a renewed interest in mainstream libraries."

Mr. McMullan echoed that sentiment: "It would be extremely pretentious of us micro-librarians to think that our systems could ever take over the public library system in this country. I just think of the Corner Libraries as an ancillary system that, if anything, remind people how valuable libraries are to our communities and our sense of cultural identity."

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