

Beyond the Desk: Librarians as Keepers of Public Space

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Abstract

Increased population and need for public services, coupled with a lack of public spaces have driven the Los Angeles Central Library to evolve over time, offering civic resources and

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becoming a communal place that goes beyond the traditional understanding of a library. Despite decreased staffing, the connection to and provision of services from the library to external spaces—both physical and virtual—has increased dramatically. The institution continues to adapt to the dynamic social, economic, and climatic needs of its patrons, especially those most vulnerable among Angelenos. The Central Library and the librarians who sustain it occupy a space between public commons, civil refuge, social services coordinator, and educational resource conglomerate. As public spaces become less accessible, library patrons have more frequently sought access to social and technical services in the Central Library. We seek to understand the Central Library's role in providing essential public services that extend beyond the physical boundaries of the library. Our observations incorporated archival research through collaboration with historians, map specialists, and librarians; spatial analysis through our own observations and interviews, and what the Urban Humanities Initiative program guides termed "multi-sensory attunement (the use of sound, smell, and feel to 'make sense' of space)." To do this, we created a "thick map" to call attention to the ways in which the library has provided for the public both within the traditional expectations of what a library and its staff can provide, and well beyond.

Keywords

urban planning; library; Los Angeles; thick map; urban humanities

Introduction

During the week of September 9, 2024, a group of architecture, planning, and humanities students embarked on a mission to understand the multilayered elements that compose the Central Library as part of the UCLA and CityLAB Urban Humanities Initiative (UHI). The UHI is an academic program focused on analyzing urbanism through the exploration of space, social issues, community relationships and culture within the urban atmosphere. Students in the program come from various academic backgrounds, including architecture, urban planning and the humanities. This cross-disciplinary approach creates a unique space which encourages students to collaborate and interact with local communities on real-life challenges they are facing. With guidance from UHI leadership, and with presentations and research support from Los Angeles Public Library staff, we sought to understand the Central Library's role in providing essential public services that extend beyond the physical boundaries of the library.

Our interest in the Central Library's influence beyond spatial bounds was conducted on the eve of the Central Library's centennial of its foundation in 1926. Assessing the transformation of the function of the Central Library over this time places the library into the shifting socio-political and economic context of Downtown and Los Angeles at large. By

analyzing these changes, we can view a cross-section of what patrons of the library seek and what the library is able to provide at different points in time, providing windows into the sociopolitical transformations that make the library yield significance beyond its four walls. The contemporary mission statement of the Los Angeles Public Library states the library “provides free and easy access to information, ideas, books and technology that enrich, educate and empower every individual in our city's diverse communities” (LAPL, 2025). By the basis of this mission, the Central Library and the greater LAPL system keeps itself openly accessible to the public throughout the sociopolitical changes of its terrain. We wanted to see how the Library itself kept track of these changes, and how modern patrons and staff conceptualize the transformation of the role of the library as a public resource and service provider.

Much of the specific historicization of the Los Angeles Central Library is contained in Susan Orlean's *The Library Book* (2018) which chronicles the history of the library from its foundation to the mid 2010s. Her historical account of the Los Angeles Central Library narrativizes the complex history of the library as seen through the eyes of the librarians and administrative staff, guided by several key historical events such as the 1986 arson fire that was a pivotal moment in its history. Some of this history remains murky, as the story is told anecdotally, guiding us through an extensive near-century of history at an abbreviated pace. For example, when conducting this research, we were unable to find reliable sources within the library or within Orlean's account any recorded history of discrimination in the Central Library, despite knowing the insidious and ubiquitous nature of explicit state-sanctioned racial segregation in America and Los Angeles up until the Civil Rights Era. Orlean does however touch on the fundamental importance of a library's publicness and its function to serve the people, particularly the vulnerable:

The publicness of the public library is an increasingly rare commodity. It becomes harder all the time to think of places that welcome everyone and don't charge any money for that warm embrace. The commitment to inclusion is so powerful that many decisions about the library hinge on whether or not a particular choice would cause a subset of the public to feel uninvited. (Orlean, 2018: 67)

Orlean uses this concept as a jumping-off point to discuss the Los Angeles Central Library as a “de facto community center for the homeless” and the conflicts between how library leadership is willing to engage with these vulnerable patrons (Orlean, 2018: pp. 73–74). The publicness of the library is in and of itself a rare resource that patrons can utilize, particularly in moments where they are displaced and without housing, or otherwise institutionally marginalized. As we approach the present day, these inequities become more apparent, as do the efforts to address inequality and a growing set of community assistance needs (as encapsulated in the current library's mission statement). The need for public services

coupled with a diminishing of public spaces has driven the Los Angeles Central Library to evolve, offering civic resources and becoming a communal place that goes beyond the traditional understanding of a library. Despite decreased staffing, the connection to and provision of services from the library to external spaces—both physical and virtual—has increased dramatically. The institution continues to adapt to the dynamic social, economic, and climatic needs of its patrons, especially those most vulnerable among Angelenos. The Central Library and the librarians who sustain it occupy a space between public commons, civil refuge, social services coordinator, and educational resource. As public spaces become less accessible, library patrons have more frequently sought access to social and technical services in the Central Library. Understanding these temporal transformations allows our research to proffer reasoning for an expanded suite of library services that are able to adapt to and meet changing library patron needs. As the needs of patrons and skills of library staff each become more complex, so too do the needs and services that the Library may be expected to provide as a public space. Likewise, as the availability of place in the city is becoming harder to obtain (e.g., unaffordable rent prices, increased surveillance of public space, as witnessed by contemporary Angelenos such as this research team), the value of public spaces as a refuge and resource increases even more so, meaning more kinds of public service spaces may fold into the library. By its public nature, the library is transformed into a thirdspace beyond the standard colloquial understanding of a library and its purpose (Soja, 1996). The scarcity of public space has only heightened the importance of the library as a resource for people to access. Our work aims to settle the library in this thirdspace, understanding the expansive roles that the library did, does, and will play in providing public services to a diverse set of patrons.

Methods

As part of the methodology of the Urban Humanities, we were asked to create a “thick map” representation of the Central Library as a source of public services (Presner et al., 2014; Cuff et al., 2022). As described by Dana Cuff et al. (2022), a “thick map” is made up of spatio-temporal layers that tell a story about the physical space being examined beyond the apparent surface-level observations one could make through basic cartography or analysis. It uses basic cartographic practices as a jumping-off point for a thicker map that exposes the limitations of such conventional mapping practices and prompts the observer to imbue meaning and capture elements of a space that are not so easily or cleanly mapped. As a framework, thick mapping helps one to think beyond the bounds of what is most normatively observed within a physical space or area and implores both the thick cartographer and the interpreter of the thick map to think beyond the “flat” interpretations of maps (Presner et al., 2014; Cuff et al., 2022; Vossoughi et al., 2024). The layers of a thick map serve to inform the scholar of the multifaceted nature of physical space that so often extends beyond just what readily appears as built and solid. We

employ thick mapping as a method in the context of this research because it allows us to unfold the multitude of spaces that are connected to the library, exposing the value of the library's publicness and observing its interconnectedness with the public and social services. Our observations incorporated archival research through collaboration with historians, map specialists, and librarians; spatial analysis through our own observations and interviews; and what the UHI program guides termed "multi-sensory attunement (the use of sound, smell, and feel to 'make sense' of space)." We incorporated both the professional experiences of the librarians as they evolved over time, as well as insights from individual patrons of the library whose everyday lived experiences with the library informed the experience.

With the interest in mind of the Central Library's role in administering public services over time, we utilized several sources of primary and secondary data to construct our thick map. To capture contemporary elements of the library, we conducted impromptu interviews with Librarians and patrons of the library to capture elements of their stories, which are visualized on the final thick map in several unique ways. This project was coursework conducted as part of a summer intensive from September 9th to September 15th, 2024, meaning there was a limited time to conduct the interviews. Over the course of two days from September 12th to September 13th, we interviewed four librarians and staff members on site and 16 patrons, selected from those who happened to be present in the library during the time our cohort was there, from 12 PM to 5 PM each day. We approached patrons directly in the library with a request for an interview and logged the part of the library where these interviews took place amongst its multiple floors and sections. Beyond this primary data collection, we also worked with library staff to collect several sources of secondary data to provide us with the historical context of the Central Library necessary to construct our thick map.

What the Thick Map Shows

The site-scale mapping portion of our work aims to describe the immediate physical environment in which the Central Library is located. It notes the proximity of the library to public spaces and social services, key amenities that the library itself provides, to understand how the services offered at the library compare to those available in the neighborhood immediately surrounding it. Included on the map are the locations of public parks, restrooms, city services, Wi-Fi, air-conditioned spaces, medical and mental health support, homelessness resources, pro-bono legal help, immigration services, cultural amenities, and public transport. We position the library at the center of the map and the extent at a 15-minute walking radius from the institution, a critical distance in urban planning for pedestrian accessibility. Our analysis indicates that accessible public spaces have decreased in the region, while semi-private spaces like commercial or corporate plazas have increased. This underscores the importance of the library as a public space without barriers to entry. Additionally, our analysis

shows that the library exists in an area highly connected to transit networks and relatively devoid of social services. Those that do exist are dispersed widely around the region. This increases the value of these essential services offered at the library, especially for patrons needing more than one such amenity at a time.

Adding layers on and around this site-scale map, our thick map calls attention to the ways in which the library has provided for the public both within the traditional expectations of what a library and its staff can provide, and well beyond. This aspect is represented on the thick map in its translucent human icons, which show the transformation of the librarian's role over time through word clouds detailing their expanding job duties, professional expectations, and necessary qualifications. Along with this, society's perspective of librarians has changed over time, looking at them in the present day as more of social workers. One anonymous career librarian said "One librarian in our system can do really a very different job from another, so there can be some really specialized roles. One of our librarians ends up fixing sewing machines that are broken—I mean not what I expected when I was in library school." Another career librarian expands on the evolving responsibility of the library and its staff:

The population of the library is always changing. It can be challenging sometimes. Some people come to it as a place that's well lit, climate-controlled, safe environment and they aren't too interested in the other resources . . . If I were to describe a lot of the things I do [for patrons] someone might ask me 'oh are you a social worker?' (Interview, 2024)

It should be noted that the Central Public Library has long provided a space of free refuge and assistance to the population it serves, including the economically disadvantaged and unhoused. In the mid-1930s, during the Great Depression, the Los Angeles population ballooned from just over 575,000 residents to well over 1 million as people sought opportunities in this burgeoning urban area (Orlean, 2018). With this population growth came an escalated need for public services, particularly for those with little income or steady employment. (Sheeley et.al, 2021). In response to this sudden increase in need, the Central Library increased its collection of literature by 1.3 million items, many pertaining to job training, skill building, and entrepreneurial aspirations. Over the next 50 years, this collection would expand to nearly 4.5 million items, and with it came social service connections. The information desk, now located at the main entrance of the Library, served as an essential location for residents to receive information on eviction defense, social security, employment, and more. In 1982, an arson left the Central Library recovering from a devastating fire in which 400,000 collection items were lost. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the Library, which found itself flung into the limelight with massive campaigns conducted which helped to rebuild the Central Library bigger and better than before (Orlean, 2018). Bringing us to the present, with a population of 3.8 million Angelenos, (US Census Bureau, 2023) the Los Angeles Central

Public Library has continued to expand its collection to well over 6 million items which now include books, documents, media, technology (LAPL, 2024)and on-site training in pursuit of support building, social services, and connections to shelter, showers, and housing.

Homelessness has become an absolute crisis in Los Angeles, and the Central Library is one of the frontline agencies dealing with this crisis on a day-to-day basis. As the city expanded, so did its unhoused population, going from an estimated 10,000 individuals in the 1930s to approximately 75,000 individuals present day (Irvine, 1939; LAHSA, 2024). In place of organized formal social services provided through state or federal support, the library has acted as a conduit to services, information, and free resources unavailable to the most disadvantaged populations anywhere else. This, however, places a burden on staff and volunteers at the library whose formal training poorly accounts for the social services the Central Public Library has inherently provided. Several unhoused individuals were interviewed who cited similar reasons for why the library was important to them—and also how social services could be improved. One patron was seeking one-on-one assistance with service navigators on site, as currently services were only offered directly on site once a month. Another patron wanted to raise awareness about discrimination against unhoused people, alluding to a sense of unhoused patrons being treated differently than housed patrons within the library space.

Just as Orlean (2018) discusses the tension with the library as a public space and its role to address homelessness, these tensions were present in the space while interviews were taking place. Several security guards walked the grounds of the library that day, and at one point, while our team was conducting interviews, security escorted an unhoused patron from the library, yet still with the kind of silence expected within a library. The person being escorted appeared somber and compliant as they brought two neatly and tightly packed suitcases with them. Witnessing this tension firsthand speaks to the unease by which the library may occupy several spaces that it sees as beyond the scope of its work. However, in addressing the needs of unhoused patrons, several patrons voiced how the library could take proactive action rather than suppressive action. They acknowledged the need for shower services and better maintenance of the bathrooms on site that unhoused folks could access to allow themselves to be clean and dignified within this public space. Discussions of case workers and other community health resources were also had with patrons and with library staff. The Source was the most cited resource to respond to homelessness in the library by library staff we spoke to in interviews and also during the summer intensive week (also included in Orlean's (2018) account, p. 74). This limited service provision at the library on the terrace to once per month, and was primarily a resource fair designed to connect patrons experiencing homelessness to service providers off- site from the library. While an important connector to resources beyond the library, patrons expressed that the library could incorporate more onsite resources (e.g., showers) to directly aid people experiencing homelessness on site. As noted by both the

conversation and location of the patron interviews, the library already served as a critical resource for people experiencing homelessness in other ways. Most folks interviewed who were experiencing homelessness were interviewed near the Computer Center, either trying to get online or resting in the lounge area outside the center awaiting entrance to the fully in use computer center. Orlean (2018) also acknowledged that the Los Angeles Central Library serves as a core resource for unhoused patrons to access digital technology and connect to the virtual world. This thus leads us to consider what additional and specific resources could be incorporated into the physical space of the library for these vulnerable patrons that fold in services from other sectors like public health and social services. Our thick map leads the reader toward some of these patrons' concerns and needs, positioning them in the modern era segment of our map to suggest the evolving role of the Library as an essential social service center. This need arises in the face of increased criminalization of our unhoused neighbors.

Libraries serve as a safe space for many of Los Angeles' most vulnerable residents, and its role is beginning to extend beyond the help desk and into action that could markedly improve the quality of life for its patrons if proper consideration of the diverse and increasing needs of patrons are met. This comes at a time when the use of downtown space is being thrown into question. With more skyscrapers and buildings downtown becoming vacant with the advent of work-from-home and hybrid working styles taking hold of the white-collar working world, the Central Library may serve as inspiration for how urban space may be repurposed to serve the community. As a place of refuge, a place of service, and a place of information, the Central Library provides unfettered public access to resources amongst a downtown landscape that has historically seen a restriction of public access and a siphoning of public resources for commercial benefit (Marks, 2004; Huante, 2022). The Central Library can be looked at as a physical space that counteracts the extractive elements of downtown, and a template for the value of public spaces to the people at large. With increased investment in public spaces like the Central Library, planners may be able to reshape the future of downtown Los Angeles in ways that provide stronger public benefits than have previously been enjoyed by Angelenos.

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