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**The Death and Life of English Public Libraries:  
Infrastructural practices and value in a time of crisis**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in Sociology

January 2019

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where I have consulted the work of others this is always clearly stated.



.....

Date: 25<sup>th</sup> January 2019

Alice Rose Corble

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the changing identity, spaces and fortunes of English public libraries in the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century austerity and neoliberal reform of local government services. It interrogates what we can understand the practices and values of public libraries to mean at a time when the very notions and forms of what is ‘public’ and what is ‘a library’ are up for grabs.

Since their inception in the mid-nineteenth century, public libraries developed with a mission to enable social change through providing free and equal access to learning resources and knowledge spaces for all. This thesis asks how far public libraries can maintain this foundational identity as institutional agents of social change, while simultaneously being forced to change their organisational forms in present conditions of crisis. It reveals what is getting both lost and gained through this double valency of change and articulates how reading library crises at the local level sheds light on a wider national condition of crisis.

Based on multi-sited ethnography and interviews in London and Birmingham between 2013-2017, it examines what kinds of publics, values, and arguments for public value are produced and contested in these different library contexts. An analysis of the social and infrastructural relations between ‘local’ and ‘central’ forms of power and (counter)publics connects the case studies. A temporal skein also threads the cases together, using a conjunctural analysis approach to trace how historical moments of social and political change are embedded within emergent organisational and cultural transformations in the unfolding present.

Scholarship on the practices of public libraries is scarce in sociology. This thesis bridges this gap and develops existing knowledge with a lively ethnographic imagination, addressing the urgent need to articulate and make visible the multi-dimensional value of these quickly-disappearing public infrastructures. By exposing the practices that make and un-make the public library, the thesis argues that the state of the country’s libraries can be read as a critical diagnostic barometer for the life and death of municipal England. It also argues that the public library’s future survival as an enabler of social change depends upon mobilising political conversations across sectors and academic disciplines with a view to bridging activist and professional practice.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## **Introduction**

*We need to do something urgently. We're at a Beeching moment – the review that led to the closure of railway branch lines – which many regret, and that's why this is urgent. [...] It's a world that's begging for action. It needs a change of narrative, it's in a downward spiral of negativity, judicial reviews, closures, volunteers – we do not have a positive narrative but there are elements of positivity.*

William Sieghart, foregrounding the publication of his (2014) Independent Review into the crisis facing UK public libraries.

### **1.0 What is a public library?**

It used to be the case, not so long ago, that the term 'public library' referred to a commonplace municipal site that was relatively easy to recognise and access. This specific and ubiquitous entity can be defined as follows: a building filled with collections of books, information resources, equipment and activities organised for public circulation and engagement; open to all without discrimination; free at the point of use and funded by public subsidy; staffed by professionally trained, council-employed library workers who facilitate informed user access and engagement; governed by local authorities according to national policy, standards and frameworks; and distributed in a national network of central and branch libraries serving every neighbourhood across the country. A common signpost, situated on thousands of neighbourhood street corners with the words 'public library' printed on it, would point to this identifiable entity, and most people who encountered such a sign would usually know what to expect when they followed it and arrived at the library entrance. Today, however, the situation is not so straightforward.



Figure 1.1: Public library signpost. (Image by author, June 2018)

The image above is a sign on my local neighbourhood street corner in the London Borough of Lewisham, which points to a branch library that is open three and a half days per week, looks and feels like a traditional public library, with its classic Carnegie architecture, embossed with a municipal crest on the outside, and stocked inside with books provided by the local authority. This library, however, receives no public or regular funding, is staffed entirely by volunteers and managed by the local residents' association. In 2016 it was divested from the local authority budget and handed over to a voluntary group through a legal process called 'Community Asset Transfer', a product of the Localism Act 2011. This is one example of hundreds of different cases of public library transformation continuing to take place across the country.

Since 2010, when the Conservative-led Coalition Government came to power in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007/8, and new programmes of 'austerity'

and ‘big society’ came into force, the public library network in Britain has undergone a rapid period of re-configuration. Established meanings of the conjunctive term ‘public library’ are becoming unmoored as the values and practices that constitute a ‘public’ and a ‘library’ become dis-articulated, vulnerable and ripe for re-appropriation (Finch, 2018).

As public librarian and online news broadcaster for the sector Ian Anstice argues, prior to 2010

public libraries had been experiencing static or increasing budgets combined with stable or reduced levels of usage. Large scale projects to refurbish central libraries had restarted in Liverpool and Manchester and the largest ever English public library rebuild had started in Birmingham. Now, the sector is facing deep and sustained budget cuts, with hundreds of small libraries under threat of closure or passing to volunteers and even the new Library of Birmingham confronted with a deep crisis. Facing this disaster, the old certainties have been washed away, with the role of paid staff, council involvement and even the library itself being called into question. (Anstice, 2015b, n.p.)

Anstice highlights here the trend for large regional cities to renovate, build and rebrand flagship public libraries as central sites of symbolic capital and urban renewal, often at the expense of the smaller libraries in communities where people need them most, which are most vulnerable to cuts and closures in the austerity context (Kennedy, 2011b; Casselden, Pickard and McLeod, 2015).

‘Public library’ assemblages can now range from a collection of paperbacks in a disused telephone box; to a ‘community hub’ run by volunteers; to a flagship city centre visitor attraction; to local ‘one-stop-shop’-information centres where libraries share buildings with other services (such as housing and benefits advice services, schools, colleges, leisure centres, arts centres and a range of third sector organisations); or to automated, staffless ‘self-service’ libraries accessed through a restrictive card-entry system that excludes children and adults with support needs (Anstice, 2015a; Finch, 2018; Taylor, 2018). In a growing number of cases, public libraries are now also sharing spaces and services with state control agencies including police, probation and visa and immigration agencies (Radical Librarians Collective, 2018). The word ‘hub’ is an increasingly ubiquitous synonym for the public library, which library leaders use to

underline the way libraries are and always have been fulcrums of intersecting learning, information and cultural practices and spaces; while political and business leaders propagate the use of this term in order to advance public-private partnership and outsourcing models of institutional restructuring (Blewitt and Gambles, 2010; McNeal, 2015; Stephens, 2017; Summers and Buchanan, 2018). In both these senses, the public library as a public infrastructural entity is getting lost in wider infrastructural organisational, urban and economic entanglements.

A confusing multitude of government-sanctioned ‘alternative delivery models’, including arm’s-length management arrangements, ‘public service mutuals’, ‘joint ventures’ and various forms of ‘asset transfer’ continue to emerge, as local authorities find new ways of providing statutory library services with rapidly diminishing in-house resources (DCMS, 2017)<sup>2</sup>. Some library services have been outsourced to commercial providers, notably Carillion plc, who owned the contract for library services in four London Boroughs before going into liquidation in January 2018 (Cain, 2018), while most outsourced services are contracted to non-profit trusts, leisure companies and social enterprises. Most public libraries divested from council budgets are transferred to ‘community management’, which invariably means library buildings and services are managed and staffed entirely by volunteers (occasionally with some local authority infrastructural support) (Casselden, Pickard and McLeod, 2015; Cavanagh, 2017). In addition to these organisational reconfigurations of ownership and responsibility, large quantities of public libraries have disappeared altogether.

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<sup>2</sup> Community Asset Transfer will be defined and explored further in Chapters Two and Nine.

## 1.1 Public library crisis accounts: states of emergency

Between 2010-2017, approximately 1,170 UK public libraries were either closed or withdrawn from direct council provision, which represents just under 24% of the national network of service points. Of the 3,750 local authority-run libraries that remain open, what their doors open onto is often a ‘hollowed out’ landscape, where a number of core infrastructural elements have been reduced to save on expenditure, notably specialist professional staff, book stock, opening hours, outreach activities and children’s services (Robertson and McMenemy, 2018a). Annual surveys from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) show that expenditure on public libraries dropped by £141 million in the three-year period of 2015 to 2017 (CIPFA, 2015, 2016, 2017). More recent data from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government reveals that a total £300 million has been cut from the national library budget since 2010 (Ellson, 2019).

	2009-2010	2016-2017	+/- Difference in provision
No. of fully-council run public libraries	4920	3750	Closure/transfer of 1,170 public libraries (-23.78 %)
No. of council-employed paid staff	31,977	24,977	Loss of 7,000 FTE <sup>3</sup> professional staff (-21.89 %)
No. of unpaid volunteers	15,861	31,403	Double the amount of unpaid staff (+98.55 %)
No. of volunteer-run <sup>4</sup> public libraries	N/A	564	N/A

Figure 1.2: Table of changes in UK public library resources between 2010 – 2017<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Full Time Equivalent employees of the council

<sup>4</sup> As Anstice (2012) points out, ‘The overall word for libraries that are no longer directly operated by the council is heavily politicised. Local councils prefer to use the positive-sounding words ‘divested’ or ‘community library’ while campaigners prefer to use more negative words such as ‘abandoned’, ‘DIY’ or ‘volunteer-run’.

<sup>5</sup> Figures sourced from (BBC, 2016a; Anstice, 2018)

One of the most striking differences revealed in these quantitative shifts is the 98.5% increase in volunteers now staffing public libraries. While there has been a long tradition of volunteers enhancing public library services through activities such as assisting with children's or older people's activities, the growing trend over the past eight years has been for volunteers to replace paid staff altogether and run the library buildings and services through unwaged and precarious labour. The libraries withdrawn from council control and transferred to voluntary groups are generally smaller branch libraries in urban margins or county villages, while those that stay within council control and are staffed by professional employees tend to be the larger 'central libraries' located in the town or city centre. This creates a patchwork national network of local public library provision which has been likened to a 'postcode lottery' by many (Anstice, 2013; Wright and Case, 2016; Sanderson, 2017).

In a context where central government controls 91% of local government public spending, and this spending power has been reduced by 40% since 2010 and is set to reduce much further, the prognosis for statutory services like public libraries does not look good. The reduction in funds and resources for public libraries is part of a wider national picture of cuts made to the full range of both statutory and discretionary public services. By 2020, it is predicted that local authorities will have faced a £16bn reduction to core funding from the Government since 2010, amounting to a loss of 60% of local public service budgets (Local Government Association, 2018). It is predicted that by 2019, 168 councils will receive no more core central government funding at all, and all councils in England face an £8bn funding gap by 2025 (ibid.).

This dramatic economic shift is the result of the Conservative government's plan for local authorities to transition from grant funding to relying on local business rates, the implementation of which has been severely delayed (Local Government Association, 2015; Barej, 2017). A recent report by the Local Government Information Unit and Municipal Journal warns that:

As it stands, councils are facing the 2020 cliff-edge without a clear idea of how they will be funded afterwards or how much money they will have. The real world impact of delaying these seemingly technical

decisions is that, across the country, libraries and parks are closing down, the elderly and disabled can't access basic care, vulnerable children aren't being supported and the streets are dirtier and more dangerous (Glover, 2018).

Public Libraries fall within the cultural domain of what the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) terms 'neighbourhood services': the group of universal public services administered by local government across the UK which fall outside the categories of education or social care, and includes highways and transport, cultural services, environmental services and regulatory and planning services (APSE and NPI, 2017). In 2015/16, neighbourhood services accounted for 19% of total local government service expenditure (excluding fire and police) in England and have been the hardest hit of all local government services, taking between 20-50% cuts to their annual grants from central government (ibid.). Faced with decisions of cutting vital adult social care services or reducing public libraries, for local authority decision makers the public library service 'is a low-hanging fruit that continues to be picked' (CIPFA, 2017).

With such rapidly diminishing financial and professional human resources, public library professionals and campaigners are fighting daily battles to defend the enduring need for and value of their services, in a governmental landscape where quantitative measurements of efficiency subsume all arguments for qualitative social value. One county library services manager describes the struggle as: 'fight[ing] every day to keep the service alive. It feels like a war zone. Library leaders have battle scars on their backs' (Onwuemezi, 2017). National news headlines from the past eight years portray a war-like landscape of attack, attrition and defence:

"'Apocalypse now' for libraries, social care and bin collections" (The Times, 2010)

"Alan Bennett says library closure plan 'child abuse'" (BBC News, 2011a)

"Library cuts: The battle of the bookshelves" (BBC News, 2011)

"Government sleepwalking into library crisis" (UNISON, 2012)

"People only realise the value of a library after it's axed" (The Telegraph, 2013)

"The great British library betrayal" (The Independent, 2014)



“Stark warnings of library 'emergency'” (The Bookseller, 2014)

“‘Empty shell' warning for library” (BBC News, 2015b)

“Lambeth library occupation 'turning into a siege'” (BBC, 2016b)

“Don't mourn the loss of libraries – the internet has made them obsolete”  
(The Telegraph, 2016)

“Libraries aren't 'dead in the water' – even if some have given up” (The  
Conversation, 2016)

“Libraries are dying – but it's not about the books” (The Guardian, 2016)

“Libraries: the decline of a profession?” (BBC, 2016a)

“Libraries facing 'greatest crisis' in their history” (Press Association, 2016)

“The Tories are savaging libraries – and closing the book on social  
mobility” (The Guardian, 2017)

“Councils used as 'human shields' for cuts” (The Guardian, 2018)

As these headlines indicate, public discourse on the public library crisis is riddled with figurative language evoking struggles between life and death that require urgent calls for critical care interventions. This highly dramatic and affective rhetoric can be understood as productive of a national mood that swings between cruel optimism and hopeful pessimism (Berlant, 2011; Coleman, 2016), interpellating the mortality of public libraries with that of 'the state' itself. As Janet Newman and John Clarke highlight, such discursive moves involve 'states of imagination' that encourage particular attachments and relations to what 'that strange abstract idea' of the state should resemble (2014, p. 160)

Laura Swaffield, Chair of the national pressure group The Library Campaign (founded in 1984 in an earlier period of cuts and commercialisation under the Thatcher government), claims:

We really are in a state of emergency now. There is a profound impact on the library network. We could reach a tipping point before the end of the year where we have lost a level of service that we will never be able to get back (The Bookseller, 2014).

This sense of high stakes was echoed by Nick Poole, the chief executive of the national professional association for librarians and information specialists, CILIP, who in 2015 wrote an open letter to the then Prime Minister David Cameron urging him to avoid creating a legacy of a network of irreversibly hollowed-out services. Poole predicted that the outcome of the 2015 Autumn Budget

is likely to put the Public Library Network itself – long the beating heart of our communities, a foundation of Britain’s education, equality and social mobility and a central pillar of our economic future – at risk. (Poole, 2015a)

Swaffield and Poole’s articulation of urgent ‘states of emergency’ and figurations of vital organs and systems essential for social survival can be understood through Ben Anderson’s theorisation of the way in which the affective force of emergency in present times of economic crisis is ‘a legal-political tool oriented to the continuation of the present and the erasure of the future’ (2016, p. 6).

## **Popularity and protest**

Despite the grave challenges outlined above, public libraries remain one of the most visited and well-used cultural institutions in society: there are 8.4 million ‘active borrowers’<sup>6</sup> using British public libraries, and one in two people across the UK and Ireland visit libraries (Peachy, 2016). The biggest users of public libraries are young people aged 15-24 and across the age ranges usage is higher for black and minority ethnic groups (Peachy, 2016; DCMS, 2017). An average of 250 million visits are made to public libraries in England each year (CILIP, 2017), which far exceeds annual visits to other major public and cultural facilities, as illustrated in the snapshot graph below.

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<sup>6</sup> defined as users that have borrowed a book in the last year

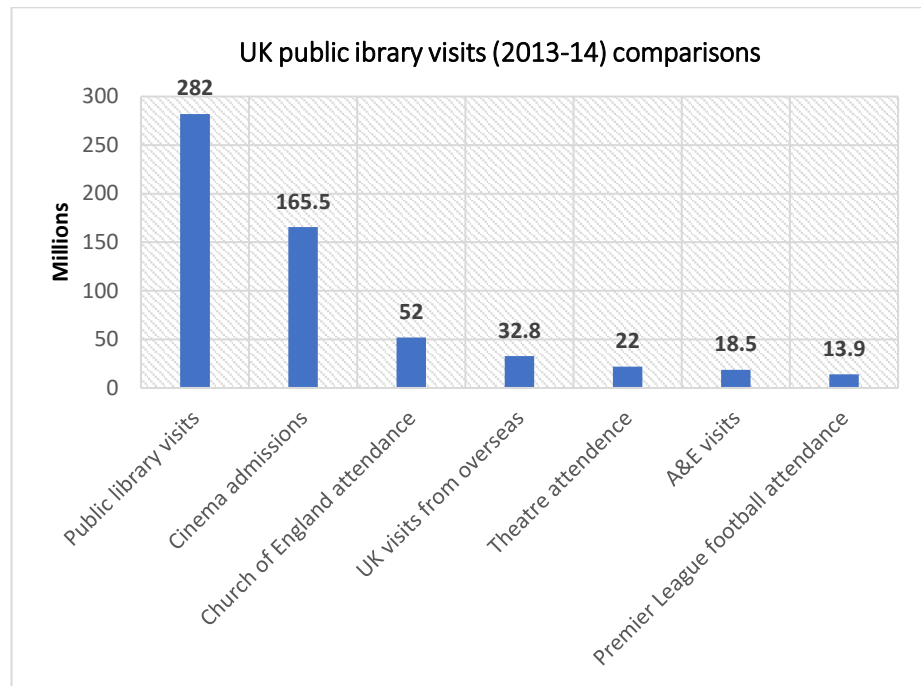


Figure 1.3: UK public library visit comparisons (2013-14)<sup>7</sup>

Given the popularity of public libraries, it is not surprising that when they are threatened with closure or reductions in quality and publicness of service, protesting publics swiftly convene and vociferous local and national campaigns spring into action to defend them.

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2016, thousands of protesters marched from the British Library in King’s Cross to Trafalgar Square in the centre of London to defend the nation’s public libraries, galleries and museums, carrying banners and placards with slogans such as *Don’t Make a Bonfire of our Culture* and *We Demand Public Libraries for the Common Good*.

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<sup>7</sup> Data source: CIPFA, 2014; graph adapted from Potter, 2015



Figure 1.4: Libraries, Galleries and Museums Demonstration, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

(Image: @SaveSwinLibrary, Twitter)



Figure 1.5: Libraries, Galleries and Museums Demonstration, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2016. (Image by author)

Public library campaigner and popular children's author Alan Gibbons (pictured on the left in the image above), argued at the demonstration that:

Libraries are the second most popular public service after the NHS. They offer education, inspiration and access to knowledge, the foundations of democracy. Sadly, they are under attack from government cuts as never before. It is time to stand up for libraries. (Flood, 2016)

Gibbons' words, alongside the slogans and actions of his fellow protesters' rallying together in the centre of London, between Whitehall and the National Gallery, places the value and values of the public library service in an explicitly democratic and national frame. Groups of protesters in the square had travelled from districts and regions across the country to defend their local library services within a national context of crisis emanating from the centre of political power. The dynamic relationality between these local, national and central forces of publicness and power is a core analytical thread that runs throughout this thesis, which argues that the public library is a vivid, diagnostic site through which to read the contemporary conjuncture.

## **1.2 Research aims, questions and methods**

Since their inception in the mid-nineteenth century, public libraries have developed with a mission to enable social change and through the provision of freely accessible learning resources and cultural spaces for all people. My research aims to provide a wider and deeper understanding of what is at stake with the current transformation of public library services in England, by investigating threats to their foundational identity and purpose, and diagnosing what kind of 'crisis' they are embroiled in. Given this aim, the questions this thesis addresses are:

- How far can English public libraries maintain their foundational identity as agencies of social change, while being simultaneously forced to radically change their institutional forms and service capacities in a crisis context?
- What tensions, cracks and openings does this double valency of change produce? Or put another way, what can be sensed as getting lost and/or gained through these changes?
- How can reading public library ‘crisis’ at local levels help us to understand and articulate national states of crisis?

The empirical work of this thesis takes a qualitative and ethnographic approach to addressing these questions. Focusing on two very different examples of recent public library transformation in England: the central urban flagship ‘Library of Birmingham’ in the West Midlands, and the volunteer-run community library ‘New Cross Learning’ in South East London; I consider how a range of public actors in these different local contexts are responding to similar national and temporal conditions of crisis and changes in governance, economics and infrastructural capacities.

Across these two sites, I conducted a total of 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that focused on participants’ understanding and experiences of the changing practices of library use, operation and management through time. Interviewees comprised:

- nine library professionals (four of whom were library service directors)
- seven library users
- five library volunteers (two of whom also identified as campaigners/activists)
- four library campaigners/activists (all also regular library users)
- one senior council division director
- one council leader
- one journalist

In addition to these interviews, at New Cross Learning I absorbed myself in its daily practices as a part-time volunteer library worker for ten months in 2013-14, taking regular ethnographic fieldnotes as an embedded participant observer/practitioner. Over three months in Spring-Summer 2016, I made weekly visits to the Library of

Birmingham and used ethnographic methods of participant observation through walking around the library and its urban surroundings, interacting with library services and tuning into its rhythms of spatial practices.

A thorough exploration of my methodology is offered in Chapter Three, where I also acknowledge the additional public library sites with which I have ethnographically engaged along the wider research journey. The use of these mixed qualitative methods has enabled me to draw out a richly textured and multi-faceted account of how public libraries are adapting and surviving under contemporary conditions, that enlivens existing knowledge with sociological imagination. While I examine the practices and narratives of library life in two different cities and organisational type, the study is not designed as a comparative analysis, for it is not possible to compare such different sites according to similar standards. Rather, I analyse these sites together as a way of examining the micro and macro practices, values and politics that condition them both, in order to tell a wider story about the state we are in. By 'state', I mean both the municipal and the national state, as well as discursive, figurative and affective states of imagination and being.

To understand my research questions and analyse my data, I draw on a range of theoretical approaches which illuminate the temporal, spatial, public and infrastructural dimensions of my research objects, subjects and sites. The next section introduces these analytical frameworks and proposes my original contribution to knowledge in these areas.

### **1.3 Analytical approach and rationale**

Libraries are more than resources. They are both places and functions. They are people and institutions, budgets and books, conversations and collections. They are greater than the sum of their books.  
(Vaidhyathan, 2011, p. 10)

Until very recently, there has been a surprising dearth of scholarship on public libraries in sociology. These sites are mainly studied through the professional discipline of Library and Information Science (LIS), which tends to lack critical theorisations of the sociological, political and cultural dimensions of public libraries (Harris, 1986; Budd, 2003; Feather, 2009); or through historical or architectural disciplinary approaches, which tend to limit understanding of public libraries to their chronological, aesthetic or material developments and designs (Black, 1996; Black, Pepper and Bagshaw, 2009; Worpole, 2013). Sociology's overlooking of these prime and unique sites of 'the social', 'the cultural' and 'the public' is a gap in existing knowledge which my thesis seeks to fill.

I agree with Siva Vaidyanathan's above-quoted assessment that libraries are multi-dimensional entities that cannot be reduced to any one of their constituent parts. I argue that public libraries should be understood as lived, dynamic, infrastructural assemblages (Mattern, 2014) that are both productive of and produced by the social, the cultural and the political at multiple scales and rhythms. My work joins emerging scholarship from researchers who take public libraries as both primary objects of sociological and geographic concern, as well as windows and mediums through which to read the changing temperature and conditions of urban, political and public relationality (Robinson, 2014, 2015; Hitchen, 2016; Norcup, 2017).

Katherine Robinson's (2014) sociological ethnographic study of public libraries in London and Berlin builds on Aditi Mehta's argument that 'the public library is a diagnostic window into society; the building, its operations, and the services it provides reflect the social, economic and political contexts of time and space' (2010, p. 16), by demonstrating how the particular institutional locale of the public library 'can tell us important things about everyday and institutional life in the city, making it a barometer of place [...] and a measure of social concerns and debates' (Robinson, 2014, p. 13). Robinson's ethnographic public library lens focuses on the way everyday practices and values of participation and belonging are negotiated in multi-cultural and semi-peripheral urban neighbourhoods.

My thesis builds on these ways of reading the life of the public library as a diagnostic viewfinder or barometer, but rather than focusing my lens on issues of



multicultural social relations, my aim is to register the atmospheric pressures that condition both urban life and the municipal state in times of austerity and institutional crisis. In this way it is more akin to Esther Hitchen's work (2016, and PhD thesis forthcoming), which ethnographically studies spaces and affective forces of austerity in a borough-wide public library service in the North East of England. By grounding my multi-sited study in the context of the last eight years of swingeing cuts to public services, I also add to recent scholarship on the organisational, spatial, temporal and everyday dimensions of austerity (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Bramall, 2013, 2016; Tonkiss, 2013a; Clarke, 2014; Coleman, 2014, 2016; Newman, 2014a, 2015; Bhattacharyya, 2015; Nolan and Featherstone, 2015; Vacchelli, 2015; Forkert, 2016a; Hall, 2017; Raynor, 2017; Dabrowski, 2018; Strong, 2018).

I approach my understanding of public libraries through four key conceptual lenses: time and tempo; space and place; publics and publicness, infrastructures and working practices. I will now take each conceptual focus in turn and introduce the theoretical frames through which I analyse them.

### **(i) Thinking library times conjuncturally and rhythmically**

My thesis takes a conjunctural and cultural analytical approach to 'telling the time' of society (Clarke, 2017), through non-chronological methods of analysing the history of the present crisis that public libraries are tangled up in. The word 'crisis' has its etymological roots in medical diagnosis, meaning the turning point of a disease: the moment at which a patient could get either better or worse. The empirical chapters (Four – Nine) of this thesis take the pulse of the library by following the tempos of its everyday life through the experiences of its practitioners and users, as well as detecting the simultaneous rhythms of local, national and global ensembles that condition the changing nature of these processes in critical ways.

To borrow a line of enquiry from Matthew Battles, the work of my thesis is 'looking for the library where it lives', particularly in its 'points of transformation, those moments where readers, authors, and librarians question the meaning of the

library itself' (2004, pp. 20–21). I expand this form of analysis to moments of library death as well as life, following these tropes through the multitude of ways in which they are invoked in recent public discourse on libraries, as well as through the experiences of my diverse respondents and through my own grounded observations of the growth and decline, construction and destruction of public library infrastructural forms and practices.

The first part of my thesis title is inspired by Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). While my thesis does not sit squarely in urban sociology/geography, nor am I particularly tied to Jacobs' urbanist approach, I do attend closely to the way in which my empirical library sites are bound up with the changing forms and flows of the urban, both from a horizontal street level, and from a 'top-down' governance, planning and design level. Through this analysis I seek out the forces of library life that both wither and grow through the cracks of civic and economic change.

The theme of library 'life' can also be read through the analytic lens of 'age': the significance of the age of library buildings, of library users, staff and campaigners, as well as the 'age' of the culture in which these buildings and people are operating; all of which bear upon how the library is lived and sustained in temporally dynamic ways. As one of my librarian respondents articulates, public libraries offer 'a cradle to the grave service' for their users. My thesis examines not only how this notion manifests in staff and user experience, but also how public libraries as statutory institutions can themselves be observed as embodying different 'life courses' which need particular forms of support.

The theoretical frame through which I read such critical balances between the attrition and survival of public libraries is conjunctural analysis. In conversation with Doreen Massey, Stuart Hall explicates the notion of 'conjuncture' through its usefulness in interpreting particular forms of crisis. Hall develops this concept from the works of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Louis Althusser (1969), who use it as ways of analysing the inherent contradictions and overdeterminations of structural social forces that produce transformations from one dominant political settlement to another

(Althusser, 1969; Gramsci, 1971). It is worth quoting Hall at length to clarify the complexity of what ‘conjuncture’ means.

A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. The post-war period, dominated by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth redistribution through taxation was one conjuncture; the neoliberal, market-forces era unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan was another. These are two distinct conjunctures, separated by the crisis of the 1970s. A conjuncture can be long or short: it’s not defined by time or by simple things like a change of regime – though these have their own effects. As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, ‘fuse in a ruptural unity’. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. (Hall and Massey, 2010, p. 57).

Conjunctural crises, argue Hall and Massey, often result in a reassertion of hegemonic forms of governance and economics, but they also offer windows of opportunity to radically transform social relations into alternative dominant forms.

The conjunctural crisis in which the subject of this thesis is situated is what Hall, Massey and Rustin (2015) call the crisis of neoliberalism, manifested in the financial crisis of 2007-8 and its continued global repercussions through cascades of national austerity programmes. The defining contradiction of this crisis is that the ‘economic model that has underpinned the social and political settlement of the last three decades is unravelling, but the broader political and social consensus apparently remains in place’ (2015, p. 9). Neoliberalism is defined here as a ‘revolution’ in dominant forms of political and economic governance that in the UK began in the 1970s as a successful drive to ‘roll back the gains of the post-war welfare state, reverse the gains of liberation movements and restore the dominance of business interests cross the world’ (Davison and Harris, 2015, p. 9).

Neoliberalism was powerfully accelerated into a new conjunctural settlement with the rise of Thatcherism, which cemented ‘the notion that the market is the only way to organise society [as] the cultural bedrock of ‘common sense’’ (ibid.). This logic,

argues Hall et al., has persisted through subsequent decades of political governance and dominant cultural ways of understanding the social and economic order, with New Labour absorbing social democracy into the neoliberal project and the latest Conservative administrations gaining further traction from these recalibrated foundations of ‘common-sense neoliberalism’ which have structural and affective consequences of ‘the individualisation of everyone, the privatisation of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn’ (Hall and O’Shea, 2013, p. 12).

The past forty years of such ‘common-sense’ constitute the ‘neo’ part of liberalism, whose classic form originated in 18<sup>th</sup>-century political theory and economy through the expansion of markets during the agrarian revolution, the rise of mercantile and bourgeois classes, and advances of British colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, all of which were driven by the self-interested wealth and property-accumulation and liberty of the ‘free man’: the rational figure of *homo economicus*, codified into a national model of ‘free market economics’ in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Liberalism and imperialism peaked in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the industrial and manufacturing revolutions that gave Britain the ‘workshop of the world’ moniker and the capitalist economy expanded the terrains of empire. The relation of public libraries to this conjuncture is explored in Chapter Two.

The present conjuncture of neoliberal crisis, which is rooted in these residual forms of historic market rule, has a dominant dimension of what is called ‘austerity’. I understand austerity as a strategic moral-political-economic governmental device, following Sara de Benedictis and Rosalind Gill’s argument that it is ‘a site of ideological and discursive struggle, enacted and played out by the State and in public sites and popular culture in particular ways, with material outcomes’ (2016 n.p.). I also concur with Tracy Jensen’s contention that:

The objectives of ‘austerity’ align neatly with those of neo-liberalism: to discipline labour, to reduce the role of state and to redistribute income, wealth and power from labour to capital. We might therefore interpret this current turn to, or age of, ‘austerity’ as the most recent translation of neoliberal rhetoric which has a much longer history than the current crisis (2012, pp. 22–23).

Tom Crewe argues it is vital that we understand austerity not simply in terms of reductions in public spending and ownership of particular public goods and services, but more importantly in terms of the vast power differentials between the infrastructural capacities and practices of central and local government, and how those power relations dismantle the constitutive *municipal* fundamentals of the state. ‘What we really mean when we say that austerity has slashed the state’, argues Crewe, ‘is that it has wrecked the ability of elected local authorities to provide and administer many of the features and functions of the state as we know them’ (2016, n.p.). In the case of New Cross Learning and hundreds of other libraries and other social and cultural services across the country, these features and functions have been put into the hands of volunteers, who choose to provide and administer them for the greater good of the municipal body.

When David Cameron came to power as leader of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010, the work done by New Labour’s Third Way localist community empowerment and social inclusion policy initiatives provided a platform for him to launch the Big Society, a Conservative model of government reform where the scale of state control and delivery of public institutions and services is diminished, and the scale of the social and the civic is enlarged through public provision by entrepreneurial community enterprises. As Walker and Corbett (2013, p. 455) summarise, this model integrates the free market with a theory of social solidarity based on the conservative communitarian principles of order, hierarchy and voluntarism. In his Big Society launch speech in July 2010, Cameron cited public libraries as one example of how local communities would gain freedom and control in running their public services, signalling the most radical shift in power from central government to neighbourhoods (Cameron, 2011).

The legal parameters of these power shifts were formalised in the Localism Act 2011, which facilitates the devolution of decision-making powers from central government control to individuals, community organisations and local businesses. Community Asset Transfer is defined by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) as the transfer of management and/or ownership of public land and buildings from its owner (usually a local authority) to a community organisation for

less than market value – to achieve a local social, economic or environmental benefit (Locality<sup>8</sup>, 2017). While community ownership of public goods dates back centuries, the co-opting of ‘communities’ into government planning agendas began in the early-2000s and was a key driver of Third Way policy under New Labour (Newman, 2005). As Elena Vacchelli (2015, p. 88) puts it:

The local scale has been romanticised as a site of democracy and empowerment through a strong territorial imaginary in a government discourse. But the curtailing of resources allocated to local government is in contradiction with the proclaimed aim of expanding the power base.

Both Localism and Big Society agendas combined to form an ideal vehicle for Conservative government leaders to launch their economic programme of dramatically curtailing public spending. Featherstone et al. define this vehicle as austerity localism: a repertoire of practices through which the government has constructed the local as antagonistic to the state and invoked it to restructure the public sector (2012, pp. 177–8). This, they argue, is a mutation of neoliberalism, defined by Jamie Peck (2012) as an open-ended and contradictory process of politically-assisted market rule. One of the many contradictions of this process is the undermining of community organisations’ ability to manage the public assets that have been transferred to them, due to reduced statutory human resources to support them. Furthermore, austerity has dramatically increased the need for councils to sell local assets to the highest bidder to solve pressing economic problems.

It must be noted that while I analyse the impact of recent major public-sector cuts and localist strategies as a major driving force in the crises facing public libraries, the threats to their institutional survival cannot be reduced to ‘austerity localism’ alone. Chapter Two will show that they are entangled in many more problems of their

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<sup>8</sup> Locality is the national association of community regeneration organizations in England. While classed as an independent charity, it receives funding from central government is a key Strategic Partner of the Office for Civil Society and manages the transfer processes by which community asset acquisition and service delivery are secured. <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/office-civil-society-appoints-strategic-partners>

own professional making, as well as wider, deeper and older conjunctural forces that shape the urban and political contexts in which public libraries have always been embedded.

My understanding of conjunctural analysis is aided by Raymond Williams' theorisation of the way society is shaped through simultaneous 'dominant, residual and emergent' forms of culture (1977). Williams distinguishes between 'epochal analysis', which is necessarily focused on the 'dominant' social formations (e.g. the transition from feudalism to capitalism), and 'actual historical analysis', which looks beneath the surface of the dominant to the entangled dynamic relations and negotiations between earlier cultural traditions that persist in the present in residual forms; while at the same time, different cultural processes 'emerge' through new meanings, practices, relations and values that are poised towards alternate futures (Williams, 1977a; Clarke, 2017). Although Williams does not use the language of 'conjuncture', his formulation of the inter-linked and synchronous dominant, residual and emergent dynamics of culture offers a similar way in which to apprehend the defining political periods of society through the pleats of history and crisis. Chapters Two and Four will outline the ways in which public libraries have been enfolded into these pleats since their inception in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Conjunctural analysis, argues Clarke, is difficult to do, but it is much needed if we are to avoid the traps of theoretical or historical reductionism, since it offers 'the possibility of escaping from epochal thinking: the belief that because this is late capitalism, we know what time it is' and hence there is no alternative to the onward march of capital (Clarke, 2017, p. 80). As Grayson and Little elucidate, the benefit of thinking 'neoliberalism' conjuncturally is that it situates it 'not simply an economic doctrine or an ideological project of the capitalist super class, but as the result of a series of historical trends, tendencies and intellectual and political movements' which condense according to different temporalities but within the same ongoing moment of crisis (2017, p. 61).

Henri Lefebvre's analytical sensibility of rhythmanalysis complements the cultural and conjunctural analysis techniques of Williams and Hall and informs the way in which I navigate and interpret the patterns and tempos of public libraries through

attuned forms of listening to their practices and values in operation. As Yi Chen highlights, '[r]hythmanalysis is a potent methodology for uncovering the actualisation of a conjuncture, it renders an optic for investigating the sensory, in materiality and in the experiential realms of history' (2016, p. 60). Sensing the rhythms of crisis in my library sites involves multi-scalar forms of attention, discerning how macro and national patterns of political and economic change are filtered through micro forms of adaptive library practices and localised spaces and experiences of organisational, individual and urban change and survival.

## (ii) Thinking library spaces and places relationally and temporally

To think about libraries is to think about the material forms that culture takes within a social landscape. [...] It is within these institutional locales of culture where tensions between the individual and community, the public and the private, the material and the symbolic are brokered (Augst and Wiegand, 2003, pp. 5–6).

I follow this cultural approach to understanding the space and place of libraries in social life and argue that locating the geographical dimensions of libraries must start with analysing the social relations that constitute them. To guide me in this analysis, I take as my point of departure a little-known essay by Raymond Williams, which argues that

in the siting and character of a library building, in relation to other buildings, exist real social relations. In most periods we are not very conscious of the social relations which most deeply govern us. Even when we become conscious of them it is often not much help, since it is very difficult in any period to escape those which are predominant and powerful. And yet, living as we do in a period of obvious and rapid change, we are forced more and more into this activity of becoming conscious of the great variation of these relations, and of their implications (1966, p. 362).

This essay was presented by Williams at the Library Association Annual Lecture in London in 1966. He encourages his audience to unpack the political, economic, cultural and – crucially – *temporal* dynamic relations that shape the ways in which libraries are situated and designed within particular civic and urban contexts. He does



this to highlight the uncertainty that exists around what should be placed at the centre of our built environments in the post-industrial, technological age, and how they should play a role in shaping the future development of society, which he saw as developing in one of two potential directions: the commercial or the educational. The mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century moment of ‘rapid change’ Williams was referring to was somewhat different to the accelerated societal shifts occurring now, yet arguably both moments are connected through the same conjuncture of crisis, which can be analysed through attention to the ways in which the commercial buildings at urban centres dominate and overshadow educational and cultural ones.

I update Williams’ relational way of thinking about the design and position of public libraries in their civic and urban environments by drawing on Fran Tonkiss’ understanding of the social life of urban form to analyse the way in which my empirical sites are ‘products of social, economic and political designs for the city *before* they become products of architects or engineers’ (2013b, p. 3, emphasis added). This is very much the case in Birmingham, whose four different central library designs across less than 150 years have been produced by different conceptions of what makes a good or prosperous city, as explored in Chapter Four. In the case of the re-purposed library building of New Cross Learning, however, the social life of its urban design can be read through processes of ‘austerity urbanism and the makeshift city’ (Tonkiss, 2013a), explored in Chapter Seven.

My work is also influenced by Doreen Massey’s theorisation of spatial ‘power-geometries’ and a ‘progressive’ and ‘global sense of place’ (1993, 1994). The actors and participants of my study range from grass-roots activists and volunteers, to public library users, librarians, council service managers and city council leaders, to national politicians; each exerting a different productive force on the distribution of resources and spaces of learning, culture and public sociability. For example, the gendered, aged, precarious voluntary labour that runs the community library in New Cross is not simply a ‘local’ concern, it is produced and reproduced across the country through the central forces of neoliberal governance that redistributes public goods to the responsibility of individuals through mechanisms of ‘asset transfer’, which operate according to logics of capital that are as global as they are local.

Meanwhile in Birmingham, it is not possible to understand the urban environment of its central library without attending to the spatio-temporal layers of global capital and empire that are sedimented into its civic and architectural urban forms. These unequal and stretched out social relations exist in complex contemporaneous power geometries through which negotiations and antagonisms are continually produced in dynamic tension. This tension allows for possibilities of ‘progressive’ politics that can disrupt dominant spatial forms of distributing social relations (Massey, 1993), as demonstrated by the activist practices and articulations explored in Chapters Eight and Nine.

To analyse these negotiations in my sites I also follow Michel de Certeau’s theorisation of space as ‘practiced place’ (Certeau, 2013 [1984], p. 117), composed through the mobilities and intersections of beings who animate, traverse and subvert it. I analyse the ‘spatial stories’ and ‘spatial tactics’ of both my own and my participants’ navigations of urban life, as we journey in and out of libraries and negotiate obstacles and diversions along the way (ibid.). I ally this analytical approach with elements of Lefebvre’s (1991 [1974]) theorisation of the way in which space is socially produced at three co-productive levels: (i) routine forms of embodied everyday spatial practice, which I analyse through my ethnographic engagement with daily library rhythms of use and delivery; (ii) the conceived representation of space, which I analyse through the designs and narratives of library architects, service directors and policy makers, and (iii) the lived space of library activists and practitioners, who creatively or strategically produce library space in ways that both challenge and incorporate dominant spatial conceptions and representations. As Leckie, Given and Buschman highlight,

Henri Lefebvre’s work has not been explored, to any great degree, in the library and information science literature to date [...and] the influences of neo-capitalist modes of production on the design of the library’s physical space is not well understood and is rarely examined in LIS (2010, pp. 233–234).

With the exception of Robinson (2014), I have not discovered any sociological or urban studies that apply such a lens to libraries, hence my thesis attends to a gap in existing literature.

Lefebvre's rhythmanalytical method is also a key orienting approach to tuning in to and analysing the spaces and places of my empirical sites. Rhythms of opening and closing times (both at a daily-practical and service-organisational levels) structure the public library experience, as do the multitude of times and tempos that bring people into the library space: from the children and young people's chatter at pre-school and after-school times; to the stretched-out and pressured horizons of filling unemployment times; to the queues and clicks of public computer booking slots; to the hush and rush of course deadline and exam times; to the calendric rhythms of seasonal events and the seismic shifts of personal and organisational life changes. These everyday rhythms can be understood at 'local' or 'regional' spatial levels, however, like Tim Edensor,

I am concerned with showing how these quotidian realms are also national in scale. For local rhythms are often coordinated and synchronized with national rhythms, local customs are incorporated into the national cultural mosaic, and national institutions penetrate local worlds. There are multiple, overlapping networks of experience that locate the nation at domestic, local, regional and national scales within a dense network of interspatiality. (Edensor, 2006, p. 537)

By thinking the public rhythms of life in both the 'central' library of Birmingham and the 'local' library of New Cross together through simultaneous local, regional and national scales, I demonstrate that what unites them are similar public struggles to maintain, defend and preserve these multiple scales and practices of public value.

### **(iii) Thinking library publics and publicness figuratively and politically**

A sociological study of public libraries would be superficial without a critical analysis of what 'public' means. To do this I draw extensively on Janet Newman's work, notably her compelling case study of a single urban public library service as a site of practice through which to read how

notions of publics and publicness have been made and remade, expanded and residualised by state professionals in Britain over the last 50 years as they struggled with the incursions of 'new' publics as well as

seeking to mediate the impact of the Thatcher years and Blair governments (2007, p. 889).

My thesis builds on Newman's concern with the way in which publics are shaped, mediated and re-constituted through public library service practices, updating it for the contemporary era of changing conceptions and practices of publicness that are shaped by austerity localist regimes of governance (more on this in Chapter Two). In this way, I am also working in accordance with Newman's (2006) claim that a politics of the public need to be 're-stated' through critical analysis of the struggles in which publics consist.

By bringing diverse publics into dialogue with each other across different geographic and discursive sites and scales of practice, my thesis contributes to the body of scholarship which argues that there is no such thing as '*the public*' or a fixed public, rather, publics are always plural, mobile and mutable, summoned through modes and mediums of address and convened through issues that spark collectives of strange and familiar actors into discursive contestation and social action (Dewey, 1927; Fraser, 1990; Calhoun, 1992b; Warner, 2002a; Marres, 2005; Newman, 2006; Barnett, 2008; Newman and Clarke, 2010; Mahony and Clarke, 2012).

As Chapter Two demonstrates, analysing public libraries within this tradition of theorising publics and counter-publics is vitally needed, since with the exception of Newman (2007) and Robinson (2014), existing studies of the publicness of libraries are limited to framing them through the concept of 'the public sphere' (Buschman, 2003, 2003; D'Angelo, 2006; Webster, 2010), which rely on uncritical formulations of idealised liberal democracy, without attending to the heterogenous inequalities and struggles that constitute actually existing democracy. Furthermore, of the numerous studies of libraries as public spaces and places (Buschman and Leckie, 2007; Aabø, Audunson and Vårheim, 2010; Webster, 2010; Elmborg, 2011; Niegaard, 2011; Aabø and Audunson, 2012), the focus is mainly on the 'thirdspace' (Oldenburg, 1989; Soja, 1996) dimensions of diverse sociability and connectivity that public libraries offer, rather than analyses of the cultural, political and economic mediations of publicness.

As Chapter Four demonstrates, Birmingham's publics are 'imagineered' (Kennedy, 2004) into being through grand designs upon the city and its new central

library, which addresses and reframes publicness through promissory futures. As Chapters Five and Six go on to reveal, however, such future publics are built upon shaky foundations, and enduring rhythms of creative destruction and the growing shadow of public debt threaten to undermine the very publicness the new ‘people’s palace’ (Mecanoo, 2013) claims to enshrine. The counter-public practices of protesting publics play a vital role in keeping these processes in check and calling to account the practices of exclusion and excision that produce the real and imagined public spaces and cultures of the city.

As Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine demonstrate, New Cross Learning’s publics are summoned and convened through collective struggles to save the library from closure in a condensed moment of crisis in 2010-11, when old and new mediums and modes of activist cultures and spatial tactics jostle and jar against the re-shaping and valuing of municipal structures of provision. These struggles transmute into a longer moment of publics-formation as the temporal horizon of austerity rolls on and volunteers are summoned and convened to keep the library open and in public circulation. Within these simultaneously contracting and expanding spaces of public provisioning, networks and alliances are formed through daily rhythms of making social connections through local circuits of public familiarity, stranger sociability, learning activities and solidaristic forms of organising.

#### **(iv) Thinking library infrastructures through intersecting practices**

As a national network of statutory public service provision distributed across every local borough and district of the UK, the public library service takes the form of a state infrastructure. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century phase of public library service development, explicit and sustained efforts were made to establish a ‘national grid’ of quality provision for all, which modernised the hitherto parochialized system of public library services and led to the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, still in force today (Black, 2000b). From the neoliberal settlement of the late 1970s onwards, however, this infrastructure has become gradually eroded, and the past eight years has

seen an accelerated splintering of the network into increasingly incoherent and disarticulated forms of provision (Usherwood and Sobczyk, 1997; Moore, 2004; Usherwood, 2007; McCahill, Birdi and Jones, 2018; Robertson and McMenemy, 2018a). This situation prompted philanthropist and publisher William Sieghart, who was appointed by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2013-14 to investigate the crisis facing public libraries, to claim that the service infrastructure has reached a defining epochal crisis – a ‘Beeching moment’ – likening the loss of libraries to the mass closure of railway branch lines over half a century before (Farrington, 2014; Sieghart, 2014), an articulation that is analysed further in Chapter Two

My thesis seeks to understand how this infrastructural crisis plays out in practice, through the lived experiences of public library users, workers, decision-makers and campaigners. It does this by applying an infrastructural lens to the very practices of those participants. I argue that as spatio-temporal public infrastructures of knowledge, learning and culture, libraries are nothing without the *people* who connect and activate them through the *practices* that constitute their organisation, curation, facilitation, maintenance, use and defence. My work therefore contributes to literatures on urban infrastructures, which with the exception of Shannon Mattern (2014) have thus far not yet considered libraries as parts of these infrastructures<sup>9</sup>. I expand Hillary Angelo and Christine Hentschel’s (2015) conception of infrastructure as ‘windows into social worlds’ which, when analysed at moments of cultural, technological and economic change, reveal how library organisations and publics are re-shaped at both micro and macro levels.

In the case of the Library of Birmingham, I analyse the hollowing out and cauterization of what one respondent called a ‘neural network’ of vital knowledge practices that connect library publics with library collections through ‘architectures of circulation’ (Larkin, 2013). In the case of New Cross Learning, in the absence of any core funding to resource the service, library volunteers have cultivated infrastructural

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Klienberg’s recent (2018) book *Palaces for the People* considers how public libraries are under-researched lynchpins of social infrastructure, providing a much-needed contribution to filling this gap. The book was published after the completion of the present thesis, and I will seek to respond to his arguments in post-doctoral publications.

practices for organisational survival through building and utilising webs of local connections and exchanges; brokering and bartering with individuals, local business and community organisations to source improvised solutions to infrastructural problems. In this way, they embody the kinds of infrastructural practices that Christian on Wissel defines as ‘inventive ways by which practitioners of space reach beyond themselves and nurture spaces of opportunity [...] mobilis[ing] themselves in order to make ends meet with what is at hand’ (2016, pp. 3; 15). Wissel’s definition of infrastructural practices is drawn from AbdouMaliq Simone’s theorisation of ‘people as infrastructure’ (2004), which serves as a key analytical frame for my reading of how public library service providers are transforming conditions of production within a dramatically changing public landscape.

Simone’s formulation of ‘people as infrastructure’ complex and nuanced, and worth quoting at length for clarity of understanding.

Infrastructure is commonly understood in physical terms, as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables. These modes of provisioning and articulation are viewed as making the city productive, reproducing it, and positioning its residents, territories, and resources in specific ensembles where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted for. I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city. African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city. [...] This process of conjunction, which is capable of generating social compositions across a range of singular capacities and needs (both enacted and virtual) and which attempts to derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements, is what I call people as infrastructure. (2004, pp. 407, 410)

In adapting Simone’s conceptualisation of this process to a UK context, my purpose is not to draw comparisons between African cities and English ones, which of course have vastly different material circumstances and geo-political histories of state formations. Rather, Simone’s analytic frame is a valuable heuristic for learning how people come

together under unstable conditions of necessity through common needs and interests, assembling and disassembling in intersectional formations to create collective resources in the increasing withdrawal of state provision.

In both Birmingham and New Cross field sites, I examine the infrastructural practices of difficult decision-making conducted by service managers and council leaders who are forced to transform and reduce the quality and quantity of the city/borough-wide library network, practices which clash and come up against counter-infrastructural practices of networks of public library activists and campaigners, who organise to defend and maintain the public integrity and value of these public goods. Through these processes, activists embody vital infrastructural practices of civic care and concern, which I analyse through feminist theorisations (Williams, 2001; Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Federici, 2012; Newman, 2012; Hatton, 2017) of how to make such embodied and unpaid labours of municipal maintenance more visible and valued. Furthermore, in the case of New Cross, volunteers running the library are also activists fighting against a range of public struggles, and as such, I argue their combined infrastructural practices and unpaid labours of work, care and political organising need to be analysed by bringing scholarship on the sociology of work (Glucksmann, 1995, 2005; Taylor, 2004, 2015; Pettinger *et al.*, 2005) together with literatures on social movements and activism (Horton and Kraftl, 2009a; Henriksen and Svedberg, 2010; Newman, 2012; Jupp, 2017; Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss, 2017; Ishkanian and Ali, 2018).



## **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

Including the present introduction, this thesis is structured into ten chapters. A brief summary of each now follows in order to orient the reader in the complex sociological landscape of the pages that lie ahead.

### **Chapter Two        Reading between the lines of the public library: telling the time**

This chapter ‘tells the time’ of public libraries by taking a conjunctural analytical approach to reading their origins in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Liberalism and tracing their development through subsequent dominant political and cultural forces and configurations of state formation through the century and a half that follow. It reviews the literature of historians, LIS theorists and policy reports to critically assess the ways in which public libraries were born into and have grown up in a range of different crises. It also critically evaluates the way in which libraries are bounded by ‘public sphere’ imaginaries and argues for an interdisciplinary approach to making visible the continued struggles that constitute the publics and counterpublics of libraries.

### **Chapter Three        Articulating multi-sited research: methodological mapping**

This chapter traces my journeys into and through the thesis and outlines my methodology of multi-sited ethnography. It articulates my ‘oblique’ relationality to the field through my multiple subject positions as library ethnographer, worker, user and campaigner, thus affording a productive disruption to the traditional research boundaries between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, researcher and researched. It accounts for the ethical dimensions of the research methods and argues for the need for studies of public libraries to use sociological imagination to attend to the ways in which they are produced through public, personal, professional and political relationalities.

The next six chapters form the empirical core of the thesis, with Chapters Four, Five and Six focusing on the Library of Birmingham, and Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine examining New Cross Learning. The analytical foci of these empirical chapters are broadly symmetrical in structure, with chapters Four and Seven situating the historical, civic and urban political relations and struggles in which each library site is embedded and through which each library has been re-designed and re-‘opened’; chapters Five and Eight hone in on the lived spatial practices, urban designs and public rhythms that condition and structure each library site; and chapters Six and Nine exploring the infrastructural practices and capacities that underpin each library site.

#### **Chapter Four    Storying the library and the city: three centuries of                           ‘thinking, feeling and building’ Birmingham’s centre**

This is the first demonstration of how the public library can be read as a diagnostic viewfinder or barometer of social and political change. The chapter situates the Library of Birmingham (LoB) in its discursive and physical place in the city and explores what kinds of public imaginaries and realities are invoked when a new central library opens and an old one disappears. Using Raymond Williams (1966) as a launching point, this chapter untangles the history of the LoB through overlapping temporal, rhythmic and spatial frames, revealing how the recursive historic patterns of what the city places at its cultural centre tells a story of its future trajectories of urban and cultural change.

#### **Chapter Five                    Perambulating the Library of Birmingham**

This chapter takes the reader on a walk around both the city centre of Birmingham and inside its central library. In doing so, it builds on the themes of the previous chapter and reveals how rhythms of creative destruction and disjunction are embedded in the designs, fabric, interactions, promises and limitations of lived urban and library space. The arrhythmic diversions and interruptions to these perambulations demonstrate the conditions of conjunctural crisis through which the LoB is being transformed.

**Chapter Six      From ‘rewriting the book’ to balancing Birmingham’s  
books: damaged neural networks and hollowed-out  
infrastructures**

This final empirical chapter on the LoB site builds on the findings of the previous two by focusing specifically on the economic and embodied knowledge infrastructures of library provision in the crisis context, revealing how hollowed-out neural, material and community networks create voids in the cultural memory and future heritage of Birmingham. It attends to complex questions of how the value and values of the library are constituted and accounted for and makes visible the hidden labour practices of those fighting to keep these value(s) public and alive.

**Chapter Seven      *Whose library?* Situating the public struggles and  
openings of New Cross Learning**

This chapter introduces the New Cross Learning (NXL) field site, situating it in its historical, geographic and political context and tracing how its space, place and publics have been produced, reconfigured and contested over time. Building on the discussions of the dynamic relationality between the social life of urban and library design explored in Chapter Four, it positions NXL as an ‘interface’ that mediates and convenes publics and counterpublics through a range of pressing social issues, needs and values. It also explores the politics of space through NXL’s origin story as a site of social struggle, revealing tensions produced through conflictual activist cultures of occupying and claiming public space, as well as divergent strategies for civic and urban survival.

**Chapter Eight      Learning publics and architectures of sociability:  
practicing open space at New Cross Learning**

This chapter begins with a walk around the streets of New Cross, following the embodied and cyclical rhythms of new beginnings laced with echoes of past urban struggles. The reader is then taken inside the everyday rhythms of spatial and communicative practices of the library, including both routine activities and

interactions, as well as spatial stories of extraordinary events that address intergenerational publics and counterpublics. Two interconnected themes that emerge through these spatial stories are ‘openness’ and ‘learning’, revealing how flexible and intuitive infrastructures of sociability at NXL foster free and open source ways of understanding and sharing library and urban space, although not without conflict.

## **Chapter Nine            Infrastructures of labour, care and repair: New Cross people fighting for fairer futures**

Simone’s analytical lens of ‘people as infrastructure’ (2004) is the key frame for this chapter. It focuses on the collaborative actions of volunteers who constitute and facilitate improvised forms of provisioning through embodied practices of caring for precarious people, facilities and resources in the austerity urban context. The examination of these practices raises questions about organisational sustainability and reveals the political dimensions of volunteering, as well as challenging the analytical boundaries between work and social activism. It argues for a feminist social justice ethics of care, in order to understand and make visible the gendered, classed and aged formations of publicness and municipal maintenance in the current crisis context.

## **Chapter Ten            Conclusion**

The final chapter reflects on the aims of this thesis and outlines how the research questions have been addressed. It synthesises findings from across the two field sites and raises further questions about the future ways in which public libraries may continue to expire, experiment or expand.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Reading between the lines of the public library: telling the time**

What makes the public library such a fascinating subject of sociological study, both historically and now, is the multiplicity of dichotomies, or contradictions, that one can observe in its professed purpose and in its everyday functioning. (Black, 2007, p. 475).

The historian of the future who records the social developments of the present age will probably find none of greater importance than that of libraries. (Champneys, 1902)

### **2.0 Introduction**

While my purpose with this thesis is not that of a historian's, I am concerned with the social developments of the present age, and to understand the present, a grasp on the historical trajectories that persist in the contemporary conjuncture are necessary. As Deborah Grayson and Ben Little put it in a recent review of the continued need for Stuart Hall's conjunctural analysis approach:

Thinking conjuncturally allows us to historicise the present; and it is through our analysis of the present in all its complexity that we may be able to see the opportunity to take steps towards a new way of organising society (2017, p. 62).

I argue that thinking conjuncturally about libraries allows much-needed insight into the ways in which they are imbricated in and overdetermined by a complex fusion of political, economic, ideological and cultural forces and temporalities. As the previous chapter outlined, the present state of public libraries is one of 'crisis', as escalating numbers of these popular institutions close down, become divested from statutory and

municipal forms of provisioning, and change hands to a host of ambiguous and precarious organisational formations. The present chapter asks: how did we get into this state? It looks for answers in the range of literatures that examine the historical development of public libraries through their legal, policy, professional, architectural, and philosophical disciplinary and discursive formations.

Drawing on and reading between the lines of a range of academic and grey literatures, this chapter traces the development of English public libraries across a condensed tour of the last 168 years. The purpose of this potted history is to highlight the turning points of crisis and windows of opportunity through which the dynamic relationship between public libraries and the state can be read conjuncturally. In this way, some of the historic ‘dichotomies and contradictions’ highlighted in the above quote by Black can be discerned, and thereby inform a critical analysis of ‘what sort of crisis’ (Clarke, 2009; Hall and Massey, 2010) public libraries are now in. This chapter seeks to address Clarke’s reflection that

the political struggles within a conjuncture might be about the capacity to ‘tell the time’: the ability to define what is ‘modern’ and what can be safely consigned to the past. This is a key element in being able to lay claim to constructing the *way forward* – the line of development that needs to be followed to escape from the present crisis, however that crisis is constructed. (2017, p. 83, his emphasis)

The first section of the chapter reviews the work of library historians to consider how to tell the time of the political and economic conditions into which public libraries were born and came of age. The second section reviews the work of LIS theorists who argue that public libraries should be valued as part of ‘the public sphere’ and evaluates these contributions with a critique of the Habermasian assumptions they rest upon. The final section of the chapter reviews the ‘crisis’ discourse of public library policy literature from the past 25 years, which, when read in the light of the conjunctural developments that have led up to these moments, highlighting an urgent need for new inter-disciplinary critical praxis in the library field.

## 2.1 Reading public libraries historically

Most library historiography narrates the trajectory of public library development in terms of a steady progression towards ever greater liberty, enlightenment, and democracy, through the institutional development of collections, technology and user services. Such accounts use various quantifiable indicators to measure this success such as progressive legislative reforms, growth trends in the number of libraries, librarians, users and loans, as well as increases in the size of book stocks and budgets. Paul Sykes surveys a range of historical literature on the development of social, cultural and educational institutions and observes that ‘on the wider canvas of national affairs, public libraries occupy only the most inconspicuous corner’, leading to a tendency for this largely analytically invisible organisation ‘to slide into a position where a false interpretation of its own origins and subsequent development is uncritically accepted’ (Sykes, 1979, p. 69).

In his *New History of the English Public Library* (1996), Alistair Black makes a bold divergence from traditional library historiography. His approach is a contextual one guided by social and political theory rather than traditional historical or library studies research methods.

Not only is a non-library theoretical model employed, the methodology is located outside library history. [...] This deductive approach involves discussions on economic decline, class conflict, technical education, cultural failure, social control, the social foundations of architecture and, most importantly, philosophical thought - matters which are of direct relevance to the formulation of a theory of early public library development. (Black 1996, 16)

Black argues that traditional historical research on libraries is largely ‘myopic’ for failing to attend to these social processes that fall outside of the immediate library domain. He makes the crucial point that public libraries are not simply part of society but also productive forces of the social and the cultural. The historical contexts of libraries, therefore, should not be merely described but also interpreted and allied to the formation of social theory on topics such as ‘the history of leisure, or urbanization, or ideas, or class, or social policy, or space, or professional-expert discourse, or any

other issue' (1996, p. 18). Black's own favoured conceptual lenses through which to read the history of British public libraries are those of social engineering, class and control, which he develops in *The New History* and subsequent volumes and papers (Black and Muddiman, 1997; Black, 2000b, 2000a, 2003, 2004, 2007; Black, Pepper and Bagshaw, 2009).

The statutory history of British municipal public libraries was inaugurated with Public Libraries Act of 1850: the first Act of Parliament that allowed boroughs to establish municipal libraries freely open to all classes of men, supported through public taxation. Prior to the 1850s there were a range of quasi-public libraries in operation in Britain, such as subscription libraries and reading rooms provided by religious and political societies, mining and mechanics institutes, factory and workshop libraries, as well as circulating literature in shops, coffee houses, taverns, chapels, farms and various community-based Chartist reading rooms; all of which involved some form of payment, membership or affiliation to an organisation, employer or social group (Epstein and Thompson, 1982; Black, 1996; McMenemy, 2009). The 1850 Act permitted boroughs with a population of or exceeding 10,000 to spend one half-penny in the pound of public rates on the establishment and maintenance of public libraries.

British public libraries were born in the period that Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1975) defines as the *Age of Capital*, which he argues spanned the years 1848-75. The word 'capitalism', Hobsbawm points out, entered the British vocabulary in 1848 and spread its potent ideological currency from the 1860s onwards (2006 [1975], p. 13). The development of public libraries built upon the premises of the 1850 Public Libraries Act did not gather pace until the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>, however, a period of history that Hobsbawm (1987) calls the *Age of Empire*. Both capitalism and imperialism were dominant economic and political models that shaped the institutional formation of public libraries, principally through the Liberal ideologies of the members of parliament and philanthropists who enabled their legal and architectural structures to be built (Black, 1996).

Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain was awash with volatile mixtures of industrial change and over production, economic crisis and depression, political suppression, gross inequality between rich and poor, drunkenness, agitation and the Chartist working-



men's movement for universal suffrage, which reached its peak between 1839-1942 (Thompson, 1968). Against this backdrop, the 1850 Act was the result of a campaign in the 1840s led by William Ewart, Joseph Brotherton, and Edward Edwards, who lobbied ardently for a system of libraries that were above all free at the point of use, open to all and funded by the public purse. Ewart and Brotherton were both Liberal MPs and part of the 'Philosophical Radicals' parliamentary group which argued for social and educational reforms on the bases of the utilitarian maxims of individualistic 'self-help' for all classes of men for the sake of rational, moral and capitalist progress. Ewart believed that the educational opportunities afforded by public libraries would teach the working classes 'the value of property and the benefits of order' (Max, 1984, p. 507). Edwards, the son of an East End bricklayer who had educated himself through mechanics-institute libraries and worked as a cataloguing assistant at the British Museum, was a supporter of Chartism but believed in tempering the radical edge of the working-classes through rational education and utilitarian principles. Edwards' biographer wrote that 'it was to him more than any other man, that we owe the municipal library in the form in which it has developed in this country' (Munford and Edwards, 1963, p. 7).

Black argues that the passing of the 1850 Act (the 1849 Bill for which was highly contested by Conservative MPs who feared threats to the social order from enabling education for the politically-agitated masses) was swung by the broad influence of the rising middle classes, who

sought to influence, in a conservative direction, the thirst for reading displayed by the early-nineteenth-century working class. In this respect, middle-class-founded libraries were indeed, as one commentator has put it, 'centres of power' (1996, p. 42).

The first municipal public library funded by public rates under powers dictated by the 1850 Act was the Manchester Free Library, which opened in 1852. Charles Dickens gave a speech at the opening ceremony, arguing that the new library was evidence that 'capital and labour are not opposed, but mutually dependent and mutually self-supporting' (quoted in Black, 1996, p. 39). As Black points out, Manchester had been a hotbed of Chartist activism, however within a decade of the Free Library opening, social relations had calmed, which he argues to be partially attributable to the civilising

forces of the public library. At a Manchester branch library opening ceremony in 1866, the Chairman of the Manchester Free Libraries Committee asserted that libraries ‘had already been of great use in making the social position of masters and workmen better understood’ (ibid.).

Black also highlights how the Liberal utilitarian beliefs underpinning the foundations of early public libraries were complemented with idealist philosophies, which, rather than focusing the notion of the ‘good’ of the library in ‘utility’, placed the emphasis in more evangelical terms of moral and civic duty. Although epistemologically divergent as schools of philosophical thought, for the purposes of the public library movement, utilitarianism and idealism united to establish what would become, as Black (1996) argues, an enduring national institution supporting the social and economic order. The penny rate of the 1850 Public Libraries Act was not enough to finance new buildings, and there were considerable campaigns by ratepayers’ groups who opposed the public funding of libraries (Black, Pepper and Bagshaw, 2009, p. 119). The financing of new public library buildings by industrialist philanthropists such as Henry Tate, John Passmore Edwards, and Andrew Carnegie, however, soon changed this. The sudden proliferation of new public library buildings in Britain in the late 1880s was also due to Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887, as patriotic efforts to mark the occasion with the erection of grand civic monuments swept the country.

The newspaper proprietor John Passmore Edwards was the second biggest public library benefactor in Britain after Carnegie. A follower of Liberal utilitarianism, Passmore Edwards believed firmly in industrialism and the merits of scientific enlightenment as the guiding principles of individual, civic and national development. A report from *East End News* on Passmore Edwards’ opening of the Canning Town Public Library in 1893 narrated the philanthropist’s vision of the potential of libraries as being ‘for the sake of the community, for our industrial development, and for the sake of the Empire itself’ (1893, cited in Black 1996, 140). This concern for linking what public libraries had to offer with the security of the British Empire can be read in the context of the National Efficiency Movement: a drive to improve the administration and economic performance of the British Empire to compete with Germany and

America. When the first public library for Lewisham was being considered in 1896, for example, advocates of the project argued that

[i]n our ceaseless competition with foreign nations, it is our duty, if we do not wish to fall behind in the race, to provide the very best opportunities for all classes in the matter of self-education, and for the acquisition of useful information (Lewisham Local Studies, cited in Black, 2007, p. 477).

The foundational values and ideals of civic pride, individual moral progress, and the spirit of enterprise and empire, argue Black, Pepper and Bagshaw (2009) and Prizeman (2011), can be read aesthetically as well as functionally in the materiality and contents of early public library buildings, both on the monumental facades and flourishes of architectural design and within the machine-like efficiency of processes and utilities taking place inside them.

The Scots-American multimillionaire steel-magnate Andrew Carnegie used his massive surplus wealth to implement what he referred to as a ‘scientific philanthropy’ on a worldwide scale (Wall, 1970, p. 125). The prize recipient of this philanthropy was the public libraries movement. In total Carnegie money financed over 2,800 public libraries across the globe, 1,423 in the US, 263 in the UK and 125 in Canada, and the rest in various corners of the world including many US and UK colonies (Wiegand and Davis, 1994) As Prizeman points out (2011, p. 4), ‘it is probable that the total number of buildings he commissioned exceeds that of any other public building type by a single benefactor at that time’. Carnegie mainly donated library buildings as gifts to communities where his steel industries were most active, as a form of appeasement to his workforces (2011, p. 209).

As a self-made man following in the tradition of Liberal utilitarianist ideology, Carnegie was a firm believer in the individual workman’s ability to self-educate and saw this form of individual development as concomitant with the progress of liberal capitalism. He argued philanthropy to be a form of ‘science in the service of society’ and saw this kind of giving as an entirely rational system central to the quantifiable progress of society (Arrove, 1980, p. 33). Carnegie’s highly influential essay that came to be known as ‘The Gospel of Wealth’ states his philanthropic philosophy in elitist and paternalistic terms:

Individualism will continue, but the millionaire will be but a trustee for the poor, intrusted (sic) for a season with a great part of the increased wealth of the community far better than it could or would have done for itself (Carnegie, 1889b, p. 655)

Prizeman argues that Carnegie's prioritising of the principle of individual liberty over and above that of social equality

places political emphasis on the notion of public access and serves to frame its architectural interpretation with particular emphasis upon the potential experiences of the individual in his or her navigation of the public realm (2011, p. 5).

The furthering of class control through philanthropically-constructed public buildings inscribed with the symbolism of labour and capital informs Black's central thesis that the British public library service developed steadfastly as 'a *middle-class* institution, an institution not only run *by* the middle classes but also – and not just in the era of the post-war welfare state – run *for* them' (2003, p. 208, his emphasis). Recent research by Margaret Hung (2015), however, challenges Black's class control thesis through her prosopographic<sup>10</sup> study of public librarians serving between 1919-1975, whom she argues came from largely working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, similar to those of library users.

The 1919 Public Libraries Act reformed previous legislation by increasing the funds and materials available, extending library networks to rural areas, and moving fiscal and governmental responsibility from individual rate payers to county councils: legitimating local authorities that gained the power to establish municipal libraries without a referendum. The Government recognised the value of public libraries during the First World War as channels of public information and propaganda, and, following the Representation of the People Act in 1918, which granted all men the right to vote and some women of a certain age, the democratisation of the public library service from 1919 onwards gathered pace. A 'welfarist spirit' accompanied this development,

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<sup>10</sup> Prosopography is an investigation of the common characteristics of a historical group, whose individual biographies may be largely untraceable, by means of a collective study of their lives, in multiple career-line analysis, to reveal both the 'roots of political action' and 'structures of social mobility' (Stone, 1971, p. 46).

as evidenced in this government poster from the 1920s promoting the public library as a dynamic, multipurpose welfare service for the nation.

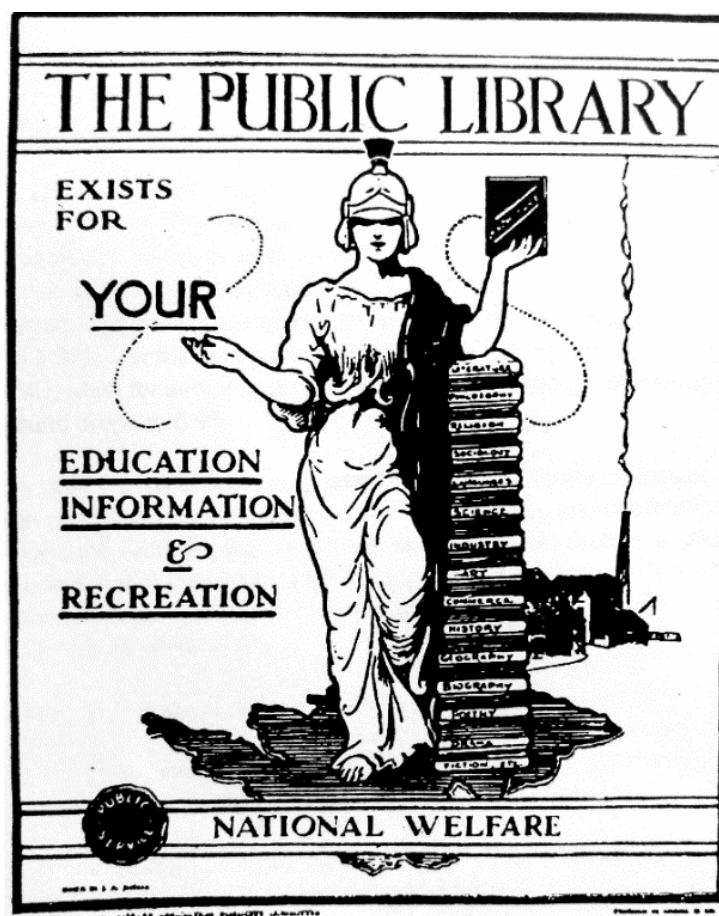


Figure 2.1: 'Public Library: National Welfare' poster, c.1920s. (Source: Black, 2000b)

The inter-war years saw a strengthening of British national identity, in contrast to the intense and variegated local and provincial culture which characterised British social life before 1914 (Harris, 1994, p. 18). This deepening sense of nationhood was bolstered by developing technological, media and communications infrastructures, with the establishment of national daily newspapers, red public telephone boxes and a national grid of electricity. This grid mentality, argues Black, extended to some librarians, such as Archibald Sparke, Chief Librarian of Bolton, who radically proposed the full nationalisation of public libraries (2000b, p. 49).

At the same time, however, this national egalitarian ethos was matched with an equally conservative one within the public library sector, as many librarians and politicians feared the potential of mass media and unemployment to disrupt the established social order (ibid). Within this ideological tension the terms 'public' and

'community' became key weapons for those seeking to advance the momentum of a more egalitarian distribution of library provision. The early publicly-funded municipal libraries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had widely been called Free Libraries, however in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a movement among some librarians to increase the popularity of the name '*public library*', since the term 'free' was thought by some to smack of 'soup-kitchens and services to ghetto populations, whereas [public] was better suited to the new and meaningful – although as yet limited – developments in public policy' (Black, 2000, p.50).

The Second World War proved to be a significant window of opportunity for public library development. Despite the damages to and privations of resources that this war wrought on civic infrastructures, this period of dramatic societal pressures and shifts increased public demand for local and national information, as well as appetites for leisurely reading during the long waiting periods of everyday life in wartime. This led to energetic developments in public library outreach work, such as bringing lending collections directly to people in air-raid shelters, underground stations and community centres. Despite book shortages, public lending statistics boomed during this time. In the 1938-39 Annual Report of Keighly borough libraries, West Yorkshire, the Chief Librarian commented that 'the demand for books of a 'crisis' nature has been most noticeable', (cited in Black, 2000b, p. 1989). These national conditions of crisis injected a renewed idealism in policy-making in the public library sector, with the war acting 'as a powerful catalyst for planning reform, encouraging librarians to design and discuss radical blueprints for a modern, more popular and more efficient post-war public library system' (Black, 2000b, p. 82).

In December 1942, a landmark report by leading public librarian Lionel McColvin was published, which aimed to 'de-Victorianize', renew and consolidate the British public library system by democratising and universalising its standards, networks and functions at both national and civic levels (Black, 2004, p. 902). As Hung points out (2015, p. 53), McColvin believed that the values and practices of equality of *choice* that underpin democracy are of little merit unless they are accompanied by those of equality of *access*. Building on the national spirit of anti-totalitarianism, McColvin argued that public libraries are uniquely positioned to provide the access to knowledge that informs

civic and political agency and thereby helps to ‘produce citizens who will be qualified to choose wisely and freely whatever form of government they think best’ (McColvin, 1942, p. 5). McColvin reinforced this position in a later publication:

Today we have reached the stage when we advocate universal library provision, not merely because the masses have the right to equality of opportunity in respect of access to knowledge but also because we firmly believe that mankind will not be able to exercise wisely their rights and powers unless they do indeed enjoy such access (McColvin, 1961, p. v).

The 1942 McColvin Report was published in the same month and year as the watershed report by William Beveridge that outlined the plan for the post-war welfare state. Despite the advances the welfare state gained through the Labour government of 1945-51, however, it was not until the abatement of post-war austerity and the emergence of affluence in the late 1950s that the egalitarian spirit of optimism and universalism began to take effect in the public libraries movement, which saw an increase in popular support and absorption of popular culture into its collections (Black, 2000; Hung, 2015). Hung cites Raymond Williams’ conception of ‘ordinary culture’ (Williams, 1977b, 2017 [1958]) and Richard Hoggart’s (2009 [1957]) argument for the ‘uses of literacy’ to illustrate the post-war context of shifting debates on public library values and practices (Hung, 2015, 293-96).

The passing of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 served as a watershed moment for the modernisation of the public library service that followed, which Black argues has led to the way in which public libraries became ‘symbolic of the ideological essence of the welfare state’ (2000, p. 145). Still in force today, the 1964 Act was enacted during a Conservative administration and came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1965 during Harold Wilson’s Labour government. Advancing British public libraries as a universal national system of provision supported Wilson’s agenda of re-stating British socialism in terms of the powers of scientific revolution forged in the ‘white heat’ of advances in technology and education (Wilson, 1963).

The 1964 Act mandates that public libraries are a universal, statutory public service, and compels all local authorities to provide their resident and working populations with professionally organised and facilitated access to books, information

and other cultural and learning resources and activities. Since the expansion of public libraries under the 1919 Act, the number of ‘library authorities’ had proliferated into an unwieldy number – by 1942 there were more than 600 different parochial library authorities managing and providing municipal libraries with a great variation of standards, types and sizes. The 1964 Act allowed the Government to merge and dissolve the smallest and least efficient authorities, reducing them to 151 in total, and, crucially, it imposed statutory duties on both local library authorities and the Secretary of State in respect of delivering a free and effective library service to the public (House of Commons, 2012). It thereby reformed previous public library legislation on the basis of making a more centralised ‘*comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof*’ (HMSO, 1964). The latter part of this clause, ‘for all persons desiring to make use thereof’ is the clearest indicator of what constitutes the ‘public’ user base of the library – namely anyone whomsoever wishes to use it.

Hung argues that the passing of the 1964 Act marked the beginning of a decade-long ‘Golden Age’ for public libraries, characterised by unparalleled expansion, modernisation and popularisation of library form, content and social engagement, with total expenditure on public libraries increasing three-fold during this period (2015, pp. 230-333). Hung’s study does not extend to public library practices beyond 1975, but she does acknowledge the decline of their structural foundations and legitimacy in subsequent decades through the accelerated forces of neoliberalism and commercialisation of cultural and public services, which became increasingly driven by the drivers of managerialist ideologies rather than educational or socialist ones (2015, p. 299).

Paradoxically, the seeds of public libraries’ decline were sown in their Golden Age [...] when librarians tempered an inherited tradition of evangelism and adapted more fully to public demand. They achieved a better balance between the competing objectives of libraries because they had ample budgets to do so. But in the subsequent period of eroded budgets, the stress of serving public demand – once part of a healthy adaptation – became increasingly identified as the central purpose of public libraries. This weakened the rationale for public libraries (Hung, 2015, p. 300).



What is interesting in Hung's analysis is how she identifies the conditions of crisis as already existing within a period of settlement and health of the nation, its services and economy. The oil crisis of the 1970s and subsequent crash of the economy and period of severe austerity, coupled with the restructuring of local government, congealed forces that had allowed public libraries to flourish into a different formation that precipitated a new period of decline. This moment of conjuncture can be understood in Hall's terms (adapting Althusser) as a process of 'ruptural fusion' of contradictory forces and trajectories. This conjunctural process can be teased out through a closer look at Raymond Williams' contribution to the study of libraries and culture.

Writing during the 'Golden Age' Hung identifies, Williams illuminates the curious temporal and cultural condition of the public library. Speaking to an audience of librarians in 1966, when the impact of Prime Minister Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' rhetoric was in full force, Williams argues that such periods of 'rapid change' are ripe for understanding the social relations between our central buildings and social institutions. Were Williams speaking to an audience of librarians today, he would presumably be rallying an urgent need to understand the present transmutation of conjunctural crisis, in which the cultural meanings of both libraries and cities shift under the dominant forces of austerity and neoliberal modes of governance. Williams cautions, however, that times of rapid change can also pose barriers to understanding these social relations, since the confidence of our future wishes and aspirations all too often are structured and coloured by the 'deep, well-built channels of the past' (1966, p. 364). These temporal channels carry powerful communicative currencies: kinds of 'thinking ... feeling, and building' (ibid.) which, while they may be directed towards an imagined future, are also pulled back in dynamic tension with the undertow of past cultural foundations that surface in the present as a residue.

These terms can be understood as a development of Williams' earlier writings, where he defined 'structure of feeling' in terms of 'the culture of a period [...] a very deep and wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on that that all communication depends' (Williams, 2011 [1961], p. 48). The paradoxical nature of this fragile yet dominant force, which is 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet

it operates in the most delicate and intangible parts of our activity’, is what makes the hold it has over public life so difficult to discern (ibid).

Williams developed ‘structure of feeling’ as a heuristic device to problematise Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony as the dominant or ‘common sense’ form of thinking and values that shape society in a particular time and place. While Williams did not refute this notion of hegemony, he argued it can never be total, since new forms of thinking and feeling are able to emerge through dynamics that are internal to epochal specificities of culture. ‘Structure of feeling’ thereby denotes the terse relations between different forms of social thought vying to emerge at any one moment in history. Williams uses the affective term ‘feeling’ rather than ‘thinking’ in this formulation to indicate that the matters at stake may only be intuited as an emergent trajectory, or inferred by ‘*reading between the lines*’ of official governmental or regulatory discourse, rather than fully articulated as a definite structure (Oxford Reference, 2018, emphasis mine). In the 1966 essay on libraries, however, Williams groups the terms ‘thinking, feeling and building’ together, suggesting these modes of apprehending and constructing the dominant, residual and emergent forms of culture are always dynamically inter-related in the symbolic and material forms of built environments.

Williams’ cultural materialist approach to history helps to illuminate the dynamic social, political, economic, spatial and temporal relations that are threaded through the changing organisational forms of public libraries. One of the most dominant cultural tropes that has persisted throughout the last century and a half of public library development is the notion of the public sphere. As Black argues, for example, even the mighty forces of neoliberal privatisation unleashed in the Thatcher years did not gain a hold over public libraries as they did other public services, which he attributes to ‘libraries [being] public sphere institutions *par excellence*’ (2000, p. 151). The next section of this chapter will survey literatures that argue for the democratic value of public libraries through this dominant analytic frame, in order to discern and evaluate the residual and emergent forms of thinking, feeling and building that are woven into the present conjuncture of crisis.

## 2.2 Sphering the *public* library

British librarian and former Director of the American Library Association Michael Gorman positions democracy as the guiding normative and political framework of librarianship:

All our values and ideas are democratic values and ideas – intellectual freedom, the common good, service to all, the transmission of the human record to future generations, free access to knowledge and information, non-discrimination, etc. [...] Libraries have grown and flourished in the soil of democracy and our fate is inextricably intertwined with the fate of democracy (2002, p. 23).

Based on these principles, British sociologist Frank Webster argues that the UK's 'public library network is arguably the nearest thing we have [...] to an achieved public sphere' (2010, p. 176). Similarly, Black and Pepper (2012, p. 444-5) argue in their historical analysis of public library buildings:

The idea of the public library, so vividly projected in its built form, was part of the emergence of a new understanding of what was meant by "public." The public library was not only free and open to all; it was distinct from the private sphere and divorced from the market. It was a shared, civic, public-sphere institution that drew on the same discourse that equated knowledge with light, or enlightenment.

These accounts and many others adopt a powerful spatial rhetoric to position the public library in the epistemic tradition of illuminated spheres of rational discourse. I concur with Clive Barnett's argument that the problem with geographic metaphors like

the public sphere, the public realm, public domain, or the public sector is not that these are spatial *metaphors*, it is that they are *spatial* metaphors. They are, more precisely, metaphors that conjure up images of contained, circumscribed spaces (2008, p. 8, his emphasis).

Such spatial imaginaries, he argues, occlude the necessary relation between publicness and democracy, whereby publicness is both a means and an end to democratic politics.

Scholars who deploy public sphere arguments to validate public library value also tend to rely on an uncritical reading of what this theoretical construct means. Having surveyed a range of post-structural social and cultural theorists on space and

place in their *Library as Place* book, Buschman and Leckie settle on the most important theoretical paradigm for understanding libraries is that of the Habermasian public sphere. They ask, ‘whether such a thing as *true* public space/sphere *still* exists and if so, what its characteristics and vulnerabilities might be’, and assert that ‘the library as a *true* public forum as well as its collective existence in democracies embody and enact much of Habermas’s classical definition of the public sphere’ (2007, pp. 13, 18, emphasis mine). Buschman and Leckie’s positioning is based on an earlier book by Buschman (2003) that uses Habermas’s theory of the public sphere as a meta-framework and ‘rallying point’ for his defence of libraries as democratic mediating spaces between the state and private life, rooted in collective discourse and rational self-reflection free from social control. Buschman uses the ideal of the Habermasian public sphere as a ‘rallying point’ for his defence of libraries and campaign to make them more democratic and public (2003, p. 29). A brief synopsis of Habermas’s influential theory is needed to evaluate Buschman’s contribution.

In Habermas’s (1989 [1962]) famous account of bourgeois public life in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, ‘the public sphere’ was defined as a vital discursive, democratic space that emerged in the liminal regions between the publicness of the state and the privacy of the home. Habermas described the coffee houses, debating rooms and theatres of eighteenth-century London and Paris as prime examples of such discursive realms of civil society. These spaces afforded what he called ‘architectures of sociability’ (1989, pp. 10–11) through their integration with ‘new infrastructures of social communication, such as the journalistic press, circulating libraries, and the post office’ which enabled the mercantile class of men to form, trade and contest opinions (Ellis, 2008, p. 161). Bourgeois public spheres served as counterweights to the prior bureaucratic processes of the absolutist state: a closed, arcane feudalist political system based on the divine right of kings, under which the ‘private’ figure of the monarch and the ‘public’ symbols of power and state authority were essentially fused. The bourgeois public sphere supplanted this system through the rising market economy, exceeding the authority of the monarch and landed gentry and turning the question of ‘public’ into one of ‘non-governmental opinion-making’ (Habermas, 1989, p. 40).

Habermas goes on to focus on the contradictions and tensions between the liberal public sphere's concentration among the highly educated and elite classes of men and their tenets of 'universal access' and 'the basic rights of man' (1989, pp. 29, 85). Other tensions centred on the expansion of the public body beyond the bourgeoisie, as democracy became a mass affair during nineteenth-century Europe, causing state and society to increasingly intertwine. Consequently, these late-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century processes led to the end of the liberal public sphere, and a 're-feudalisation' of it in Habermas's view. Maintaining the legitimacy of the state and the economy then became a process of stimulating mass loyalty in the form of consumption, public relations, mass-mediated and manipulated stages of public opinion.

The version of Habermas's public sphere Buschman relies on is, in its re-casting by Craig Calhoun (1992a, p. 1), 'an institutional location for practical reason in public affairs and for the accompanying valid, if often deceptive, claims for formal democracy'. Buschman also relies on Habermas's later work on *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), which argues that the binding consensual norms and their implicit 'validity claims' to authority present in everyday speech, argumentation and critique, form the 'principle of discourse [that] can assume through the medium of law the shape of a principle of democracy' (quoted by Buschman, 2003, p. 41). Buschman applies this directly to librarianship by proposing that this profession and field of cultural practice

in many important, thorough, latent, and concrete ways *embodies* and *enacts* the public sphere idea in the form of rational organization of human discourse, a resource to check validity claims, and so forth. Therefore, library collections, services, values, and traditions ... still contain within them many of the characteristics – and possibilities – of the public sphere (2003, p. 170, his emphasis).

As Buschman goes on to argue at length, however, this ideal-type of libraries as institutions of the democratic public sphere is in trouble, due to the 'crisis culture' that has riddled its practice for decades, which he argues is not only due to the dominance of 'new public philosophy' neoliberal management policy and cuts to public funding, but also due the lack of critical thinking in Library and Information Science (LIS) theory and practice (2003, pp. 6, 28).

Buschman examines the way in which libraries are funded and increasingly valued on an economic rather than social basis, which entails an unquestioning prevalence of management techniques in which patrons are treated as ‘customers’, causing libraries to change their goals and values, bringing a corporate and homogenising ethos to the library profession and service delivery. He acknowledges that this new economic, technological and customer-driven focus to librarianship is not unique to the library sector, but crucially, it is what erodes them as instances of the public sphere, turning a ‘democracy of citizens [to] a democracy of consumers’ (Bushman 2003, p. 122). Budd agrees with this in his argument that the customer service emphasis of librarianship is based on the misguided notion that libraries deal in commodities (2008, pp. 202–3). Further support to this point comes from Ed D’Angelo (2006), who argues that ‘postmodern consumer capitalism’ and neo-liberal management forces pose a grave threat to the ideals of ‘democracy, education and the public good’ that are inherently manifested in the public library as an institution.

For D’Angelo,

The public library may be like the proverbial canary in the mine – the first to go when the air is poisoned. It is uniquely positioned to feel the effects of a declining democratic civilization and it is the first to go when knowledge gets reduced to information and entertainment (2006, p. 2).

Leading British LIS scholar Bob Usherwood shares the thrust of this argument and laments the trend that has accelerated in recent decades for public library professionals to get swept up in the demands of the market and consumer culture and claims that ‘[t]he physical and psychological state of the public library service can be seen as symbolic of the condition of cultural institutions in general’, which can be read as having been ‘dumbed down’ and evacuated of their social democrat principles of equity of access to quality culture (Usherwood, 2007, p. 2). Usherwood had also warned of such cultural trends in 1990s when there was a rise in corporatisation within the library profession, lamenting ‘the sins that have been committed in management’s name’, and believing that ‘some of the new managerialist ideas had been introduced because of a disbelief in any kind of delivery of public service’, preferring instead the logic of market trading (1996, p. 121).

Buschman, Budd, D'Angelo and Usherwood each argue for an urgently renewed critical debate on the external economic and ideological relations that are shaping the crisis culture of libraries and librarianship and call for a more principled understanding and intellectual foundation of its resolutely *public* purposes. As Buschman concludes:

[i]t is in the *process* of debating and deciding on the purpose, boundaries, and support for public institutions – the democratic process – that both defines their purpose and the reason for continuing them as a democratic public good, and at its core lies the irreducible value placed on enacting democracy (2003, p. 174-75, his emphasis).

While there is much to applaud in these arguments for an injection of critical political and moral discussion and positioning in the theory and practice of librarianship, what is missing from this scholarship is reflexive critique of the ideals they are premised upon, and thereby an analysis of *how* library practitioners might be able to effect real social change within the limits of actually-existing democracy.

While I am broadly aligned with these authors' normative positions and agree with the characterisation of public libraries as a diagnostic 'canary' or barometer of wider cultural and public formations of crisis, I diverge from their limited analytical framework, which tends to rely on simple binaries of 'public/democratic' versus 'private/market' and attributes the decline of public library spheres to a single logic of marketisation. As Newman (2006, p. 175) puts it:

[t]his is a conception that views the public sphere as spatially and temporally fixed; that locks us into a traditional notion of the public as clearly distinguished from the private; and that offers a view of the public sphere as a domain of rational deliberation that can be clearly marked from the passions and pleasures of the personal or the commercialised relationship of the market. Crucially, it also misses the gender subtext of the duality between public and private.

Nancy Fraser reminds any would-be embracer of the ideal of the public sphere that '[a]ccording to Habermas, the full utopian potential of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was never realised in practice. The claim to open access in particular was not made good' (1990, p. 59). Habermas maintained that in the ideal public sphere, differences in birth or fortune were 'bracketed' or suspended for the sake of free

rational discourse. His critics argue that this was not possible because of the depth of hegemonic and ideological forces at play – the bourgeois masculine of his theory inherently excluded large sections of society on the bases of gender, race and class (Fraser, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1997). The real root of the public sphere, then, is one of conflict and struggle.

Michael Warner points out that ‘public’ and ‘private’ are not simply descriptive, normative or legal terms; they are also cultural categories that co-constitute the social (Warner, 2002, pp.9-10). These cultural categories produce powerful and far-reaching social imaginaries: ‘the public’ has been unmoored from its original context and travelled around the world to become a floating signifier similar to ‘the market’ or ‘the nation’, which has settled into the discursive repertoires of many different institutions and cultures (Warner, 2002a, p. 11). Warner demonstrates that publics are not empirically self-evident, but rather textual, visual, and self-reflexive in polyvalent ways. The notion of the public sphere is, for Warner, a handy ‘imaginary convergence point’, a discursive context in which ‘a public’ is ‘a special kind of virtual social object, enabling a special mode of address’ (Warner, 2002a, p. 55).

Warner’s central argument is built upon Fraser’s conception of ‘subaltern counterpublics’, which she defines as discursive arenas parallel to mainstream publics, in which members of marginalised social groups ‘have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics [...to] formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (1990, p. 67). Warner’s theorisation of the dynamic relation between publics and counter-publics is premised on the notion that ‘when people address publics, they engage in struggles – at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tactic to mute cognitive noise – over the conditions that bring them together as a public’ (2002a, p. 11).

Social struggles have been entwined with UK public libraries since their inception in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century context of contradictory tensions between Chartism and Liberal utilitarianism/evangelism (Black, 1996; Green, 2011); to early twentieth-century campaigns for universal suffrage and the campaign to bring women into libraries and librarianship (Kerslake and Kinnell, 1998); to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist contexts of welfarism and universalism (Whiteman, 1986; Black, 2004); to late-20<sup>th</sup>-century



professional developments that saw radical ‘community librarianship’ practices address the non-normative needs of immigrant, LGBT and disabled populations (Astbury, 1989; Alexander *et al.*, 1992; Black and Muddiman, 1997; Newman, 2007; Pateman and Vincent, 2010). Now in the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, such struggles have transformed into the fight to defend these cumulative democratic foundations and social inclusion principles from the decimating forces of austerity and neoliberal welfare reform (Bailey, 2014; Robinson, 2015; McCahill, Birdi and Jones, 2018; Robertson and McMenemy, 2018a). This ongoing dialectical relationship between publics, libraries and social change can be understood through theorisations of the way in which publics are ‘summoned’, ‘convened’ and ‘mobilised’ into forms of contestation through a range of political, discursive and cultural practices (Barnett, 2008; Newman and Clarke, 2010).

In *The Public and its Problems* (1927), John Dewey argued that the notion that we can identify a ‘general public’ is a fiction, since publics are not pre-existing entities but rather emergent responses to social problems that have failed to be dealt with by institutions. Dewey was writing in response to Walter Lippmann’s 1925 book *The Phantom Public*, which turns the tables on modern democracy by arguing that it is social issues that organise publics, rather than the other way around (Marres, 2005, p. 209). Dewey argues that publics are confederations of bodies that come together not so much through choice but rather through being ‘summoned’ or ‘convened’ via common experience of a certain kind of institutional harm that becomes a problem over time (1927, p. 39). As Newman argues, an illuminating lens on such processes of public-formation can be discerned in the cultural practices of social movements and political campaigns, which ‘suggest ways in which the processes of summoning publics requires attention to the practices of representation – practices through which an issue is made live or real to others’ (Newman, 2011, p. 316).

Widespread cases of organised local and national campaigns to save public libraries from cuts and closures over the past eight years of austerity offers a fascinating lens through which to read the ways in which publics are summoned, represented and mobilised in multi-layered ways. Collective, embodied practices such as hundreds of residents borrowing their full quota of books from their public library to empty the bookshelves to keep public goods in public circulation (Kennedy, 2011); scores of

campaigners joining hands to form a human chain around their public library building to defend it from closure (ITV News, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Fryer and Mahony, 2014b); and groups of activists squatting and occupying library buildings for days and weeks to protect, re-claim, and share the building and its contents (Stevenson, 2011; Farrington, 2012; *BBC News*, 2016); are all potent examples of how the material and symbolic effects of cuts to public services summon and mobilise creative publics into action over issues of common concern and value. Many activists who self-enrol in these campaigns have not engaged in activism before (Forkert, 2016a), yet the issue of the threat to their cherished public library service ‘sparks into being’ (Marres, 2005) a realisation of the public they are a part of that needs defending. As Newman and Clarke argue (2010, p. 184),

public services remain a focus of collective aspirations and desires [...] all the more so in times of growing inequality, division, anxiety and uncertainty [...] and] are worth struggling for because they hold the possibility of de-commodifying goods, services and, above all, relationships.

### **2.3 Millennial public library crises and struggles**

As the previous sections of this chapter have gone some way to show, conditions of ‘crisis’ in English public libraries are not new. There has been a gathering of pace in these conditions over the past 25 years, however, with a series of policy reports and government enquiries attempting to re-frame the future of the public library service in contexts of crisis since the early 1990s.

An independent green paper titled ‘Borrowed Time?’ (Comedia, 1993) investigated the perceived ‘terminal crisis’ facing public libraries in the context of funding cuts, declining book stocks and circulation figures, and reduced opening hours, and argues that libraries were ‘dying in a welter of goodwill’ caught between ‘the seemingly contradictory values of high public esteem and low political visibility and concern’ (Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry, 1995, p. 43). This predicament is in part

caused, these authors argue, by the ‘unusual reversal of cultural influence compared with most other cultural facilities, in that it is weakest at the centre and strongest at the periphery, in terms of the national cultural geography’ – an issue that is compounded by the assumed ‘political neutrality’ of professional librarians (1995, pp. 44-45). The non-departmental public body of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA, originally called Resource) was established to address the gap in national cultural strategy and advocacy in England, but their ability to effect change was deemed as ‘shadowy’ in a 2000 DCMS Select Committee report, and criticised by a Demos report in 2003 as ‘lacking credibility’ and ‘too preoccupied with internal structures’ (Leadbeater, 2003, pp. 26–27; Goulding, 2012, p. 61).

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 seemed to promise new hope for public libraries, with Tony Blair’s ‘education’ mantra and agenda for social inclusion offering an opportunity for them to be placed back on the political agenda. In 2000, a commemorative fifty pence piece was issued by the Royal Mint to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original Public Libraries Act.



Figure 2.2: Commemorative 50p (Image: The Royal Mint, no date)

In the same year, a research report titled ‘Open to All?’ published in 2000 argues that the advancements in capitalism have removed the public library’s founding principles of meeting ‘the needs of the deserving poor and yet, 150 years later, they are disproportionately used by the middle class’, and thus calls for a radical programme of tackling social and cultural exclusion across the public library sector by addressing structural issues of classism, racism and capitalism that influence the culture and uptake of service provision (Muddiman *et al.*, 2000, p. 17). Shiraz Durrani highlights in this report that social exclusion ‘is seen as having intensified with the rise of the

‘information age; and argues for new strategies of resistance to such processes’ (200, p. 78).

In 2002 DCMS published its *Framework for the Future* strategy for public libraries, which aligned the priorities for the sector with the New Labour agenda for education, lifelong learning, e-citizenship and community-building. Quotations from sectoral and political reports on public library futures that followed, however, illustrate less of a brave new world of utopian possibilities, and more of an unending dystopian precipice of crisis. In the same year, Leadbeater’s ‘Overdue’-titled Demos report, the research for which informed and developed government strategy, argued that public libraries are still not clear on what they should be doing in modern society, and hence ‘may decline so far that they cannot be resuscitated [...] The public library system could be sleepwalking to disaster’ (2003, p. 13).

In October 2004 the House of Commons conducted a Select Committee Enquiry into the problems and reported that there was a danger of public libraries losing the focus of their core literacy missions by placing too much pressure on community enhancement agendas, arguing that libraries cannot solve all communities’ advice, information and empowerment needs ‘without the appropriate allocation and clear demarcation, of resources’ (House of Commons, 2005, p. 44). It also warned that the priority and funding of quality book stock needed substantial increases and crumbling public library material infrastructures needed an injection of between £240-650m; while staffing and leadership infrastructures needed an overhaul of knowledge and skills development for delivering, managing and advocating for services in the modern age.

An independent report in the same year by The Libri Trust, authored by former head of Waterstones booksellers Tim Coates, narrated a scathing attack on the bureaucracy of public library management systems and warned that there would be mass closures within 15 years without a radical overhaul of the infrastructure’s book budgets, opening hours and building renovations (Coates, 2004). In 2007 the MLA produced a consultation document designed to test a ‘Blueprint for Excellence’ vision for the public library service for the period 2008-2011, which sought to address the problems highlighted by previous reports by placing the library user at the centre of

delivery. The financial crash that soon followed this report and subsequent change of government in 2010 prevented this blueprint from becoming a reality.

### **A Beeching Moment**

This brings us to the temporal focus of the extended ‘present’ moment of the thesis, which examines the transformation and conjunctural crisis of English public libraries between 2010-2018. As seen in the previous chapter, the current state of affairs has been likened to an epochal ‘Beeching moment’ (Sieghart, 2014). As Sieghart articulates, the ‘public good’ of the public library service is distributed in a national network of public goods and services through the practices that underpin the social value of public libraries.

The library does more than simply loan books. It underpins every community. It is not just a place for self-improvement, but the supplier of an infrastructure for life and learning, from babies to old age, offering support, help, education, and encouraging a love of reading.  
(Sieghart, 2014, p. 5)

This social infrastructure is of quite a different nature to the transport infrastructure of Britain’s rail network, yet it is facing a ‘Beeching moment’ because it has been valued as if it is simply a transactional, quantitative exchange system and drain on the economy. At the time of Sieghart’s Independent Library Report in December 2014, there were 477 fewer public libraries than there had been a decade before, and over 70% of this reduction had occurred since austerity cuts to public services were introduced in 2010, with these numbers set to increase dramatically in the years to follow. Protests have ‘saved’ some libraries, but invariably this ‘saving’ constitutes them being transferred to volunteers to manage, as Chapters Seven – Nine of this thesis explores.

Under the 1964 Act, the Secretary of State is duty-bound to oversee and promote the public library service, and to intervene where a local authority is in breach of its own duty in providing a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ service (HMSO, 1964). Despite countless appeals by local and national campaign groups and sectoral bodies

over the past seven years for such interventions, the steadfast response from the successive Ministers in post has been to refuse and instead recommend local solutions guided by national taskforces and advisory agencies which lack political power. As Anstice reflects:

It does not matter how many thousands respond to a consultation or protest in marches, if the council has decided on a course of action then that is what will happen. The protection of the courts, in a service like libraries where legal precedent is limited and definitions are weak, is haphazard at best. Central Government has shown itself impervious to appeal when it comes to cuts to library services. (2015, n.p.)

This means that local authorities generally consider their libraries a 'soft' statutory service, with some councillors failing to notice they are statutory at all (ibid).

In order for all aspects of the Act to be upheld across the 151 different local authorities that provide and govern library services, a national Public Library Standards for England framework was established by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and DCMS in January 2001, a model which:

represent[s] a basket of input and output targets across key library activity areas. The standards as a whole help to define what is meant by a comprehensive and efficient service within the terms of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. (archived DCMS webpage, 2005)

These standards were revised according to innovations in librarianship in 2006-07 which stipulated that all public libraries in England must meet ten criteria in order to deliver their obligations to local people, including targets for close proximity to local public libraries for all residents, sufficient opening hours, access to the internet and online catalogues, numbers of books and other learning and information resources purchased new each year.

In 2008 under the Gordon Brown New Labour administration, the Public Library Standards were replaced with a *voluntary* performance assessment policy framework, through which each library authority could choose to have its performance indicators measured through a set of national benchmarks, which created a more competitive and discretionary context through which success and value was measured, and a loss of standardisation. Then in 2010, under the newly formed Cameron-Clegg

Coalition government, the voluntary public library National Indicator benchmarking framework was abolished altogether, as was the MLA, thereby removing a crucial level of governance and strategic oversight for ensuring a quality service was maintained across all 151 library authorities. The dissolution of the MLA was part of what became known as the mass ‘bonfire of the quangos’ instituted in Chancellor Osborne’s first term of office, in his mission to cut £500m from the national budget. Arts Council England became the national strategic body that took on the work of the MLA, but with a significantly reduced budget of £3m for supporting public library development - £10m less than the abolished MLA’s £13m budget for libraries.

The systematic undermining and dismantling of legislative, policy and professional frameworks that support the national network of public is illustrated in the following diagram, which depicts an eviscerated hierarchy of legitimating structures and forces.

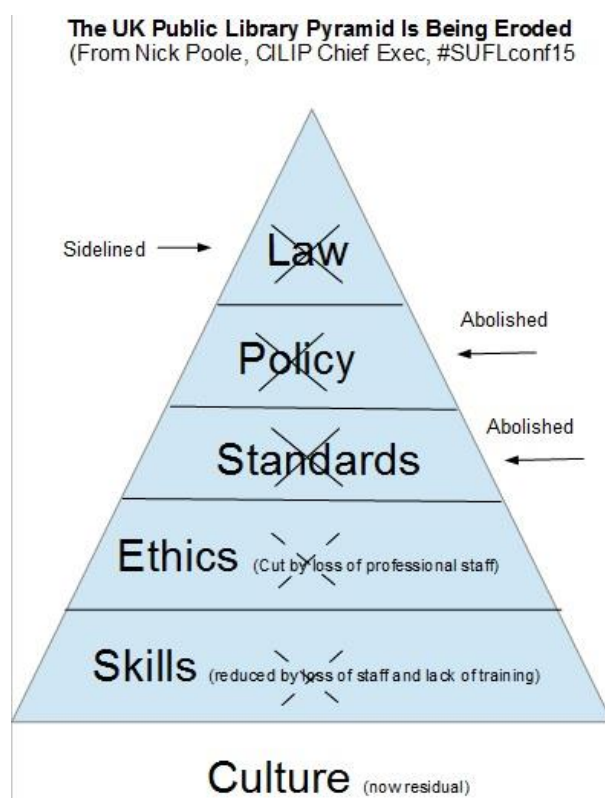


Figure 2.3: ‘The UK Public Pyramid’ (Poole and Anstice, 2015)

This image is a reproduction of a flipchart diagram drawn by Nick Poole during his workshop at a national ‘Speak Up for Libraries’ campaign conference in 2015. Poole had at that point been in post as the CEO of The Chartered Institute for Library and

Informational Professionals (CILIP) for six months and was finding new ways to strategically steer and advocate for the public library service and profession within a context of crisis. The diagram illustrates how the abolition of national policy frameworks and standards for public libraries, the undermining legal protection, and the hollowing out of ethics and skills through mass redundancies and under investment in staff, means that the nation's public library service is relying only on a foundational base of 'culture', which has become residualised through the dismantling of structures that culture has evolved to underpin. In his keynote speech at the conference, Poole argued that under his leadership CILIP would work to 'repair the fabric of professionalism and standards that has worn thin over the past decade' (Poole, 2015b). He rallied the audience of library professionals, public library users, activists and allies to mobilise and strengthen the cultural foundations of the national network through public solidarity, using a powerful rhetorical statement to marshal a collective position: 'because I am part of society, the loss of any library diminishes me' (ibid.).

Reflecting on the pyramid diagram three years later in a public Twitter conversation with me, Poole acknowledges that the structural erosion it depicts has occurred not only through strategic government agendas of privatising and deregulating public goods, but also through lack of political strategy (and thereby complicity with government strategy) of the library profession itself:

I would probably characterise it as a string of tactical errors in the face of an onrushing neoliberal agenda. [...] I feel duty bound to point out that a lot of the dismantling was done by the sector to itself. The sector actively rejected standards, the law was partly framed by librarians to be deliberately vague and its partly a personal choice to disengage from ethics. (Poole, 2018, n. p. )

Why would the library profession take part in its own undoing? The answer lies in the 'culture' element of the pyramid. While Poole appeals to the public library's professional and popular shared value base as that which can provide a fertile soil for the reanimation of public libraries' societal importance, he also acknowledges that structurally, culture is a weak residual category that doesn't even have its own level in the hierarchy, but rather sits beneath it like a shadow cast by the hollowed-out pyramid of library legitimacy.



The problem of de-legitimised structures and residualised values at the core of the public library profession has been a key concern of Usherwood, who introduced his last book by reflecting on a statement by Etzioni (1995):

‘The best time to reinforce the moral and social foundations of institutions is not after they have collapsed but when they are cracking.’ The public library service is not in a state of collapse, but there are definite cracks in its edifice, and it is perhaps not unfair to suggest that a number of these have been caused by some contemporary professionals who have neglected to look after its foundations (2007, p. 7).

Over ten years after Usherwood wrote this, with the impact of crippling austerity measures exacerbating the demise of professional ethical standards, the foundational fissures in the public library service have arguably expanded far enough to risk a perilous state of collapse. However, it is not my purpose to ‘reinforce the moral and social foundations of institutions’, in Etzioni’s terms. Rather, I am concerned with interrogating the conjunctural formations that produce the ‘cracks’ and contradictions that propel the library service into ongoing states of crisis. Poole and Usherwood’s acknowledgement that the crisis is in part caused by the profession itself, can be attributed to a lack of critical reflexivity and political capacity within the profession to take advantage of the ‘cracks’ in the hegemonic forms of governance and economy within which public libraries have developed, in order to forge an alternative future for libraries grounded in radical praxis.

As seen in the previous section of this chapter, scholarly attempts to theorise and defend libraries as ‘public spheres’ lack critical attention to the residual and dominant ideologies that frame the political systems such ‘spheres’ are framed upon. Budd argues that LIS scholars would do well to learn from critical theory traditions in the social sciences.

Much, though certainly not all, of the practice (and I do emphasize *practice* here) of librarianship goes untheorized. Within library and information work there is a fairly long-standing antipathy toward ‘theory’ [...] as though there is some chasm between the two that stands in the way (necessarily) of their intermingling. To the extent that such thinking exists, librarianship and information work will always be prevented from realizing the goals of praxis, defined here as the critical,

rational, interpretive, epistemic, and ethical work of a discipline or profession (2003, p. 20, emphasis his).

My thesis calls for a renewed dialogue between LIS and sociology in order to address this gap. I also contribute to social science scholarship on the way in which discursive proliferations of ‘crisis’ tropes in political and popular culture summon, mediate and shape publics in the contemporary conjuncture (Mahony and Clarke, 2012; Tsilimpounidi, 2016; Grayson and Little, 2017). Such practices of meaning-making are powerful symbolic devices that are ‘always deployed in search of an audience – here, a public – that can be activated, mobilized or engaged by the threat and promise that idea of crisis appears to carry with it’ (Mahony and Clarke, 2012, p. 5). Recognising these rhetorical devices as such does not mean that the crises befalling individuals, groups and public services under austerity are not real, but attending to the ways in which such modes of address amplify, augment and urge the matters at stake in these contexts helps to reveal the ways in which publics are mediated by agencies of hegemonic power and thereby how they can struggle against those structures.

A pertinent example of such dominant (re)structures is Community Asset Transfer (CAT), introduced in Chapter One. In 2007 ‘Making Assets Work: The Quirk Review of community management and ownership of public assets’ was published – a report commissioned by DCLG and written by Barry Quirk, then Chief Executive of London Borough of Lewisham. The report opens with a utopian vision of the future of civil society:

**Imagine this!**

It is 2020 and communities across England have been revitalised from within. Local councils have been central to this economic and social renewal, working alongside each and every community in the country. Capable and confident, these communities are ready and willing to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the fast-paced modern world. And after twenty years of sustained investment in community infrastructure, local economies are strong, particularly in those areas where poverty has persisted for generations. A new civic spirit sweeps through urban, suburban and rural communities alike – galvanising

communities to harness their energies for the wider public good.  
(Quirk, 2007, p. 3)

This utopian vision reads like a cruel trick in the present context of the ‘£8 billion funding black hole by 2025’ predicted by the Local Government Association (July 2018), and report by . The Quirk Review was well received by central and local government and led to the establishment of the Asset Transfer Unit<sup>11</sup>, which saw c.1,500 CAT initiatives throughout England in the period 2007-2012 (Locality, n.d.), phenomena through which Jane Wills argues place-based publics are convened to solve local problems (2016, p. 11). Ash Amin echoes this with his critique that through the spatial logics of Third Way Localism, ‘the social has come to be redefined as community, localized, and thrown back at hard-pressed areas as both cause and solution in the area of social, political, and economic regeneration’ (2005, p. 612). The way in which community becomes both symptom and cure of local problems has been intensively exacerbated by Big Society and Austerity agendas of Conservative-led governments from 2010 onwards, in particular via the influence of the ‘Open Services White Paper’ (2011), which establishes the government’s plans to radically reform the ownership, delivery and funding of public services through the euphemistic rhetoric of ‘releasing the grip of state control and putting power into people’s hands’ (HM Government, 2013, cited by Latham, 2017, p. 23).

As countless critics of Big Society-style localism argue, this ruling agenda represents the epitome of invidious neoliberal hegemony, via a neo-communitarian co-opting of volunteers as virtuous social entrepreneurs embodying the individualistic values of self-reliance over and above those of the collective state. As Williams et al. (2014, p. 2803) point out, however, such critiques risk essentialising the blanket-reach of neoliberalism and ‘glossing over other interpretative perspectives that remain open to a politics of possibility within spaces opened out by the changing architectures of governance’. Williams et al. follow the ‘radical heterogeneity’ analytic approach of Gibson-Graham, who argue for reading through difference and contingency, rather than domination and necessity, in order to discern what alternative political and ethical

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<sup>11</sup> Initially a government-funded advice agency, which was transferred to Locality, a charitable body, in 2011.

spaces of possibility may emerge through the fissures of hegemony (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxxi; Williams, Goodwin and Cloke, 2014, p. 2803).

As Chapters Seven – Nine of this thesis demonstrate, the transfer of public library assets onto voluntary and activist groups reveals complex compromises and contradictions of public struggle which on the one hand resist the dominant governmental forces of public sector retrenchment through subversive practices of social agency, while on the other hand participate in neoliberal restructuring of the state through complicity with forced agendas of asset transfer. Through examining the cracks of possibility that emerge through these tensions, my thesis adds to scholarship on the ambivalent notion of ‘progressive localism’ (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012; Hall and McGarrol, 2013; Williams, Goodwin and Cloke, 2014; Crisp, 2015; Vacchelli, 2015) which attends to the political significance of bottom-up forms of resistance ‘occurring *in the meantime*, in amongst the activities of local governance and third-sector agencies’ (Williams, Goodwin and Cloke, 2014, p. 2799).

Political double-binds produced by the retrenchment of public services are also apparent in the practices of senior librarians and local authority decision-makers in Birmingham, who are pushed into contorted ethical positions of having to choose between quantity or quality of provision for the many or the few, but who try to attend to the social justice-driven demands of the publics they address (see Chapter Six). By exposing these tensions and quandaries, my thesis develops Newman and Clarke’s conception of the ‘intrinsically dilemmatic’ nature of sites and spaces of public action and accords with their assertion that

[w]hat matters is to make the ‘dilemmas’ visible and available for being acted upon, rather than compressing and displacing them into the difficult choices of individual actors (whether workers or users of public services) (2010, p. 184).

The next chapter illuminates my methodology of making such conundrums and practices visible.

## 2.4 Conclusion

By reading between the lines of over a century and a half of social reform, struggles and structures of feeling, this chapter has shown how the changing state of the public library is symbiotically tied to the changing state of the nation: whenever there is a shift in the form, governance and practice of democracy, so the public library shifts too. What endures throughout these shifts are the dominant strides and contradictions of capital, which as the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century historiography shows, are woven into the public library's conditions of existence. Furthermore, analyses of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century public library development reveal how the conditions of crisis formed and fused during a post-war era of affluence and optimism, highlighting how the temporality of 'progress' is always pulled in contrary directions due to the confluence of dominant, residual and emergent forms of culture and power.

What also persists through the different conjunctures of public library development, however, are currents of struggle that resist the dominant common-sense forms of governance, struggles for which public libraries provide particularly fertile spaces, given their heterogeneity of forms and functions in public life. While these spaces of possibility are presently subjected to accelerated processes of curtailment and commercialisation, this chapter has argued that it is vital that advocates of the social value of public libraries do not fall into the traps of nostalgia for a 'golden age' of the public good or uncritical notions of the public sphere, nor the gloomy resignation of 'there is no alternative' to the enduring powerful grip of (neo)liberal hegemony. What conjunctural analysis teaches us, rather, is that a 'ruthless analysis of the present' (to paraphrase Hall and Massey (2010)) in all its contradictory forms, opens the possibility for alternative ways of organising collective life: lessons that librarians, and LIS scholars, who trade in organising and analysing (infra)structures that connect knowledge with people, would do well to learn.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Articulating multi-sited research: methodological mapping**

#### **Preface: Time bridges<sup>12</sup>**

*It was summer 2010. I was cycling over Southwark Bridge from the south side to north. I was leaving a day of training at the Feminist Library and gestating the theory and practice I was learning. I carried with me over the bridge an embodied sense of knowledge collections and activist collectives fighting for survival. Questions began to form in my mind: how can the library be understood in terms of connecting collections of people, not simply collections of books? How are libraries connected through social issues of concern?*

*My traineeship at the Feminist Library was almost over and I was soon to start a paid job in a public branch library in Kensington and Chelsea – a service and space very different to the politicised, volunteer-run library that trained me. I would soon learn from my new employers that public libraries and their staff must remain politically ‘neutral’ in their standpoint, as agents of local government providing standardised, unbiased and statutory access to information, learning and culture. I would also soon learn that this national infrastructure of local library provision was facing a moment of reckoning in which its very ability to survive and grow would be at stake.*

*As the Thames curved and stretched either side of me in the evening sunlight, with the Houses of Parliament around the bend to my left and the Mayor of London’s office along to my right, I reflected on what was to come with the newly formed coalition government which had already announced its plans for a ‘Big Society’, and pondered the place of public libraries against this looming horizon. As I moved from one side of the river to the other, poised between one library pathway and another and, with a creeping sense of a change in the political weather, I embodied a moment of conjuncture and articulation.*

*Eight years later, it is Summer 2018 I am in a sense still on that bridge. I am still journeying between thought and practice in both public and counter-public or ‘other than public’ (Rex, 2018) libraries and instigating conversations and actions across these spaces. The conjuncture of austerity and municipal crisis is still profoundly immanent in the churning waters below the bridge, and the social relations between political centres of power and local agents of public resources are more fraught, frayed and fragmented than ever.*

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase ‘time bridges’ is borrowed from the title of a workshop delivered by Les Back at Goldsmiths in May 2017, which taught Lewisham school pupils about the history of black protest in Lewisham in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This becomes relevant at the beginning of Chapter Eight.

### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter explores my entry to and journeys through my research, focusing on the ways in which I relate to and engage with the use and practices of libraries as social and learning spaces, work places, services, and ideas. I introduce my two primary empirical sites: a volunteer-run community library in South-East London, New Cross Learning, and a flagship civic behemoth in central England, The Library of Birmingham. While very different sites, these libraries share the condition of having to compromise and re-configure their publicness in a time of austerity and institutional crisis. Both cases have sparked local protesting publics into action campaigning on public interests and goods at stake in these vulnerable statutory services and spaces. Read together, these cases tell compelling stories on the dialectical relations between local, regional and national public imaginaries and realities of public value. My research methodology is designed to capture the different practices and values that constitute these stories.

Given the marked difference in terms of organisational scale and type, it does not make sense to use the same distribution of methods in each site. I therefore outline the reasoning behind the qualitative methodological toolbox I use to shape the data that forms the fundament of the thesis. I explore my empirical sites through a series of locations in time, articulating their ‘detailed situatedness in the contemporary’ by inscribing them in ethnographic forms of knowledge-making (Marcus, 2005, p. 23). I do this through a strategically multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) through which I inhabit an ‘oblique’ (Røyrvik, 2013) positionality between insider and outsider as I cross multiple boundaries in the field.

In this chapter I reflexively engage with my multiple subject positions as a library user, library worker, activist, and library researcher. All these positions mirror those of many of my research participants – those people that I have interviewed, observed, and worked with during my research journey. These are diverse and include library users, current and former professional library staff, library volunteers, library activists, campaigners, journalists, civil servants and policy-makers. I consider the opportunities and challenges these border-crossing relationships and standpoints have created in my research journey and enquire into the methodological potential for

multi-sited research to disrupt the boundaries between the personal, professional and political. In this sense I am contributing to discussions on labour practices of academic research as ‘dirty work’ that consciously muddies the waters of traditional analytical, methodological and disciplinary categories of knowledge production (Skeggs, 2008; Mavin, Grandy and Simpson, 2014; Southgate and Shying, 2014; Hatton, 2017). I argue that the methodological ‘mess’ (Law, 2004; Malcolm and Zukas, 2009; Mathar, 2008) that arises from the work of traversing different organisational, professional and political cultures is both productive and performative of the phenomena under analysis. The multiple sites, positions and relations I traverse and perform are ciphers of knowledge-making through my field and serve to both trouble and enrich the common-sense ‘national picture’ of libraries in England today.

### **3.1 Entering and journeying through field**

The genesis of this project was sparked by my entry to the field of library work in 2010, via an activist and feminist route: a traineeship in ‘Radical Librarianship’ at the Feminist Library in North Lambeth, London<sup>13</sup>. The traineeship made me aware of how power relations in social life are reflected in classification structures on book shelves; how collective bodies of women can elude, shape or disrupt bodies of published knowledge; how library publics can be supported to access and use collections and resources for activist ends. This experience challenged my assumptions about the quiet and neutral nature of libraries and opened my eyes to the politics of the formation, classification and accessibility of gendered, raced and classed bodies of knowledge; and how libraries can be agents of social change and places of sanctuary and growth for their users and practitioners. The traineeship led to my first job in a public library, a small branch library serving the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in West London. Although the state-run, standardised public library was a very different space and service to the volunteer/activist-run, politicised, Feminist library, it nonetheless shared

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<sup>13</sup> Further information about the project can be read in a special edition Feminist Library Newsletter, which I co-edited and contributed to (Aizen et al., 2010).



an ethos of public empowerment through accessibility, and I noticed that the politics of knowledge and public space worked in equally interesting (albeit different) ways there.

Through observations gained in my everyday work practice, I came to think of public libraries as unparalleled public places in which all strata of society could converge, and not necessarily for the same ends, since they offer many different purposes for many different publics. Where else would I be serving – in the same public space and time – the wellbeing needs of a homeless woman one minute, and the information needs of a local aristocrat the next?<sup>14</sup> As Ema Engel-Johnson (2017) reflects,

It is quite difficult to think of a social space that is truly free of costs and social boundaries. Parks, beaches and woodlands would fit this bill in the natural outdoors. Indoors, the public library is the only readily available option.

By 2011, the politics of providing access to public space and knowledge was becoming increasingly contested as the first wave of public spending cuts ensued in the wake of the global financial crisis. The library service I worked for underwent a significant restructure and the local authority merged with two others in a cost-saving and efficiency strategy. The homework club I helped to run was discontinued, outreach services to socially excluded library members were cut, staff teams were trimmed, and Librarian and Library Assistant positions were re-named ‘Customer Service Managers’ and ‘Customer Service Assistants’, required to perform more condensed and stretched workloads.

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<sup>14</sup> Royal Borough Kensington and Chelsea is the richest local authority in the country with its residents including some of the richest people in the world. Like all London boroughs, however, it includes pockets of extreme deprivation (thrown into devastating relief with the 2017 Grenfell Fire), and publics from both ends of the class use its public libraries, as well as many in between. In the small branch library in the West of the borough where I worked, a local Lord who had an affection for the public library would regularly come in to read the Financial Times and collect inter-library loans, often sitting in close proximity to regular homeless users who share the space to read, snooze, stay warm and use the public toilet. The children who attended the daily after-school homework club I helped to run were largely from poor and migrant family backgrounds, living in local social housing. The well-attended ‘Baby Bounce’ early literacy sessions for pre-schoolers I helped to run included parents from a mix of socio-economic groups, as well as many Filipino nannies caring for the children of the wealthy.

A lot has changed in both the political field of my research and in my own personal and professional development during the past eight years. In addition to working on my PhD which began in 2011, I have been continuously employed in numerous professional library positions in academic, public, and ‘other than public’ (Rex, 2018) libraries run by artists and activists. I have also worked at a national policy level both at the ‘top down’ level with DCMS Libraries Taskforce and in ‘bottom-up’ formations with the Radical Librarians Collective<sup>15</sup> and participating in ‘save libraries’ activist demonstrations. Through my multi-positional experience as a researcher, worker, user of and campaigner for libraries, I have evolved and created a complex nexus of relationships, perspectives and ontological positions that have both enriched the conversations that have produced this thesis, as well as disrupted traditional research boundaries between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, researcher and researched.

My ongoing embeddedness in the field of my research from multiple standpoints means I have a distinctly non-neutral relation towards my research objects. My normative position is that statutory public libraries are a vital part of a healthy and culturally inclusive society, and therefore should be invested in and protected from infrastructural erosion. Like Newman (2006, p. 163), I am ‘closely engaged with the fortunes of the public sector, of those who work in it and those who benefit from it (or not) – and as such I want to argue that the publicness of public institutions and public discourse is something to be struggled over’. This does not mean, however, that I am not able to provide a balanced analysis of the range of perspectives and normative positions my diverse participants and sources contribute to this thesis. As Howard Becker argues:

Whatever side we are on, we must use our techniques impartially enough that a belief to which we are especially sympathetic could be proved untrue. We must always inspect our work carefully enough to know whether our techniques and theories are open enough to allow that possibility (1967, p. 246).

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Radical Librarians Collective aims to offer a space to challenge, to provoke, to improve and develop the communications between like-minded radicals, to galvanise our collective solidarity against the marketisation of libraries and the removal of our agency to our working worlds and beyond.’ (<https://rlc.radicallibrarianship.org/about-2/> (Accessed 08/07/2018))

My self-reflexivity and re-iterative conversations with both my research respondents and advisers have been a constant way of checking and balancing my own analytical biases and have also helped me to identify my own shifting positions throughout the research journey. In this sense I inhabit a feminist epistemology which argues that all knowledges are situated (Haraway, 1988) and that objectivity comes with examining the partiality of research (Harding, 1991).

### **3.2 Oblique relationality: ethnography at the interface**

My methodological understanding of the relation of the self to ethnographic practice is one that does not take an over-simplified view of the ethnographer as an 'ignorant outsider' who comes to know her field and herself only in the process of observing it. This, argues Amanda Coffey, denies the crucial intersubjective and experiential nature of fieldwork.

The ethnographic self actually engages in complex and delicate processes of investigation, exploration and negotiation. These are not merely professional tasks. They are also personal and social occupations, which may be lost if we revert to an over-simplified model of fieldworker as ethnographic stranger (Coffey, 1999, p. 22).

My relations to my research participants and sites do not easily fit into methodological discussions of researching 'up' or 'down', 'inside' or 'outside' in the field. Given that my research participants span a range of social and professional hierarchical positions, from local government leaders to unemployed library users, the power-relations involved in terms of potential manipulation or influence of researcher over researched, and vice versa, were shifting throughout the research.

The methodological binary between 'insider' and 'outsider' is premised on the assumption that a community, organisation or institution is made up of insiders, and the 'outsider' ethnographer can gradually gain entry or membership through an extended process of participant observation. My study is situated in a context where the way in which public services such as libraries are now being run, is one that sees a high turnover of staff through mass redundancies, temporary and outsourced human

resource contracts and endless organisational restructuring. This means being an 'insider' in terms of a workplace identity makes a decreasing amount of sense. This sense of shifting sands has emerged both in my interview data, as well as experienced first-hand in most recent employment as a librarian in a public library service. Here, my observations and interactions with colleagues told me that although some staff had been there for decades, they hardly recognised their own workplace any more, and were continually having to adjust to new roles and expectations. A more conflated identity of insider-outsider in a rapidly changing social and organisational context therefore diffuses the everyday life of the library service.

So who is a stranger or a member, an outsider or an insider, a knower or an ignoramus is all relative and much more blurred than conventional accounts might have us believe. The path between familiarity and strangeness; knowledge and ignorance; intimacy and distance is far from straightforward. Simply adopting the stance of 'stranger' or 'unknower' denies, rather than removes, the situatedness and connectedness of the fieldworker self, alongside other selves.  
(Coffey 1999, p. 22)

Locating myself in my field is a reiterative and reflexive process, as my personal, professional and political positions intersect across familiar yet also strange social ground.

Emil Røyrvik follows a multi-sited research design to his field, which I draw on for my own methodology. As an anthropologist studying the social worlds and practices that circulate in a large multinational company in Norway, in which he was also employed to work as a consultant across a number of departments, Røyrvik found himself being positioned at the boundaries of his objects of study, traversing and studying them in a non-linear and abductive way that can be understood as a 'sideways' (following Hannerz, 1998) or 'oblique' ethnographic approach, in so far as it studies neither 'inside' nor 'outside', 'up' nor 'down'. Rather, I orbit my research sites in a recursive set of relations and encounters.

This oblique ethnography is challenging and rewarding in terms of access, entries and exits, and might be considered, in some senses, as a continuous process of entries/exits, yet offers novel research opportunities (Røyrvik, 2013, p. 74).

I follow a similarly oblique approach in the traversing of boundaries in my multi-sited field work, which cuts across and dismantles the traditional ‘ethnographic trilogy’ of one researcher in one location at one time, by following multiple and cross-boundary relations with a range of actors, stakeholders and practices. Christina Garsten (2010) defines such an approach of following trans-local relations between the interfaces and connections of actors and practices as ‘ethnography at the interface’.

### 3.3 Articulating the multi-sited research field

Multi-sited ethnographic research emerged as a methodology from the late twentieth-century onwards, a development defined by George Marcus as originating in response to empirical changes in the ‘postmodern’ world, where the ‘local’ becomes entangled with the ‘global’, transforming the spatio-temporal locations of cultural production (1995, p. 97)<sup>16</sup>. Tracing the contours of cultural formation across this shifting terrain means that traditional anthropological distinctions between ‘lifeworld and system’, for example, are disrupted, and interdisciplinary arenas and new mobile objects of study unfold. The field in multi-sited ethnography involves strategic selection of more than one locales for participant observation. The ‘strategy’ here, however, is not necessarily predetermined, as the real contours of the field only emerge in the grounded practice of the research process.

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of ethnography. (Marcus, 1995, p. 105)

I have both strategically and intuitively selected a mix of qualitative methods and multiple field sites because the social worlds and histories that assemble to form each site are different, but at the same time form parts of an articulated broader picture of

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<sup>16</sup> See also Massey (1994).

how public services are in a process of having to ‘adapt or die’ in the present conjunctural crisis.

By reading together seemingly disparate sites of enquiry through a common conjuncture, I am engaging with Stuart Hall’s important heuristic of *articulation*: both an analytic and an activist tool – a way of attending to the cultural politics of social formations that apprehends both their discursive or ideological and their embodied, practiced manifestations. Hall’s use of this term capitalises on its double meaning in the English language, as he clarifies in conversation with his (American) colleague Lawrence Grossberg:

‘articulate’ means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an ‘articulated’ lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? (Hall, in Grossberg, 1996, p. 142)

My methodology is designed to engage this double valency of articulation: to both give voice to the ideational forces inscribed into my field of study (the way in which ‘public libraries’ are discursively and politically constructed, e.g. a statutory knowledge network caught in the crisis of a ‘Beeching moment’, discussed in the previous chapter), as well as to embody the intersecting, grounded social relations and practices that underpin the everyday life and struggles that occur in my empirical research sites (the connective tissues and trajectories of library users, workers, buildings and operational infrastructures). As John Clarke helpfully elucidates, this work of articulation involves ‘paying attention to what circulates, to what matters, to what connections are already being forged, to what threads are being forgotten and to what apparently natural and normal alignments of things are coming apart’ (2015, p. 284). This work of articulating forged connections and frayed threads that are woven and entangled through my research sites also fits the analytical theme that has emerged

through my data, concerning how libraries operate through shifting configurations of both human and non-human infrastructures and networks.

Drawing on Marcus' work, sociologists Nadai and Maeder (2005) argue that we need to be clearer about what constitutes an adequate field for a given research question, but at the same time acknowledge that 'the field' in multi-sited sociological studies is often by nature 'fuzzy', and that attending to this fuzziness enhances empirical analysis. The field is not, like in anthropology or early sociology, some sort of bounded place in time and space, a culture or community available for study 'over there'; nor can it be understood as a fragment of wider society mirroring its culture. Nadai and Maeder's multi-sited ethnographic research on 'the entrepreneurial self and exclusion' across a range of seemingly disparate fields and participants allows them to 'contrast the elegant findings of discourse analysis to the "dirty" practice of everyday life in organizations', as well as to examine and trace the limits of discursive concepts in everyday practices (2005, p. 24). Thus, they argue, 'multi-sited ethnography is a powerful tool for building truly empirical grounded theories' (ibid.).

My research is multi-sited not merely in terms of geographic locations and scales. The objects or protagonists of my study are not *places* as such (although I do consider 'library as place'), but rather the *practices* and *social relations* that can be observed in and around these various places, which are as temporal as they are spatial. The fuzzy "*field* proper to explore such a topic is composed of a *collection of forms of practice*, which may be *found in different, but complexly connected sites*" (Nadai and Maeder, 2005, p. 10, their emphasis). The practices and social relations in question for this thesis are those that contribute to the formation of library meaning and value through the delivery, use and discourse of public libraries as services, spaces, and concepts. What this thesis tracks across multiple sites is the cultural and political *relationality* between libraries and society via narratives and practices of making and un-making publics and value(s). The next section will introduce the primary empirical sites I have ethnographically researched to follow these phenomena. Before that, I want to briefly note that there are several other empirical research sites that are absented from the thesis, yet whose presence in my understanding of the cases that I do present is not unimportant.

As well as undertaking participant observation and interviews in libraries in Lewisham and Birmingham, I have over the course of this PhD taken my ethnographic senses on sustained and reiterative research excursions to public and counter-public libraries in Kings Cross, Croydon, Newham, and Manchester in the UK; and Delhi and Kolkata in India<sup>17</sup>. While these data have not made it in to the present thesis (mainly due to the limited spatial confines of the PhD form, but also due to strategic choices about the story I want to tell), they form an important hinterland to the thesis and have informed and enhanced my interactions with and interpretations of the primary empirical sites I do base the thesis upon. This will become clear in subsequent chapters' attention to the way in which the publicness of libraries is produced and summoned through imagined communities (Anderson, 1990) and practiced through locations in space-time that are as global and central as they are local and marginal (Hall, 1997; Massey, 1994).

### **3.4 Primary empirical sites and methods**

The sites that form the empirical core of this thesis were chosen for the depth of insight they provide into the dynamic relational meanings that underpin 'the local' and 'the central' roles that public libraries play in changing configurations of publicness and power. These sites operate at very different economies of scale and modes of production but share common conditions of crisis in the ways in which they are having to respond to austerity, municipal restructuring, changing needs and expectations of users, and mutations of institutional and architectural identity. New Cross Learning (NXL), a small community-managed library in the urban margins of an inner-city London Borough which has transformed its model of delivery under the auspices of 'localism', can be understood as a prime example of 'the local'. The Library of Birmingham (LoB), which is the largest public library in Western Europe (at the time of its opening in 2013) situated in the centre of the UK's 'second city', which is located

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix A



in the geographical centre of England, can be understood as a prime example of ‘the central’.

These understandings of ‘the local’ and ‘the central’, however, are based upon a flat conception of geographical distribution and material configuration of buildings and services, and do not take into account the social relations and geometries of power that produce and constitute their meanings in the lives of those who use, work in and fight for them. For the majority of people involved in the everyday life of NXL, this library is at the *centre* of their lives and neighbourhood, which is how the story of its changing public form has also come to play a central role in public debates about the meaning and value of libraries, through the stories that made both local and national media headlines when activists occupied the library building and took part in mass protests to save it from cuts and closure in 2010-11. LoB, on the other hand, while it is located firmly at the centre of a city, a country and a social imaginary of public library progress, it is subject to particularly *local* problems of economic production and social provision, and while the conditions of crisis it finds itself in can be attributed to national governmental and economic forces, they are also inextricably tied to the city’s local history and culture. Both sites can be read as providing different lenses on similar ‘states of imagination’ (Newman and Clarke, 2014) of how the library is a barometer of the way in which both the city and the state are changing in the present conjuncture.

Given the pertinence of the specific geographic, historical and urban cultures of these research sites to the focus of my research objects, I have chosen not to anonymise the institutional and municipal identities of these libraries. As the section on ethical considerations below elaborates, however, I have taken due care to anonymise the personal identities of most individual research participants, with some exceptions (the research ethics of which are discussed below). I will now go on to introduce the context of these sites and the research methods I used to gather data in the field, starting with NXL, where I began my field work in 2013-14, and then moving on to LoB where I completed my fieldwork in 2016. The empirical chapters that follow present my findings in the opposite order, with chapters four, five and six focusing on LoB, and chapters seven, eight and nine telling the story of NXL. This reversal of sequencing is designed to highlight both how time is not linear, and by ending where

this research journey began, the reader can find important clues as to the directions in which public libraries in a time of crisis are heading.

### New Cross Learning (NXL)

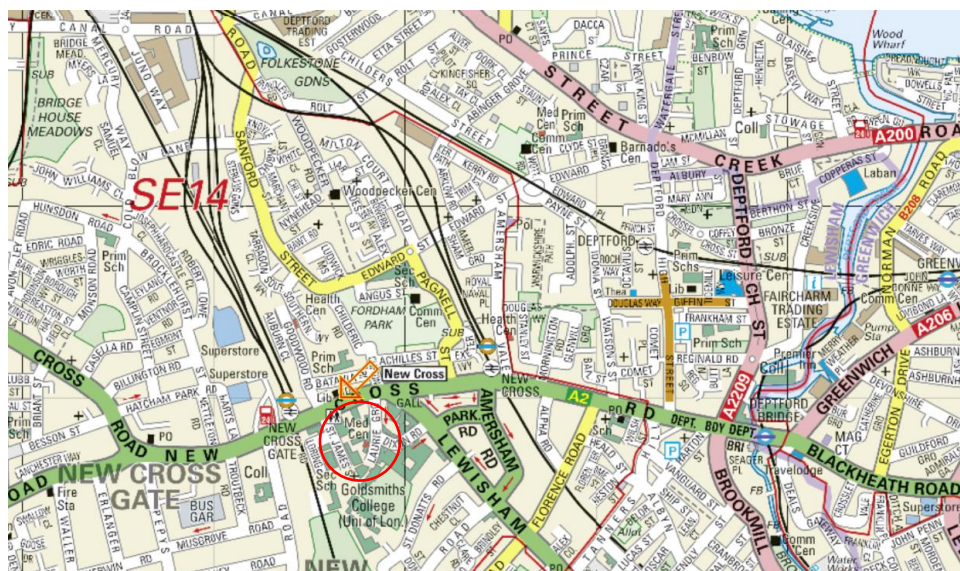


Figure 3.1: New Cross Learning location in North Lewisham, South East London  
([www.streetmap.co.uk](http://www.streetmap.co.uk))

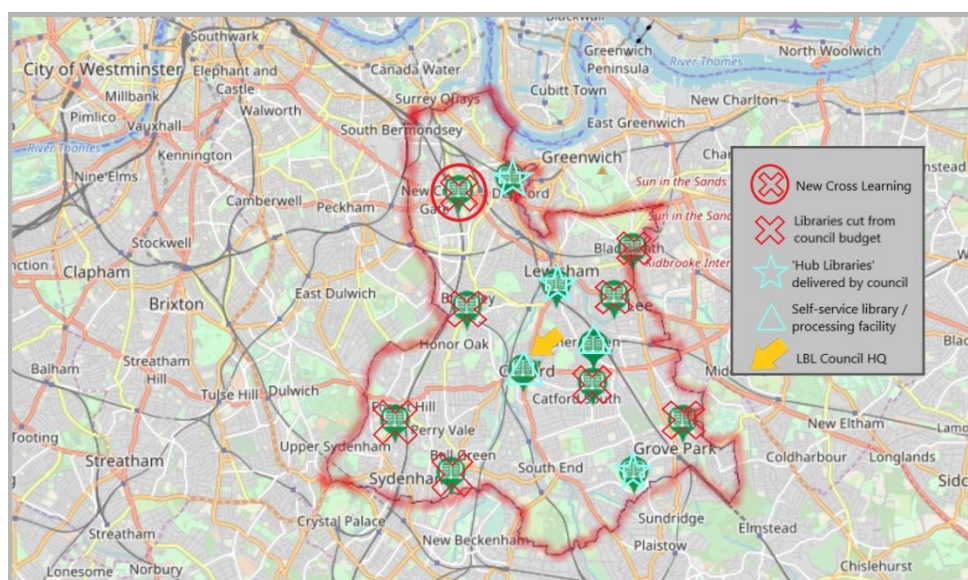


Figure 3.2: map of re-structured London Borough of Lewisham public library service (map created by author via <http://interactivemap.lewisham.gov.uk> July 2018)

NXL is a library managed and run by volunteers without public subsidy or guaranteed external funding. It is located in New Cross, a ward in the north of

Lewisham, South East London. London Borough of Lewisham (LBL) was one of the first local authorities in England to announce public library closures in response to the Coalition Government's first wave of austerity cuts in October 2010, which dictated that Lewisham must cut £88m (26%) from its overall budget by 2014. In response to vociferous and disruptive local protests against library cuts and closures, in December 2010 the Mayor of Lewisham announced a six-week deferral of the council's decision to close five of its 12 libraries while they called on local community organisations to bid to manage the sites on behalf of the local authority. This was reported in local government press as 'one of the first major councils to experiment with Big Society-style cultural services provision' (Conrad, 2010). The deliberation process resulted in an IT social enterprise company taking on the management of three of LBL's libraries, and a dementia charity taking on the fourth, while the fifth library, NXL, was not allocated to any bidders. It was reclaimed as a volunteer-run library by a group of local residents who formed themselves into a 'New Cross People's Library' committee following a series of high profile campaigns and direct-action protests carried out in conjunction with student and anarchist activists who were engaged in wider anti-capitalist struggles at the time.

I attended some of the first meetings organised by New Cross residents and local activists focused on campaigning to save the library, and took part in some local anti-cuts demonstrations, as well as the mass national student-led demonstrations in Central London against cuts to further and higher education. My combined personal, political and professional experiences in these intersecting fields and participating in local and national arguments for safeguarding these public goods and services are what informed my decision to begin my PhD on this live topic, which began at Goldsmiths in October 2011.

In 2016, following the second major wave of austerity cuts in 2015, three more of LBL's public libraries were transferred to community/volunteer management, and a fourth was scaled down to a minimal level of council service provision through reduced staffing and self-service machines. At the time of writing in Summer 2018, there are just three of the original 12 LBL public libraries fully staffed and run by the council, which not only serve the increasing needs of local users but also support the efforts of

volunteers running the community-managed libraries with council-provided book stock. Before going into my research methods at NXL, it is first helpful to situate the research site in its local governmental, economic and demographic context.

LBL was formed as a municipality under the Local Government Act 1963 with its first Local Authority elected in 1964. Its municipal motto is *Salus Populi Suprema Lex*, which can be translated as 'the welfare of the people is the highest law'. At the time of writing, Labour has held majority control of LBL since 1964, apart from a Conservative leadership between 1968-71 and no overall control between 2006-2010. During the early 1980s LBL was one of the first councils to resist the Thatcher government through refusing to set rates and at this time 'was seen as a high-spending, moderately radical' local authority which was subject to rate-capping regulation from 1985 onwards (Travers, 2015, p. 114). LBL has been governed through a directly elected (consistently Labour) Executive Mayor and Cabinet model since 2002. Before the cuts in 2010, LBL had already established a strong localism tradition, following the community empowerment policy agendas of the New Labour years. Barry Quirk, LBL CEO between 1993-2017<sup>18</sup>, authored the central government-commissioned 'Making Assets Work' review which, as outlined in the previous chapter, informed the institutionalised spread of CAT uptake across the country and paved the way for the Localism Act 2011 which embedded these frameworks in law. Quirk wrote a book titled *Re-imagining Government* in 2011 which both extols the virtues of localist, place-based governance and warns against the threats of parochialism and austerity to the value and openness of community asset-building.

Lewisham is the fifth largest borough in inner-London with a population of around 303,400 (Greater London Authority, 2017 estimate). This population is both young and ethnically diverse: 25% of Lewisham residents are under the age of 19; 47% of Lewisham residents are of Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic heritage (rising to over 76% among school children); and over 130 languages are spoken in the borough (Lewisham Strategic Partnership, 2012). The population of New Cross is 17,650. The

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<sup>18</sup> The longest period of service for any local authority CEO. In July 2017 Quirk was seconded to Royal Borough Kensington and Chelsea in the wake of the Grenfell Fire and has since taken up a permanent executive leadership post there.

ward is a very densely populated area in comparison to the rest of the borough, and is nearly twice as densely populated as London as a whole (New Cross Gate Trust, 2015). New Cross is one of the two Lewisham wards that scores most highly on multiple indices of deprivation, placing it within the 20% most deprived wards in England<sup>19</sup> (Greater London Authority, 2017). 40% of New Cross children live in poverty, compared to 34% of Lewisham as a whole and 25% for England (ONS 2013 estimates, New Cross Gate Trust, 2015). 36.1% of New Cross residents identify as Black/Black British, over double that of the ward's White/White Other population (14.6%), while 10.8% identify as Asian. On average, between 5-6,000 people visit NXL each month, the majority of whom are local residents.

The research participants I observed and interviewed at NXL are broadly representative of these economic and ethnic social groupings. This was by chance circumstance rather than by design. Most people using and volunteering NXL are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and as will become clear in Chapters Seven - Nine, this is important to consider in understanding why the library continues to exist in its present form, as the local levels of social need are woven into its conditions of organisation and use. While ethnic and economic social categories are not directly relevant to my research questions and analysis, it is important to note the demographic constituency in which I was embedded as a researcher in order to attend to the power differentials between myself and my participants. As a white, middle-class, highly-educated Lewisham resident, I occupy the more socio-economically privileged portion of the borough's demographics. This subject position was borne firmly in mind when interacting with research participants. I attended to feminist methodological concerns with these power differentials by maintaining open, active and reflexive listening and speaking stances, while paying close attention to the contexts of participants' accounts and practices (Roberts, 1981).

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<sup>19</sup> Deprivation is concentrated in New Cross and Downham, where in both wards nine out of the ten Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) are in the 20% most deprived in England. In Downham the situation is unchanged from 2010, but in New Cross relative deprivation has increased significantly as only half of LSOAs were in the 20% most deprived band in 2010. (London Data Store)

## **NXL research methods: participant observation through volunteering**

Given my already-existing connection to NXL as a library user and campaigner, I knew the lead volunteers managing the library and they were happy for me to engage with them on a research basis. At an initial meeting in July 2013 where I outlined my research aims and discussed the ways in which my work might benefit them as an organisation, it was agreed that I would begin working at NXL as a regular part-time volunteer as a way of ethnographically observing and participating in its everyday life. My period of voluntary work commenced at the beginning of September 2013 and ended at the end of July 2014. During this period I volunteered on average 12 hours per week during their daytime opening hours, with additional involvement in a range of evening and special seasonal events and activities. NXL was not short of volunteers during my 2013-14 period of field work, but Kathy and Gill were keen to have my help in delivering the library service, given my professional experience in the field as a Library and Learning Assistant in another London Borough. The majority of volunteers at NXL had never worked in a library before. My relative ease and confidence in helping to run the library meant that relationships of mutual trust and learning with other volunteers and users developed fairly quickly.

Sometimes my volunteering shifts would be relatively quiet, providing me with time and space to observe the granular detail of everyday life in the library and write reflective fieldnotes in-situ, and other days I would be so rushed off my feet, multi-tasking a panoply of tasks and competing demands and needs from both users and other volunteers that my ethnographic senses would be saturated with information overload, which posed challenges in recalling and having the energy to record my participant-observations at the end of the day. This experience speaks to Goffman's insistence that field research involves

subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation (1989, p. 125).

Although my ethnography at NXL in a formal sense was bounded within the 2013-14 academic year, my acquaintance with its space and people exceeds these temporal brackets on both sides through my sustained familiarity and involvement as a local resident, campaigner, student, and library sector professional. All these experiences and encounters have informed my analysis of this field site.

As Kayleigh Garthwaite has surveyed (2016, p. 61), while studies of the roles of volunteers in organisations exist, there is a distinct lack of literature documenting to the process of volunteering as a *method* of participant observation. Garthwaite's own ethnography of delivering food bank services as a volunteer addresses this gap and reveals how '[a]dopting the different roles of ethnographer and volunteer means it is inevitable that the boundaries between those roles would at times become blurred', yet when balanced with ethical diligence and 'a stance of curiosity and openness to the unexpected', these entangled and liminal positions can produce valuable self-reflexive insights into under-researched phenomena (Garthwaite, 2016, pp. 67–68).

In my own case, before undertaking a year as a participant-observer volunteering at a community-managed library, I shared the view of many library professionals and commentators that running public libraries through voluntary labour is a 'bad' thing through its exploitation of good will, complicity with right-wing agendas, and role undermining and de-valuing the professionalism of librarianship (Dunn, 2017; Finch, 2015; Hitchen, 2016; Onwuemezi, 2015). While I still broadly agree with this view, my understanding of what library volunteers can contribute to society in the current conjuncture, and more importantly, *how* they can do that, as well as the potential for subversive political and social change within those practices, has been greatly developed through the primary research experience I gained in the field as an ethnographer-volunteer. I am now able, therefore, to contribute to arguments about paid and unpaid labour, public and professional value in much more nuanced ways, providing different sides to a story that all too often gets reduced to limited binaries of either/or; good/bad; life/death.

## **NXL research methods: Semi-structured interviews**

Between April – July 2014, eight months-in to my 11-month immersion into NXL's working practices as an ethnographer-volunteer, I conducted 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews including five NXL library users; five NXL volunteers; and three council employees of LBL Library and Information Service. Recruiting interview respondents was made easy by the working connections I had already established in my everyday volunteering.

My first interview was with Lewis, a senior LBL officer with decision-making responsibilities for the library service. I was keen to find out his thinking and practice behind the new model of library provision through 'community-managed' services. The interview took place in a meeting room in the 'Civic Suite' wing of the council's headquarters, which is reserved for professional meetings between senior council officers and elected members. The setting was formal and felt somewhat daunting, and a bit like entering a job interview. Before the interview began, I went through security checks at reception, ascend a grand staircase, and wait by myself in the empty meeting room with sterile, neutral décor and a plastic cup of water on the otherwise bare table. This research setting bore a striking contrast to the informal, convivial and homely atmosphere I had become used to as a volunteer immersed the lively everyday practice of NXL.

Looking and listening back to the recording and transcript, it was hard for me to stick with the interview questions I had prepared, perhaps in part due to nerves and discomfort, but mainly due to the way in which Lewis's answers spiralled and stalled in disorienting directions. In my reiterative interpretation and analysis of this data, however, it became clear that some key orienting positions emerged in this first interview would go on to help articulate the refinement of my research focus as my field expanded.



I began the interview (as I would go on to do in slightly different ways with all subsequent interviews<sup>20</sup>) by sharing a bit about myself, my involvement in libraries and how I came to the research project. I concluded my brief introductory biographical narrative with a synopsis of my project, overall research question, which I framed as investigating the relation between the public and its libraries and asking how the two reinforce each other to shape what a library is for. Before I had time to ask my first interview question about Lewis's professional experience in the library sector, he replied:

Actually, I wanted to ask you – you said that your direct experience of libraries is what has given you insight into what libraries are for, and it's really interesting for me to hear what you think libraries are for.

Stating my 'insider' status as a library professional, user and researcher from the outset served as an opportunity for my interviewee to turn the research lens back on me, by almost immediately asking me my own research question of what a library is for. I was not mentally prepared for being asked this question directly. My trepidatious sense of feeling like I was entering a job interview was becoming unnervingly real.

I shared some general perspectives on the complexity of public library purpose and hedged my response around not wanting to pin down meaning until I had completed my research and analysis. After some discussion on the UNESCO/IFLA Public Libraries Manifesto (1994) and the UK Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964), Lewis asserted:

I think it's quite interesting that there is a lot of soul searching that has gone into what public libraries are for [...] but at some level, there's very little point in looking at the definition. What is interesting is to look at *the impact, the understanding, the interactions*. Those are what ultimately public libraries are for. They were first set up to change people - well not to change people, but to allow people to change themselves. That is the interesting thing. And if the mechanism that is the public library service succeeds in doing that, then we are relevant.

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<sup>20</sup> Adjusting my register and reference points slightly according to the subject position of each respondents

Lewis's emphasis on the foundational role of public libraries as enabling individual and social change, and his framing of the public library as a 'mechanism' for change, spoke directly to my interest in the double movement of change that pulls the library in incompatible directions in times of crisis. It also highlighted how change is contingent upon resources and infrastructures of service provision. Lewis soon went on to talk about the impact of austerity on the what public libraries are for, suggesting the main contemporary driver of change is financial.

Lewisham is an example of change that has happened over a long time, but there has been some cranking up of the speed of change, because of the economics everywhere. (04/14 interview)

My interview with Lewis, combined with my embodied experience in the field as a volunteer at NXL, led me to reframe my primary research question from its initial formulation of asking in the current crisis context 'what public libraries for?', to an enquiry into what public libraries do and how these 'doings' are compromised. The data I went on to gather through further participant observations and interviews in my multi-sited field increasingly illuminated the ineluctably *practice*-based nature of library publicness and value.

### **Connecting sites through temporalities and ethics of enquiry**

Following my first interview with Lewis, I re-crafted a set of interview questions and conversation prompts for subsequent respondents, which were grouped into three main areas:

- (i) participants' early experience of public libraries – recollections of when libraries became important to them either personally or professionally;
- (ii) participants' present experience: the way in which they are currently using/working in or with/campaigning for libraries. Within this discussion area respondents were encouraged to think about spatial/environmental aspects; books and learning resource collections; social connections between other users/staff/publics; programmed library activities and events; and digital/technological aspects respectively;
- (iii) how participants see the future of public libraries.

The semi-structured interview format was designed in this temporally-themed format to elicit narratives that spoke to the research project's concern with the way in which public libraries are both subject to and agents of social change, since time is the necessary dimension through which change occurs. Change does not simply happen by itself, however, which is why I took care to ground the phrasing of my open questions and prompts in a discourse of *practice*, encouraging respondents to reflect on actions and interactions that are conducted through the use, operations and work of public libraries, and the mitigating or facilitating conditions of those practices. What counts as 'past', 'present' and 'future' hinges on the temporal horizons associated with each of them. As Barbara Adam explains:

What time is, how it is conceptualized, what it means in practice, how the parameters set by nature are transcended through the ages, what changes are wrought by the quest for know-how and control, all these issues belong together. Collectively, they illuminate the wider picture and provide us with a basis from which to get a sense of the role of time in cultural existence in general and contemporary social life in particular. (Adam, 2004, p. 150)

This qualification of the social and relational nature of timescapes fits with my conjunctural analysis approach to the study of public libraries and library publics.

The temporal lines of enquiry I follow in interpreting my data are those that speak to ways in which

[d]ifferent levels of society, the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc, come together or 'fuse'. [...] A conjunctural crisis is when these 'relatively autonomous' sites which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities - are nevertheless 'convened' or condensed in the same moment. (Hall and Massey, 2010, pp. 59–60)

The temporal horizons convened through analysing my interview data emerged not only from how I framed my open questions according to past, present and future experiences and expectations, but also through the very intersection of personal and public life that underpins any human narrative. Following Stephanie Lawler, I am using the term 'narrative' here in terms of '*social products ... interpretive devices through*

which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others’, as opposed to one-way stories that ‘carry’ a set of facts about the world (2002, p. 242).

Emma Uprichard builds on Lawler’s conceptualisation of narrative by highlighting how such interpretive devices ‘can also be used to produce stories about the social world, albeit from a particular standpoint’ (2011, p. 104). This is particularly important to note for the present thesis’ concern with articulating the dialectic of social and organisational *change* that public libraries are caught up in. Uprichard continues:

individual biographies *and* the ways in which these interact with macro-level social dynamics are considered to be an important part of how the social world works. Narratives enable the exploration of how some of these interactions manifest themselves at both micro and macro levels and help therefore in understanding trajectories of change more generally. (ibid., citing Uprichard and Byrne, 2006)

I practiced Holstein and Gubrium’s (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, 1995) notion of ‘active interviewing’ to produce conversations that yielded such micro-macro narratives of library practice and experience through time, a methodology that considers both interviewer and interviewee as active co-producers or collaborators in the data elicited. In the interview encounter, meaning is not passively provided by the respondent but ‘actively and communicatively assembled’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, p. 114) and constructed in dynamic *response* to the interviewer, as well as in response to the broader context of the interview style, setting and time-space.

Following Hollway and Jefferson (2012), I understand both my own subjectivity and that of my research subjects as ‘psychosocial’, whereby both parties embody both individual and social psychic and affective responses to the intersubjective research encounter. For example, my nerves before my first interview with Lewis in its official council office setting may have been palpable in the room and elicited more formal and stalled answers from him. There was also a shifting power dynamic at play: Lewis was a senior manager in a local authority, and thus embodies a sense of ‘authority’ political diplomacy in the room. As a PhD student relatively new to researching ‘up’ in this way, it took me some time and effort in the interview to relax and steer the conversation using my own position of power. My experience of volunteering in the bottom-up context of NXL as a participant observer gave me an

advantage in my role in co-producing data through the conversation, for Lewis's perspective was limited to a top-down, structural view of the life and meaning of the library. When he spoke of 'restructuring' and 'models' of library service, I was able to probe his understanding through my own experience of the lived reality of the library space.

In 2016, when I interviewed senior council officers responsible for libraries in Birmingham, I encountered similar curiosity about my knowledge and experience of working in a volunteer-run library. These decision-makers and managers seemed keen to find answers to their own questions about how to re-define and deliver services. The 'cranking up of the speed of change' Lewis articulated had accelerated even further by this point, and, faced with impossible budget decisions that entailed cutting or closing several community libraries, the senior council officials I spoke to in Birmingham were keen to learn what alternative models they could use to help them square their own circular resourcing problems. Such questions would place me in 'uncomfortable positions' (Jones, 2013) as I attempted to boundary my insights and avoid complicity with austerity localist management decisions.

Other ethical considerations that have required sustained and reiterative attention concern the identities and disclosures of interview respondents. All participants provided informed consent for my use of their recorded interviews<sup>21</sup> and were guaranteed anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and camouflage of identity wherever possible. Some respondents who were currently or recently employed with library services in Birmingham were very concerned about their articulations of the politics being traced to them, given their precarious working conditions and livelihoods, so every effort was made to consult with these individuals on how best I could protect and conceal their identities while allowing the integrity of their contributions to be understood. The conversations I had with these respondents both during the fieldwork phase and later in the writing up phase helped me not only to shape my methodology ethically, but also helped me to understand the wider politics of the sectoral landscape my thesis speaks to.

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix B

For those respondents for whom anonymity would not be feasible due to their public profiles and/or ability to be easily traced, I have consulted with these individuals and shared the sections of the thesis that use their narratives and incorporated suggested changes that address concerns with how they are represented. The lead volunteers managing NXL, Gill and Kathy, were clear that they were happy to be named from the start and are used to talking about the politics and practices of their work in public. They also indicated to me that a lot of the time they do not get credit for the work they do, much of which becomes invisibilised or re-appropriated by dominant forms of measuring or communicating value. It was therefore agreed that they would not be anonymised and they have been consulted throughout the writing process on how their voices are represented.

Attending to feminist methodological concerns with the politics of representation and recognition (Skeggs, 2001; Mohanty, 2003; Baum, 2004) and making visible the practices of undervalued and of unpaid work practices (Hatton, 2017; Star and Strauss, 1999) therefore became very important to my research practice, which was also the case for the volunteer library activists I interviewed in Birmingham, who were clear that they wanted to be named in the research. I agree with Newman that '[t]he work of making visible is both analytical and political, and is most powerful when these come together, creating the capacity for new 'public conversations' to emerge (2012, p. 185). I consider the ethnographer's role in terms of what Marcus calls a "circumstantial activist": a position that forms through the political-ethical discourse of self-identification developed by the ethnographer through the reflexive positioning that is specific to doing multi-sited research. This is not a kind of activism that may be self-defined in a leftist or liberal political tradition of scholarly praxis, nor an activist position that sits outside of academia in a community context.

Rather, it is activism quite specific and circumstantial to the conditions of doing multi-sited research itself. It is a playing out in practice of the feminist slogan of the political as personal, but in this case it is the political as synonymous with the professional persona and, within the latter, what used to be discussed in a clinical way as the methodological. (Marcus, 1995, p. 113)

## Library of Birmingham (LoB)

I chose to conduct fieldwork at LoB after a period of interruption to my PhD programme, during which time I had followed with interest the story of the new library's development in both the national press and library sector media coverage. These stories captured my sociological imagination as they were filled with resonant articulations and images of public library symbolism and arguments for cultural value. The library's prominent public image and location made me realise that my original research plan of studying changing public library types in the Capital was too London-centric. There is no such thing as a single 'central' public library in London, but rather 32 different 'central libraries' for each London Borough, each with its own different character and municipal history. The LoB, however, was billed as a new central library not only for the city of Birmingham, but also for the region, nation and continent. This made me re-think the library's relation to the state and follow my ethnographic nose to the geographic urban centre of England.

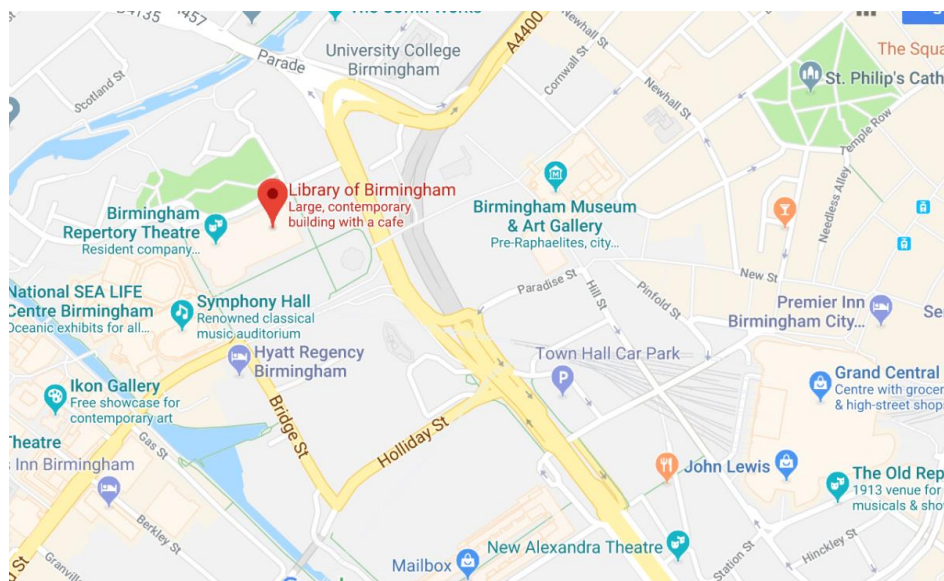


Figure 3.3: Map of Library of Birmingham location in Centenary Square (www.maps.google.com)

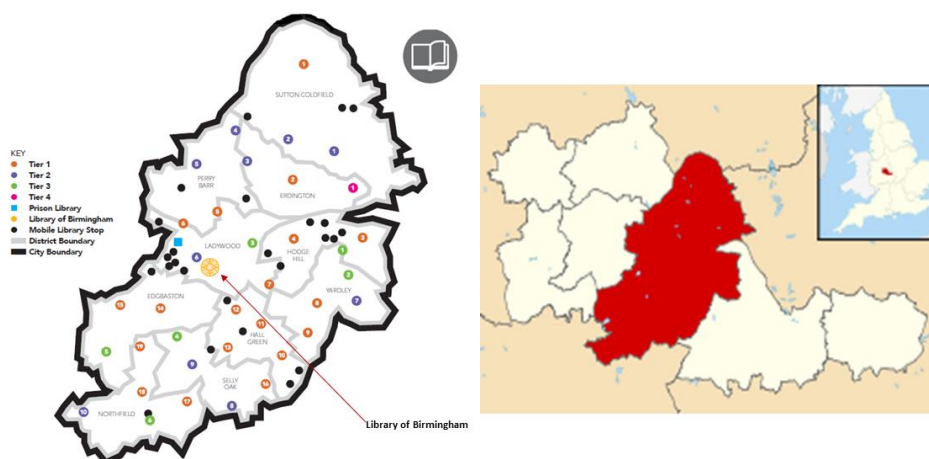


Figure 3.4: Left: map of restructured Birmingham public library service network (Birmingham City Council, 2017). Right: Birmingham shown within the West Midlands county (Wikimedia Commons).

The Library of Birmingham is the centrepiece of the network of 38 statutory public library services that serve both the city and the metropolitan borough of Birmingham, in the West Midlands. Birmingham has a resident population of over 1,124,600 million (2016 mid-year estimate, Office for National Statistics), making it the second most populous city in the UK after London; while the wider Birmingham metropolitan area is the second largest in the UK, with a population of 3.7 million. Birmingham is hence is commonly referred to as the ‘second city’ of England<sup>22</sup> (BMG Research, 2017; Elkes, 2015; Tomlinson, 2013). In similarity to Lewisham, albeit on a much bigger scale, Birmingham’s demography is both very diverse and very young, with around 42% of residents identifying as from a non-white ethnic group, and 40% of residents under the age of 25, making it the youngest city in Europe (BBC News, 2015d; C. Harris, 2017).

In its first full year of opening in 2014 LoB was the most visited free attraction in the West Midlands with 2.7 million visitors (Brown, 2015). LoB opened to the public on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2013 as a brand-new flagship library building in Centenary Square on the West side of the city centre. The £189m LoB building adjoins the refurbished Birmingham Rep theatre, both of which are situated in very close

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<sup>22</sup> closely competing with Manchester for this title, particularly for reasons of cultural value (Collin, 2013)



proximity to other landmark cultural venues including The International Convention Centre, Symphony Hall, the Town Hall and Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. LoB replaces Birmingham Central Library, which was situated in the adjacent Chamberlain Square before being demolished in 2016.

Birmingham was the fastest-growing town in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Britain and became known as ‘the city of a thousand trades’ and the ‘workshop of the world’ during the Industrial Revolution, due to its plethora of specialist trades and booming manufacturing, metal work and steam engine industries (Dick, 2005). By the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, Birmingham was famed for its self-sufficient and magisterial municipal infrastructure and its ruling elite aspired to the status of a ‘city-state’, a formation that leads historian Roger Ward to argue: ‘No provincial city has had a greater influence on the shaping of British Democracy and on the governance of the British state than Birmingham’ (2005, back cover blurb). Birmingham’s population and industry continued to rapidly expand and diversify in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, with the automobile and munitions industries dominating the economy in the first half of the century. The city was badly damaged during the war and rebuilt with migrant labour during the 1960s according to the Modernist concrete masterplan of city engineer Herbert Manzoni. The latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century saw great industrial decline and rising inequality and deprivation. By the turn of the new millennium Birmingham began reinventing itself through urban cultural regeneration plans designed to boost the visitor economy and foreign investment. The new LoB capital investment project played a key role in these plans.

Upon its opening in 2013 widespread media reports heralded the arrival of a new global breed of ‘super library’ that set to define a future template for cultural and professional excellence in the sector (BBC, 2013). In just a little over the space of a year, however, such media narratives had dramatically changed from a theme of celebration to one of commiseration, since at the end of 2014 it was announced that the ‘iconic’ and ‘world class’ library’s opening hours and staff numbers would be reduced by half. This confirmed Birmingham library campaigners’ arguments of unethical business planning for the library and led to a wave of Birmingham protests against both local and central government decisions that impacted not only LoB but also the wider

network of community libraries. The then council leader Sir Albert Bore announced the reasons for the severe reductions in service as central government-imposed austerity measures, which were causing BCC to ‘scrape away’ at the bones they had already been cut down to in previous years (Gallagher, 2014). The convoluted history of BCC’s governance and economic context, as well as the history of its library service and central buildings, will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters.

### **LoB research methods: observing, talking, walking and sensing**

LoB had been open to the public for 19 months before I undertook my ethnographic fieldwork there between March – June 2016. It was not until I inhabited the lived space of the library and the city in person, and listened to the narratives of its users, practitioners and inhabitants, that I was able to begin to unpick the tangled web of conflicting values and practices that had brought the LoB case into such significance and contestation in the media stories I had followed with interest. Making on average one day-long visit per week during Spring-Summer 2016, I spent time inside the library, wandering around and using facilities and services spread across its nine storeys, observing its library users, staff and materials circulating the space and interviewing a range of respondents.

I conducted a total of 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews comprising: three library users, four library activists/campaigners, six library professionals (a mix of current and former council staff), one service director, one political leader and one journalist. Interview durations ranged between 50 minutes and 2.5 hours and took place in the LoB café, council offices, and various cafes in different parts of the city. The interview questions and style I used fit the methods and approaches described above in the NXL case.

Access to interview respondents were gained by direct approach in the case of library users, activists and campaigners, while the professionals I engaged with were recruited primarily through one key participant, John, who was a former library service director in Birmingham as well as senior policy adviser at a national level. I had

met through my own professional network at a library conference and he became a key participant in the thesis by not only acting as a bridge in connecting me with other participants, but also in helping to shape my understanding of both the Birmingham field site and the wider landscape of the library sector through multiple interviews with him in 2016, as well as follow-up conversations in 2017-18, through which he entered into the spirit of sociological imagination by maintaining an open and reflexive dialogical relationship with me. While it is important to be cautious of the way in research can be limited by reliance on key informants (Payne and Payne, 2004), I balanced this potential bias by interviewing a range of respondents outside of John's contacts, including activists and frontline staff who were not connected to him and provided alternative perspectives on his field of expertise, as well as engaging in other ethnographic methods for gathering and interpreting data.

Another research method that emerged in the grounded practice of the fieldwork in Birmingham was walking. The 10-12-minute walk between the train station and the library became an important part of the ethnographic process. I came to realise that this walk and the urban sights, sounds and affects I absorbed as I navigated the city centre conditioned my thoughts and feelings as I entered the library space and tuned in to its rhythms and stories. In turn, walking back to the station after a busy day of gathering data in and around the library added extra layers of interpretation to my experience of the city and its ever-changing form. During this period of research, the centre of Birmingham was undergoing a dramatic physical and ideological transformation, with the demolition of LoB's predecessor, Birmingham Central Library: a monolithic modernist concrete ziggurat designed by John Madin, which was built in 1973 and opened in 1974. This demolition, along with the bulldozing of some of its surrounding buildings in an area known as 'Paradise Circus' due to the inner ring-road that circled an ancient street called Paradise Street, was happening to make way for a new commercial centre and landscaped 'public realm', branded as simply 'Paradise'.

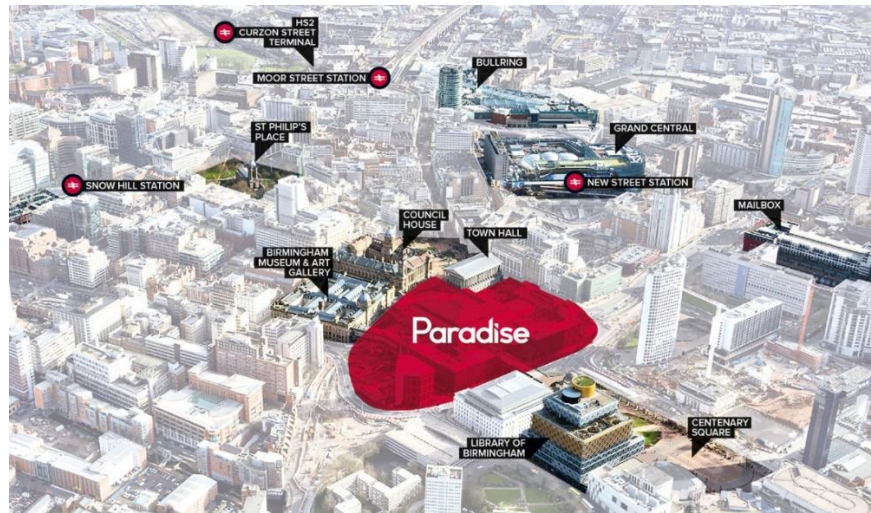


Figure 3.5: 'Paradise' urban redevelopment zone and site of the demolished Birmingham Central Library (Paradise Birmingham, n.d.)

Each time I visited, the city centre looked different and my route to the library was diverted through different channels and byways around the cordoned Paradise development area, which resembled a warzone more than it did a promised land. Navigating the death of the old library in order to reach and research forms of life in the new one made me realise that the death and life of the library is ineluctably bound up in the changing life of the city, which in turn is bound up with the machinations and rhythms of the municipal and commercial forces that shape that city's politics and publics. It also taught me about the temporality of my research as embodying a specific conjuncture in which one era of municipal materiality was being literally dis-articulated from the new and emergent forms of culture and commerce re-shaping the city.

As Bates and Rhys-Taylor put it (2017, p. 4), walking methodologies facilitate:

an ethnographic 'being there', through which we can observe issues unfolding at street-level, if only for a short while. Walking also leads to new places, over bridges that take the researcher's body beyond 'being there' to something more like 'becoming anew', offering novel perspectives and prompting questions. [...] It is an exercise, and a form of training, in sociological attentiveness, as well as letting the sociological imagination roam (Wright Mills, 1959).

I began routinely taking photographs and sound recordings of my walk to and from the library to document this process. These audio-visual data captures served as vibrant aide-memoirs when I came to begin the analysis and ethnographic writing process, enabling me to 're-insert' myself into the sensory field, as Sarah Pink (2015) puts it, enabling a kind of 'time-travel' to my sites of ethnographic encounter (Nolas and Varvantakis, 2018) for a 'more generous remembering' (Back, 2009, p. 2010). They also served as an important sensory lens that both framed and coloured the way in which I listened to my interview recordings, adding layers of interpretation to moments of narrative that describe the relation of the library to the city. While only a few of these images make it in to the following chapters, it is important to acknowledge the many layers that have shaped my embodied practices and modalities of sense-making both in the field and at my desk.

In their study of the metaphors multi-modal ethnographers use to communicate how they collect and analyse multi-modal data, including figurative practices of 'composing', 'meandering', 'plundering' and 'time travel', Sevasti-Melissa Nolas and Christos Varvantakis argue that such forms of articulation

point to a form of creativity and invention that 'folds' together categories that are typically separated: time and place, self and other, past and present, public and private. Through a process of making connections, of entangling and enmeshing, new knowledge is created. Such practices are necessarily experimental and playful, and we would argue take place at the margins, beyond the formal and the technical, and entail a change in researcher subjectivities (2018, p. 11).

My own practices of sense-making in the chapters that follow have been figuratively shaped by metaphors, images and affects I encountered in the field. An extract from my Birmingham field notes provides a key illustration.

*16<sup>th</sup> April 2016*

*I'm on the train back into London after an intensive two days of fieldwork in Birmingham. There are many thoughts and reflections I should be getting out of my head – which is buzzing and full of connections – but I can't quite bring myself to. Maybe I just want to let it buzz and percolate on its own. But how reliable is my memory?*

*So many dots have been joined up in my mind these past two days. Dots between library publics/users, library staff (expert/trained; amateur/temporary), between the struggles of library activists and the powers of government decision makers.*

*I keep thinking of the phrase that Pete used a couple of times – something about 'neural networks' – he used it to describe the knowledge that exists in the brains of archivists and library curators – a web of connective knowledge practices that enable people to access it and make further connections.*

*Today I met two women who have been lively librarians in Birmingham, impacting powerfully on people's lives in different ways, but whose knowledge is being excised from the neural network in the gulfs and chasms created by austerity and the institutional amnesia that that creates. There are so many emotional undercurrents carried in the conversations on these losses. It's my job to record this and somehow connect these fissures, but I feel overwhelmed by that task.*

The metaphors of a 'neural network' that was offered by one of my interview respondents (explored in depth in Chapter Six) helped to crystallise not only what would go on to become a core argument for the thesis, but also helped me to understand my own role in the wider cognitive and cultural webs of knowledge and meaning-making in library research and practice. From this point on, analysing my data and crafting the thesis has occurred through a practice of disentangling and re-weaving threads of meaning to articulate a picture of the mortal forces shaping public libraries, thereby making visible their vital but often hidden or excised infrastructural practices.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Within an individual's biography and within a society's history, the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history. The future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided – within the limits, to be sure, of historical possibility. But this possibility is not fixed; in our time the limits seem very broad indeed (Mills, 2000, p. 174).

This chapter has outlined some of the ways in which my own biography and those of my research participants and sites of enquiry intersect with the life of the public library in society in the contemporary conjuncture, through a methodology designed to co-

produce new knowledge on live issues of public concern. This intersection of the personal and the public within the ‘principle of historical specificity’ is what Mills understood to be at the core of the sociological imagination. In the chapters that follow, I hope such sociological imagination can help to carry the reader along the walks I take through the times and spaces of my library sites in order to build a textured ethnographic picture of the ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977b) underlying the interconnected lives, deaths and temporal dynamics of English public libraries.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Storying the library and the city: three centuries of 'thinking, feeling and building' Birmingham's centre**

We pass historically through a bewildering succession: for example, through the time when the palace became much more important than the cathedral as the public building where the meanings of the society were concentrated. But even there we are still within a traditional mode—the one big public building associated with a traditional kind of authority. As we move towards communities nearer our own, we find something very different, and an evident confusion. One of the greatest problems we encounter in thinking about remaking our own communities, is to know what the central buildings ought properly to be. (Williams, 1966, p.363)

No provincial city had a greater influence on the shaping of British democracy and on the governance of the British state than Birmingham. (Ward, 2005)

#### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the case of the Library of Birmingham (LoB), which offers a diagnostic viewfinder for reading the condition of both the municipal state and the city through the way in which the public library is both produced by and productive of civic and urban life. I argue that the state of the city, and the relation of the city to the state, can be read through the state of the library, and the relation of the library to the city. This argument builds on Raymond Williams' (1966) analysis of the social relations constituted in the siting and character of library buildings, through which the channels of culture, capital and information flow. I take up Williams' question of what gets placed and prioritised at civic and urban centres by reading how multi-temporal



structures of ‘thinking, feeling and building’ (1966, p. 364) play out in Birmingham’s central library, which has had several lives and deaths over the last century and a half. By tracing the mortality of these thought, felt and built social forms across three different conjunctures, the chapter also speaks to Gramsci’s famous statement that ‘the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (1971 [1930], pp. 275–76).

The chapter is structured as a reverse chronology, starting with the new 21<sup>st</sup>-century library and then proceeding to peel back the storied layers of the city’s changing landscape through 20<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century civic library projects. This archaeological approach reveals recursive motifs present in each time-space of urban change to show how reading the present and future state of the library and the city depends upon discerning embedded layers of how its future has been imagined in the past. Studying each conjuncture reveals different yet interrelated social imaginaries of what drives the city forward. As Daniel Koch points out in his study of the recent global metropolitan boom in statement library architecture, there is a ‘silent-but-present’ history of libraries informing expectations, values, and choices’ in the making of new ones (Koch, 2015, p.9). By tracing these residual and emergent expressions I will reveal how the ‘deep channels of the past’ are present in the current and future direction of urban and library planning in Birmingham, in relation to the city’s history of continually demolishing and erasing the material forms of that past.

The chapter shows how Birmingham’s urban centre is defined primarily through an arm and hammer approach to driving the city ‘*forward*’ (the municipal motto) through rhythmic repetitions of demolition and reinvention. It is therefore difficult to discern the social meanings embodied in its buildings and places, and to know which times and spaces they belong and relate to. This chapter also adopts a Lefebvrian approach to reading the multiple temporalities, tempos and textures of the city centre library, attending to ‘the long *history of space*, [...as] a set of relations and forms’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p.116). Both Lefebvre and Williams offer complementary analytical lenses through which to discern the patterned ground of the embodied meanings of our communal and urban centres. Williams’ conceptualisation of

‘dominant, residual and emergent culture’ as three intertwined and co-present temporal currents (Williams, 1977a), chimes with Lefebvre’s theorisation of the ‘meshwork’ (1991 [1974]) of the way in which space and time are *lived* through everyday practices and rhythmic assemblages of movement (Lefebvre, 2004). Lefebvre claims ‘it is helpful to think of architectures as ‘archi-textures’, viewing buildings and monuments contextually through the intersecting ways in which space is produced (1991, p.118). Following Lefebvre and Williams, the primary objects of my analysis in this chapter are not buildings and material infrastructures in themselves, but rather the archi-textural social relations and practices that bring these built (and demolished) forms into significance and contestation.

#### 4.1 A 21<sup>st</sup>-century library is born

On Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2013, five years after the global financial crash and three years into the UK coalition government’s austerity programme, a brand new £190m public library opened with great fanfare in the centre of England. It is the fourth central library to be built in Birmingham in 150 years. The 31,000 square-mile glass, steel and aluminium building is composed of stacked boxy forms and overlapping circular motifs with a golden rotunda at the top overlooking the city like a civic crown. The building’s design was marketed as ‘a people’s palace’, with its star architect Francine Houben claiming in her opening speech that ‘libraries are the cathedrals of the 21st Century’ (*BBC News*, 2013c).

LoB is situated on Centenary Square, a large oblong piazza named in 1989 to mark 100 years since Birmingham was granted city status. The library adjoins and shares foyer space with the refurbished Repertory Theatre and is neighboured by Symphony Hall and the International Convention Centre on one side of the square, and Baskerville House<sup>23</sup> and The Hall of Memory war memorial on the other. Upon the

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<sup>23</sup> named after typographer, printer and industrialist a John Baskerville, who was buried close by. Baskerville House previously known as The Civic Centre when it housed the Council’s Planning and Economic Development Departments, before the building was sold and converted into private commercial offices.

opening of this diverse city's new library, the then Culture Minister Ed Vaizey described the building as 'a symbol of the confidence of Europe's youngest city - a confident template for twenty-first century libraries' (*BBC News*, 2013c). As this and subsequent chapters unfold, it will become clear how Williams' warning that such 'confidence may be a barrier, in a time of rapid change, to precisely the kind of thinking, the kind of feeling, and the kind of building which is going to express the life of a growing community' rings true (1966, p. 364).

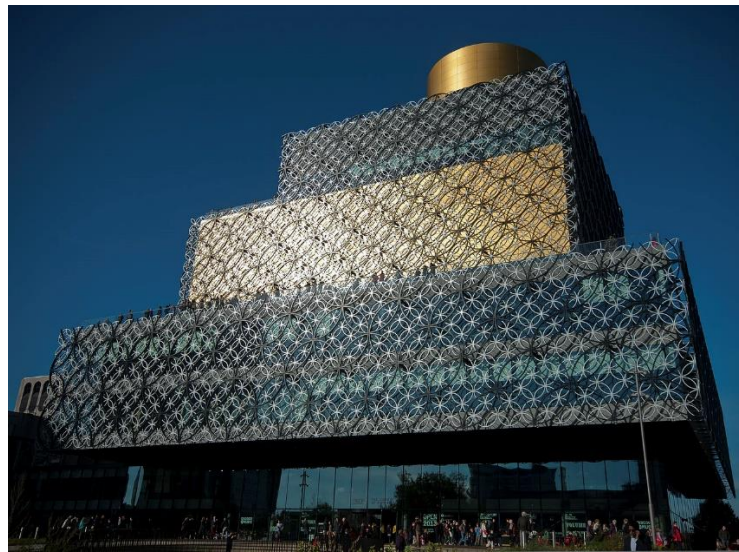


Figure 4.1 The Library of Birmingham, October 2013 (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

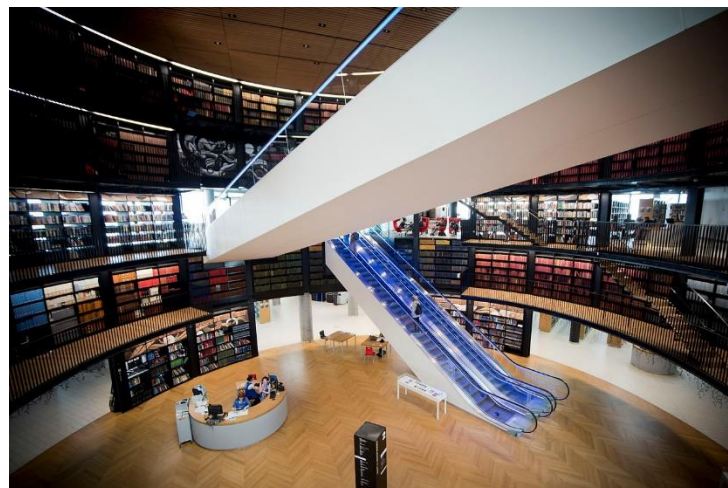


Figure 4.2 The book rotunda on Level 3 of the Library of Birmingham (Image: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 4.3 View of the city from inside Level 3 of the Library of Birmingham (Image by author)

Architectural critic Tom Dyckhoff was at the library's opening event as a presenter for a special BBC *Culture Show* TV programme to evaluate this landmark building in the city's development. In the programme's opening scene, Dyckhoff is standing among the expectant crowds and photographers amassed near the library's entrance as they wait for the opening speeches to begin. Turning to the camera, Dyckhoff's opening lines set the scene of a library poised between death and life:

Opening a grand new public library might come as something of a surprise. All around the country budgets are being cut, libraries are closing, some even say there's no place for libraries in this digital age. And yet here we are, celebrating the opening of a two hundred-million-pound building: the largest public library in Europe. So, if this is anything to go by, maybe the library isn't dead, maybe the library is being reborn. (BBC Two, 2013)

The tropes of life and death, past and present, local, national and global publics form leitmotifs throughout this thesis, and are also potent metaphors used in the speech of LoB's keynote opening speaker, Malala Yousafzai.



Figure 4.4 Malala Yousafzai (Image: BBC News, 2015a)

Standing at a podium branded with the new library's strapline 'Re-writing the Book', Yousafzai is staged as regenerative image for the library. She begins her opening speech by announcing her honour at being 'here in Birmingham, the beating heart of England, [...where] I found myself alive, seven days after I was shot' (Library of Birmingham, 2013). At the time of the opening ceremony, Yousafzai was sixteen years old and at secondary school in Birmingham. She had settled as a refugee in the city the previous year, having survived a murder attempt by a Taliban agent in her native Pakistan, who shot her in the head for campaigning for girls' and women's rights to education. As Williams argues, the social meanings encoded into cultural buildings can often be seen 'easily by a visitor from another country, [or] another generation; as we ourselves are when we look at such buildings from the past, where the meaning that is embodied in that building and its relation to others is quite clearly and openly there' (1966, pp. 362–363). Yousafzai, a 16-year-old who had recently arrived in Birmingham from a country with a very different culture<sup>24</sup>, was in this sense an apt choice of speaker to open the new LoB building in 2013, able to comment on the meanings it communicates from the viewpoint of a relative outsider and new generation.

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<sup>24</sup> Pakistan has no functioning public library system and one of the lowest literacy rates in the world (Jalaluddin Haider, 2012). Although Birmingham fares much better by global comparison, it's population has one of the lowest literacy rates in the country, with a quarter of 11-year-olds unable to read properly, and over 20% of adults classed as functionally illiterate with no formal qualifications (McKinney, 2015; Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2012).

Yousafzai's speech is built around the life-giving quality of libraries, with rhetorical flourishes such as 'pens and books are the weapons that defeat terrorism' and 'a city without a library is like a graveyard' (Library of Birmingham, 2013b). Her discourse moves from the personal subject position of being suspended between death and life as her body lay comatose in a hospital bed; to the universal life force inhering and enduring in the bodies of great literature through time; to the mortality of the city itself, thereby inviting her audience to connect their own lives with that of their city. The speech also places the site of LoB in a layered temporal frame: the dual contemporary contexts of global political conflict and local urban regeneration, as well as a historical storying of English public libraries as symbols of civic life and liberty that endure through the ages.

Yousafzai ends her speech by declaring LoB will educate future generations of citizens, as the previous libraries had done in the past. This aspiring confidence, articulated in a time of rapidly changing tides in the economic fortunes of the city, belies a hidden history and future of urban and civic transformation in which the present library is embedded. Read through Williams' terms, Yousafzai's confident rhetoric performs a form of 'thinking and feeling' the library that is 'built' by an orchestrated PR strategy, through which the city council and its commercial partners construct a symbolic imaginary of the city.

A crucial element in developing the LoB project was the symbolic weight placed on the new library in redefining the image of the city as a cultural destination that would boost the visitor economy. Then Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council (BCC) Ian Ward<sup>25</sup> spoke at the opening ceremony, taking up the baton of the city's municipal motto of moving 'forward' through urban renewal, that the new library would not only transform our understanding of what a library can do, but also transform the image of the city itself: 'with this amazing building, we have a new iconic image, redefining Birmingham as a city of learning, knowledge and for the future' (Mecanoo, 2013). Chief librarian Brian Gambles, then LoB Director, embellished this

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<sup>25</sup> Cllr Ward was promoted to Leader of BCC in September 2017 and remains so at the time of writing in June 2018.

theme of entwining the identity of the library with that of the city, announcing with pride in his opening speech: 'this is the Library of Birmingham, but it's also the library *for* Birmingham, but it's more than that, it's a library of national and indeed international significance' (ibid.).

These rhetorical statements take the library-city trope to elevate its significance to a national and global scale of civic culture. There is a streak of competitiveness in this positioning, as Birmingham has a long history of vying with Manchester for 'second city status' in the popular imagination, with the latter often winning in the cultural prominence stakes (BMG Research, 2017). This competition extends to the global market as well, as regional UK cities attempt to rival European destinations such as Barcelona, Paris and Berlin (Sassen, 2001). The marketing of the LoB project played a key role in the city's failed bid to compete for the European Capital of Culture 2008, which was won by Liverpool. Liam Kennedy calls the PR-led engineering of the city's landscape and its public perception 'imagineering', drawing on Sharon Zukin's analysis of the common cultural strategy of post-industrial cities that 'imposes a new way of seeing landscape: internationalizing it, abstracting a legible image from the service economy, connecting it to consumption rather than production' (Zukin, 1996, p.45). As this chapter demonstrates, the imagineering of Birmingham's successive central libraries is as much about fashioning timescapes as it is landscapes.

### **Polyphonic performances and rhythms of resistance**

Shortly after Yousafzai's speech and the unveiling of the commemorative plaque that opened the library in her name, the library doors opened to the public for the first time. Expectant crowds poured inside and journeyed up, down and around the spiralling rotundas via escalators and long electric-blue illuminated travellers connecting each floor<sup>26</sup>. These circulating publics were encircled by over one hundred brass instrument players, performing a sonic installation called 'Together We Breathe'.

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<sup>26</sup> Over 10,000 people visited LoB on its first day (BBC News, 2014a).





Figure 4.5: LoB first and second floor rotundas (Image: Capsule, 2013a)

The performance was created by sound artists Super Critical Mass, with the intention 'to set the tone for Europe's largest civic building' (Capsule, 2013b). Staging a noisy sound installation on LoB's first day of opening releases the building from the traditional cultural form of a library as a quiet place, signalling a new era of interactive and dynamic event space in the library, symbolised through the rhythmic metaphor of communal breathing. This sonic opening event chimes with a statement made by former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, upon the opening of the Frankfurt State Library in 1997: 'Libraries . . . provide a polyphonic sounding board for language. Here culture lives in the rhythm of the past and the beat of the present day. Here we can sense the melody of the future' (quoted in Brophy, 2007, p. 26).

Were Raymond Williams to be transported through time and space to Birmingham city centre on Tuesday 3rd September 2013 to witness the new library's opening fanfare, he may at first glance be delighted by this new flagship cultural building surrounded by other arts and cultural venues in the square, symbolising the educative societal direction he advocated. If he tuned in his attention to some more dissonant social soundings interrupting this scene, however, Williams would notice the growing shadow of commercial value threatening to overtake the priority of this centre of public learning and centre. At the same time as the sound installation played out inside the library, an arrhythmic scene unfolded outside in Centenary Square, adding foreboding tone to the day's polyphonic celebrations. A group of protesters were stationed amidst the circulating crowds, holding placards and banners denouncing



funding cuts and their impact on community libraries in the rest of the city, distributing leaflets detailing the library's large debt incurred by huge financial loans to fund the project, and gathering signatures on a petition against rumoured plans for the privatisation of the library service. At one point, a large banner stating "Keep the Library PUBLIC" was unfurled on one of the front-facing roof terraces, before the protesters were ushered out by security guards (BBC News, 2013a).



Figures 4.6: Birmingham library campaigners at the LoB opening ceremony (Images: Birmingham Libraries Campaigns, 2013)

This jarring interruption to the otherwise smoothly-orchestrated public relations event is an example of what Lefebvre calls ‘counter-spaces’ in the city: sites and practices that defend ‘the primacy of *use*’ and ‘quality’ of social space and refuses the exchange-based value of society and the dominant spatial logics of capital, which in the case of LoB encroach through the influence of the market on public debt. The campaigners’ public actions in this dissonant opening scene produce a polyrhythmic clash of contradictory positions between public and private, present and past, ownership and access. These dissenting publics strategically use public space as a site of practice to defend public space – as Tonkiss puts it, ‘urban space is both the object of political agency and its medium’ (2005, p. 63) – powerfully making visible the relations of power embedded within those spaces.

One of the campaigners present at the LoB opening protest likens the building to ‘a gilded bird cage’ – shiny and ornamental on the outside but hollow and lonely within, due to the specialist services which have been hollowed out under austerity (Jeevan, 04/16 interview). She also reflects on the Birmingham cityscape in which this proverbial cage is poised:

They just knock things down. All the time things are being knocked down. And they just keep putting up this bland rubbish or all this bling bling bling ... Commercial city. It's a commercial city rather than a city for the people’ (idem.).

The most glaring demolition taking place at the time of my conversation with Jeevan was the bulldozing of the twentieth-century Central Library in Chamberlain Square; the impact of which will be explored through another library campaigner’s narrative in section 4.2 of this chapter.

Jeevan’s analysis of the culture of Birmingham’s relation to its urban forms is redolent of the future direction of society that Williams was worried about, one that is dominated by commercial centres, ‘and in which the other things that we have to have, from libraries to hospitals, are so to say inserted into that structure’ (1966, p. 364). Library campaigners in Birmingham continued to fight this ‘insertion’, joining forces with a range of anti-austerity, anti-privatisation groups, including the National Union

of Teachers and student activist groups, who deployed subversive ‘spatial tactics’ (Certeau, 2013) to insert counter-spaces of resistance. In 2015, student activist groups collaborated with Birmingham library campaigners to stage a six-month campaign of sit-ins and occupations at LoB to protest against drastically reduced opening hours, study space and human resources (Moran, 2015).



Figure 4.7: Student occupation of LoB in 2015.

(Image source: Geoff Dexter, via McIand, 2016)

To understand the Birmingham-specific context of these protests, it is first necessary to unravel the tangled political and professional threads of circumstance and argument that brought LoB into existence.

### **From an open interface to ‘a can of worms’: Designing LoB**

‘as we increasingly came to realise, the opportunity was to use the library to redefine the city’ (Brian, 05/16 interview).

‘I have to say you really have opened up a can of worms here’ (Terry, 05/16 interview).

LoB took almost 15 years to realise, a complicated journey which was riddled with false starts, lost opportunities and redirections. At several points throughout his

interview with me, Terry Grimley, retired Arts Editor for the *Birmingham Post*, used the metaphor of a ‘can of worms’ to describe this convoluted tale. The development of a new library in millennial Birmingham’s city centre took a slippery and entangled form as a conflictual web of political and economic positions and values played out like live wires in the hands and visions the city’s power brokers and decision makers. This section explores how this development played out through the accounts of two of its strategic directors: John Dolan OBE and Brian Gambles MBE.

John was the library service director responsible for developing some of the early stages of the new library plan from 2000 under the Labour city council leadership of Albert Bore, when it was intended to be built on a different site in the Eastside area of the city, and designed by a different architect, Richard Rogers. This plan was eventually arrested when a change of city governance took effect in 2004. John left his post in early 2006 and Brian was promoted from his Head of Central Library role to Director of Learning and Culture for the council, leading on the LoB project until he retired early in January 2015. Both John and Brian’s recollections of the project’s development offer key insights into the politics and practices of re-designing public library models for the twenty-first century. Their narratives also reveal the challenges of library work at a strategic senior manager level, how professional and ethical values of librarianship come up against the corporate and economic values of local government politics and the tricky landscape navigated between the two, particularly in a time of dramatic economic shifts.

For Brian, the LoB project was about shifting the symbolic imaginary of the city’s regeneration programmes away from its obsession with *retail*, notoriously emblematised in the dominant glamour of the Selfridges flagship store, to a focus that is concentrated in spaces of *culture*.

The Selfridges building was on all Birmingham’s marketing literature for about a decade, and one of the things I said was that it’s time we moved on. And for the next ten years - indeed - if you watch BBC local news it’s always the library now. [...] so subconsciously you should be getting the message that Birmingham is about Birmingham, it’s about culture, and that’s what the library is about. (Brian, 05/16 interview)

This attempted shift in emphasis from retail to culture was also signified through the changing of the library name from Birmingham Central Library to the Library of Birmingham. The new moniker was coined by John, who explains the rationale:

I came up with the name, and we called it the Library of Birmingham for two reasons. One because it would contain the story of the city of Birmingham, secondly because it was a library for all the people of Birmingham [...] this library should be as relevant to people in Alum Rock, or Kingstanding, or Shard End, or Handsworth<sup>27</sup>, as it is to people on Broad Street<sup>28</sup>. (John, 05/16 interview)

The move here is to turn the meaning of the library's relation to the city inside-out, becoming a place that faces its people and tells their stories, as opposed the traditional model of a library as an inward-facing container that 'keeps' knowledge and information for patrons to access and consume.

Working in a context of serving a rapidly growing, youthful and intensely diverse population, John and Brian, following the global millennial trend of new flagship public library architecture, set their sights on a new outward-facing, open and organic library design that could adapt and grow with changing cultures and technologies of learning and civic participation. As Shannon Mattern summates, third wave<sup>29</sup> library design is primarily envisioned through the notion of *interface*: a term resonant of new media information technologies mediating and shaping culture, but also one that describes the library's form, function and identity as a common portal or space 'between inside and outside, between the library's civic functions and its internal program, between public and private' (Mattern, 2007b, p. 143).

Methods of professional librarianship also developed with this shift in library concept, whereby librarians were moving away from the 'gatekeeper' identity and towards the 'knowledge facilitator' role. John recalls a colleague<sup>30</sup> saying in the early 2000s that 'we're no longer the gateway, the gate is open, so our job now is to light the path' (June 2017 interview). Brian argues that this shift in practice was behind the

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<sup>27</sup> districts of the city with high concentrations of ethnic diversity and socio-economic deprivation

<sup>28</sup> a large busy commercial street just the other side of the square to LoB, famous for its nightlife.

<sup>29</sup> Classical Victorian or Carnegie-style buildings constituting the first wave, and mid-century modernist forms the second wave.

<sup>30</sup> Ned Potter

meaning of the ‘Rewriting the Book’ slogan, which started as an ‘internal message particular to staff, and it became later on to everybody that this is not just about building a building, because this is about everything is there to be challenged, the way in which we do things, the reasons why we’re here’ (Brian, 05/16 interview). The ‘book’ being re-written then, is the whole socio-cultural-technical assemblage of what a library consists of and how it is perceived and practiced by both its users and staff.

The transformation of the library into a twenty-first century *interface* was the key aspiration of John and Brian’s, but they knew that communicating this vision and achieving financial support and council backing for what would inevitably be an expensive project would require some strategic manoeuvring. Would the city’s power brokers really care about the finer points of the changing visions and practices of librarians? Or would they care more about the image and economy of the city? As Brian reflects,

...clearly one of my ambitions right the way through has been that redefining what a library is. I’m nowhere near naïve enough to believe that would have persuaded any politician to invest huge amounts of money in a new library, so that was always going to be a much more pragmatic role, and despite all the ups and down and the setbacks we had [...] it became increasingly obvious [...] that the real motivation was always that the city, no matter what political persuasion was in control, wanted the central library demolished. [...] So yeah, we needed to take the chance to reconfigure it.

This pragmatic, strategic approach to realising the new library’s future, aligning it with the council’s ambitions to regenerate its economy and public profile, granted the library managers a license to forge ahead with realising their visions of a more open and inclusive library space and service.

As John recalls, ‘the very early mentionings of a new library [in 1998] coincided with Albert Bore’s vision for Eastside, which was to expand the city centre’ (05/16 interview). Eastside is located to the east of the city centre, a post-industrial zone that the then council leader Albert Bore sought to transform into a cultural ‘learning quarter’ through funding secured from the European Regional Development Fund. Adding an iconic new library to the mix of emerging cultural and educational buildings there aligned with Bore’s plans to make Eastside a cultural destination. A LoB steering



committee was set up in the early 2000s and John and Brian set about an intensive period of research and consultation on designing a new library fit for the twenty-first century, making research trips to flagship urban library buildings around the globe to gather insight on the cutting edge of library design. A design brief for the new LoB was drawn up that emphasised the nature of the library as a multi-functional dynamic cultural interface reflecting both Birmingham's heritage and future.

John recalls interviewing around six architects and being thrilled to appoint the Richard Rogers and Graham Stirk partnership, as they were the firm who communicated most passionately about the project. The concept that most impressed itself on John's vision from Rogers was his statement during the interview that

*'we don't build iconic buildings. Buildings become iconic by virtue of the way they're used.'* ... And from then on, I kept on saying to people, *it's not what it looks like it's what it does.* (John, 05/16 interview, his emphasis, quoting Rogers)

Renowned designer of European flagship public buildings, Rogers is famous for his 'bowellist' architecture, which features material service infrastructures as part of the structure's exterior rather than interior. This style served as an ideal conceptual fit for the change in image John and Brian were aiming to achieve with the transformation of the library model into an 'inside-out' approach.

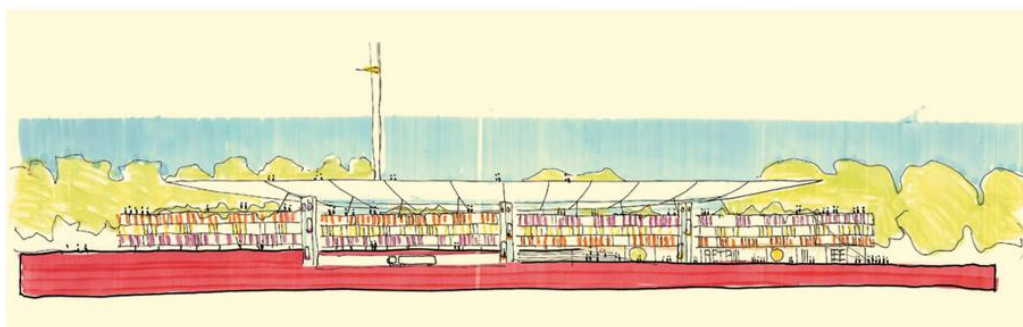
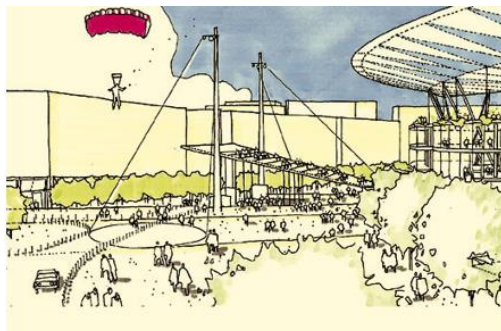


Figure 4.8 Library of Birmingham design drawings (Images: Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners +)<sup>31</sup>

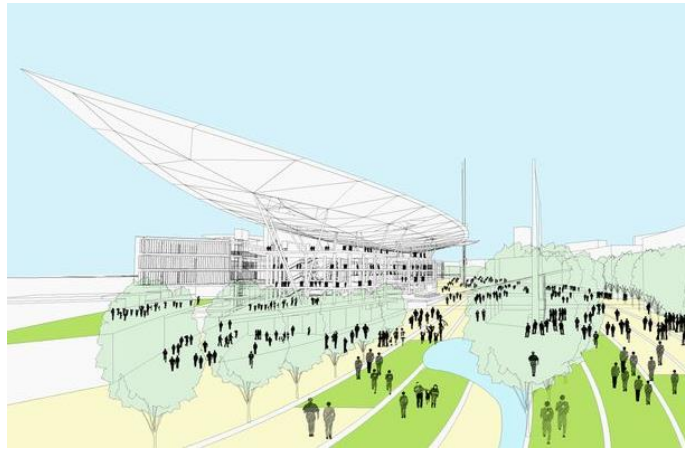


Figure 4.9: Design by Rogers and Stirk in 2002 for the new LoB at Eastside (Image: Kuczora, 2013)

In contrast to the ten-storey Mecanoo-designed library that was eventually built in the Westside of the city centre, the Rogers library design was much longer than it was tall, with just four storeys.

I was very clear that I wanted as few floors as possible, and as big floors as possible. Because I knew that in the future - not that I could foresee a crash or whatever, but because you know, money's always tight, and staff is the biggest single cost, and I said I want to be able to run it on less than a dozen staff at any one time in the day, you know on the floor. [...] I have to stress here, that this is about what kind of building it is *supposed* to be. I'm not being nostalgic, I'm not interested in nostalgia. (John, 05/16 interview)

John's recollection of the intended design for LoB reveals an economy of purpose tied to the human infrastructural practices necessary to keep the library service living and growing. The consequences of this loss of vision in the reality of how the LoB

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<sup>31</sup> John recalls these images during my interview with him, emphasising the importance of the building's material transparency and visibility, with wide expanses of glass, exposing vast rows of books and dissolving the boundaries between library and park space. The railway line that connects London and Birmingham sweeps around the curve of the elliptical design, affording maximum visibility of the library for travellers into the city. John recalls excitedly 'there was a great drawn image of the new library with someone paragliding down into the park - we used to joke, that's you John coming to work!'



materialised under a different architect and political administration, will be explored in depth in Chapter Six.

The Rogers design reached an advanced stage of the planning process and was on course for successful development for a planned opening in 2009, but in 2004 the plans came to an abrupt halt. Following the elections in May that year a change of city administration occurred and Mike Whitby (Conservative MP, Harborne) was appointed Leader of the Council.

The Iraq War happened. As a consequence, the voting patterns in the city changed. In the 2004 elections, Labour, although they retained a majority, they didn't have an overall majority, and some voters had gone to the LibDems, and also to Respect, which had emerged at that time. So the Labour Party lost its overall majority in the city, and rather quicker than the 2010 national phenomenon, the following day, the Tories and the Lib Dems announced a coalition (John, 05/16 interview).

This paradigm shift in local, national and global politics had a dramatic impact on the new library plans. Whitby was quick to distance himself from what he saw as a Labour project (around the same time Richard Rogers was made a Labour Peer) and set about reclaiming the plans to forge his own prestige project. By 2005, the Rogers Partnership was dismissed, and a new site for the library was scoped out in the Westside of the city. Rogers vowed never to work with Birmingham again (Kuczora, 2013).

As Terry puts it, Whitby 'was very much opposed to the Rogers scheme, so basically he killed it off. But it was a long and lingering death', referring to the toxic political climate in which the subsequent re-visioning of the city's cultural centre was conducted (05/16 interview). Brian highlights that the leaders of the new Tory-led coalition during this period were strident in their approach to regaining symbolic territory and authority, pointing out that

almost none of them individually had ever held political office [...] they came in thinking we're going to be completely different to that lot who have gone before us, and of course what they find is that they have all the same problems [...] So they took quite a long time to get their feet under the table and there was quite a lot of personal hostility between the political administrations. [...] They didn't trust the experts and in

the end [...] John almost had to go because he was so inextricably linked with the previous political regimes. (Brian, 05/16 interview).

Brian took over leadership of the new library project and the city-wide library and archive service after John's resignation in December 2006. In all my conversations with John the subject of his departure remains unspoken, but he did admit he found the decisions made by political leaders at that time 'very frustrating, undermining - not undermining but dismantling or undoing everything that had been done without any real rationale' (05/16 interview).

<b>1998</b>	<b>March:</b> The Highbury Initiative: Birmingham urban planning conference attended by Cllr Albert Bore, then Chair of the Economic Development Committee. First proposal to redevelop Paradise Circus 'concrete collar', expand foreign investment and expand the city centre to Eastside.
<b>1999</b>	<b>May:</b> Albert Bore elected leader of Birmingham City Council. Birmingham City Council sells Paradise Circus land (site of Birmingham Central Library) to Argent Group. Planning for a new and re-located central library begin.
<b>2002</b>	<b>May:</b> Richard Rogers Partnership wins competition to design new £100m Library of Birmingham in Eastside
<b>2003</b>	<b>February:</b> Approx. two million people march through London to protest UK military action in Iraq. <b>March:</b> Tony Blair wins House of Commons backing to send UK forces into war in Iraq, despite a major rebellion by Labour MPs. The invasion begins with a "shock and awe" campaign of aerial bombardment intended as a show of force.
<b>2004</b>	<b>May:</b> Labour loses control of Birmingham City Council after 20 years of Labour rule. Albert Bore steps down and Mike Whitby (Conservative, Harborne) becomes BCC Leader in a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition.
<b>2005</b>	<b>July:</b> Richard Rogers partnership dismissed as LoB architects and Eastside construction site abandoned.
<b>2006</b>	<b>September:</b> Centenary Square revealed as the location for the new library <b>December:</b> John Dolan resigns; Brian Gambles takes over as chief librarian and Director of Library of Birmingham
<b>2008</b>	<b>August:</b> Dutch avant-garde architects Mecanoo appointed as new LoB designers <b>September:</b> US stock market crash precipitates global financial crisis and UK enters recession. <b>November:</b> Carillion wins £188m LoB construction deal
<b>2009</b>	<b>April:</b> New Library of Birmingham design and marketing plan revealed.
<b>2009</b>	<b>November:</b> UK Culture and Tourism Minister decides not to give the old Central Library listed status.
<b>2010</b>	<b>May:</b> UK General Election: Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition take control of the country and David Cameron becomes Prime Minister. <b>October:</b> First Comprehensive Spending Review announces loss of 490,000 public sector jobs; Local Government spending cut by 27% and Communities cut by 51% over four years.
<b>2012</b>	<b>May:</b> Labour regains control of Birmingham City Council. Mike Whitby steps down and Albert Bore resumes leadership position.
<b>2012</b>	<b>December:</b> Demolition of the old Central Library agreed by the council.
<b>2013</b>	<b>June:</b> Birmingham Central Library closes to readers with more than 400,000 books transferred to new site.
<b>2013</b>	<b>September:</b> Library of Birmingham opens to the public. Neither Sir Albert Bore Lord Mike Whitby attend the opening ceremony.

Figure 4.10: Timeline of key events shaping the design and construction of the LoB

As the above narratives and timeline of LoB's realisation demonstrate, the fickle and turbulent winds of political and economic change greatly impacted the stability and design of the city's civic centre and the library's design and position in that centre. The political manoeuvring and re-territorialisation of the LoB capital project that unfolded in its 15-year development reveals how the meaning, value and fate of the library could not be disentangled from the political and economic rhythms of the city that shifted in dynamic relation to those of the nation. As political control of Birmingham City Council swung from left to right, in reaction to central and global politics, the LoB became a political football caught between these power shifts and its structural foundations – both economically and ethically – became weakened.

Critics of the new LoB plan argued that that such an expensive publicly-funded capital project should be deferred in a time of global economic recession. Library campaigner Alan Clawley reflects that despite the financial crisis, BCC ‘chose to press on, arguing that it would stimulate a faster recovery. It was an act of sheer political bravado by a leader whose term of office would not extend beyond May 2012, a whole year before the new library was scheduled to open (2015, p. 12). The fact that neither Whitby nor Bore, who spearheaded the LoB prestige projects in different ways as alternate council leaders, were present at the official LoB opening, yet a very vocal group of library campaigners were, speaks volumes about the value(s) placed at the centre of twenty-first century Birmingham. The next section will unfurl further spatio-temporal values and struggles ‘thinking, feeling and building’ Birmingham’s central library, this time in a twentieth-century context, which reveals how the ‘deep channels of the past’ hold sway over present and future fates of the library and the city.

#### **4.2 20<sup>th</sup>-century concrete dreams: from ‘a great leap forward’ to mourning the near past**

On 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015, another polyrhythmic performative event took place in the heart of Birmingham. The sounds of brass instruments returned to the city centre, but this time to the beat of quite a different tune. In Chamberlain Square, five men dressed in black struck up tubular instruments and began playing a slow, New Orleans-style bluesy riff. They start moving and lead a group of people carrying placards and pictures, bending their knees in time to the rhythm of a rain-drizzled funeral march, slowly parading around the square in a damp, carnivalesque procession. This performative public event was advertised in advance in the *Birmingham Post* in the following form:

## DEATH NOTICE

We are sorry to announce the premature death of Birmingham Central Library at the early age of 41.

Created by John Madin and his colleagues, it began life as Europe's finest municipal library in 1974 when it was opened by Harold Wilson, Leader of the Opposition, who went on to become Prime Minister for the second term later that year.

Despite growing support here and around the world, the Central Library lost the battle to survive in the face of wilful neglect by Birmingham City Council, the unbending aspirations of Argent PLC and its opponents of shared Prince Charles' visceral dislike of its uncompromising appearance.

The Friends of the Library grieve not only for the loss of great and memorable building but for the cultural reputation of the city of Birmingham. To celebrate its short life a Wake will be held in Chamberlain Square starting at 11am on Saturday 31 January 2015.

Wear warm clothes, bring a candle, food and drink.

Figure 4.11: Birmingham Central Library Death Notice (Clawley, 2015a)



Figure 4.12: Funeral March for Birmingham Central Library (Image: YouTube, Piffany, 2015)

The wake's performers and participants began their march against a backdrop of the ground floor of the old Central Library, which had been transformed into a showcase area for the commercial redevelopment of Paradise Circus, with corporate logos heading large scale images that mapped out the reconceived space and architectural mock-ups of the proposed commercial buildings to take the place of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century library. In front of these images was an alternative exhibition area paying tribute to the old library set up by the organisers of the wake, the Friends of Central Library committee, including a painting of the library situated within a giant hour glass, to signify its time having run out.

In 1974, Labour government minister Harold Wilson M.P. opened Birmingham Central Library, declaring the occasion '*a great leap forward ... an act of faith in meeting the needs and creating the demand for the future*' (quoted in Clawley, 2015b, p. 18). As seen on the plaque pictured below, the municipal motto of Birmingham is 'Forward', coined when the city was incorporated in 1889. An image of a hammer held aloft a turreted building tops the municipal coat of arms, symbolising the city's proclivity for incessant rhythms of demolition and construction in the name of progress.



Figure 4.13: 'Harold Wilson and Birmingham Central Library black plaque', 1974.

(Images: Open Plaques)





Figure 4.14: Birmingham Central Library, Chamberlain Square, circa 1974.

(Image: Brutalism Online)

The new Central Library, a gargantuan, Brutalist, inverted concrete pyramid, ‘was the first library in Western Europe to be designed as a complete cultural centre including exhibition areas, lecture hall, children’s and music departments under one roof’ (Foster, 2005, p.77). A RIBA guide includes an image of Madin’s Central Library with the caption: ‘If Birmingham has a heart then this is it. The library, with roots in the Boston Civic Centre and Le Corbusier’s La Tourette, is a fine example of modern civic architecture’ (Clawley, 2015b, p. 23). The building divided opinion however, with Prince Charles famously likening it to ‘a place where books are incinerated not kept’. The library was the centrepiece of a larger masterplan for the civic centre planned for the next several decades, which however did not come to fruition. Soon after the Central Library opened the oil price shock hit the British economy, and adequate funds were never released to improve the building in its 40-year lifespan.

The brave new Paradise turned out to be only a pale shadow of what its designers intended. Beached by the 1970s oil crisis, the complex remained half-finished, the water features never switched on, high-level walkways arrested in mid-air, doomed to remain forever unconnected to parts of the complex which would never be built. (Grimley, 2002)

While Madin's library was a radically progressive design for its era, it nonetheless conformed to a traditional model of a storehouse of books with a functional, gatekeeper approach to keeping and distributing knowledge. Its rigid concrete structure and internal fixtures offered very little flexibility for re-design. By the early 2000s, the use and operation of the building were also hampered by costly infrastructural problems, including increasingly broken-down escalators, inaccessible archives, poor health and safety working conditions for staff, and decades of wet weather that had permeated the cheap concrete-composite cladding (used in place of the more durable and refined but expensive Portland stone or travertine marble stipulated by Madin) and corroded its supporting metal rods, leading chunks of concrete to cascade onto the square below. As John describes,

the building was becoming clapped out, it was raining in it was leaking out it was falling to bits - I had to put a net around it. I had to go and beg for the money and it cost £394,000 to do that, and then it would have to be inspected by abseiling experts every six months (05/16 interview).

He also recalls a 'crisis moment' in the mid-2000s when a lump of concrete 'as big as a doorstep' fell from the library edifice above the main entrance and landed a foot away from a group of people standing next to the entrance. At this point the library was seeing over 5000 visitors a day (the most-visited public library in the UK) and the threats and compromises facing these library users and the staff facilitating that use, as well as the cost of repairing these infrastructural problems, were a key element in the argument to build a new central library.

A strident campaign to oppose the closure of the Madin building and construction of a new central library was led by the Friends of Birmingham Central Library (FBCL) group, who fought to attain listed building status to protect the heritage value of the modernist cultural centre. Alan Clawley, trained architect and secretary of FBCL, contested the council's claim that the library had 'concrete cancer', using Freedom of Information Request data that revealed BCC had no supporting evidence for this diagnosis (Birmingham Post, 2009). The campaigners' counter claims suggested that the real sickness was rooted a council that valued commercial urban growth and above the architectural heritage at Birmingham's centre (Clawley, 2015b).



The 2015 death march and funeral wake for the Central Library is a metonymic performance of this fatal illness: a macabre manifestation of an arrhythmic social formation in the development of Birmingham's library, city and state.

Campaigners' attempts to achieve Grade II heritage listing for the building were overturned when in 2009 Culture Minister Margaret Hodge declared that it wasn't 'really of sufficient architectural or historic interest' to be saved from demolition (BBC News, 2009). Despite this setback, campaigners persisted in lobbying both local and national government to save the building, receiving high-profile backing from English Heritage, the Twentieth Century Society, the World Monuments Fund, and writers Jonathan Meades, Catherine O'Flynn, Jonathan Glancey and Owen Hatherley. Arguments were made to put the building to alternative cultural use, such as an arts centre or museum. There was a strong hope that campaigners could re-apply for listed status and save the building, based on the five-year Certificate of Immunity from Listing running out in 2015. However, the City Council maintained that 'the old library's demolition was a "done deal" and internal demolition was already under way' (BBC News, 2015c). Grade II listings can be ignored on the grounds of economic or social benefit of redevelopment, which is what enabled Council spokesman Simon Houlby to argue that 'even if the Central Library is listed, we'll still knock it down. Listing doesn't look at suitability for use. It's just more bureaucratic process to go through' (The Telegraph, 2015).

During his mid-century reign of transforming Birmingham into a Ballardesque metropolis of motorised highways and subways, bulldozing historical buildings that stood in their way, Birmingham's chief City Engineer and Surveyor Herbert Manzoni brashly declared:

I have never been very certain of the value of tangible links with the past. They are often more sentimental than valuable . . . As to Birmingham's buildings, there is little of real worth in our architecture. Its replacement should be an improvement, provided we keep a few monuments as museum pieces to past ages . . . As for future generations, I think they will be better occupied in applying their thoughts and energies to forging ahead, rather than looking backward.  
(cited in Foster, 2005, p.197)

One of the buildings demolished to make way for Manzoni's Inner Ring Road that cut through Birmingham's civic centre, was the Victorian central library built in 1879. Given Manzoni's attitude to devaluing the past, it is perhaps not surprising that cultural demolition and re-invention repeats itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with the Modernist library now removed without a trace, replaced by centres of commerce.

Phil Jones and James Evans highlight that in the widespread trend of urban regeneration projects to rapidly sweep away huge segments of a city's industrial or unfashionable past through a 'tabula rasa' approach to demolition and rebuilding, 'it is not only the material landscapes which are being transformed but also, often quite explicitly, their social and cultural associations' (2012, p. 2316). What becomes erased is not only a set of buildings, but also a *sense of place*, a sense that Jones and Evans conceptualise 'as an embodied experience built on affective connections between people and spaces', which can be recovered through a process of 'rescue geography' (ibid.). The funeral wake participants were mourning not only the concrete structures of the building, but more significantly the sense of place that the Madin library and cultural complex engendered in the centre of Birmingham. Such an affective relationship to the temporality of a practised place can be understood through Williams' questioning of 'the kind of thinking, the kind of feeling, and the kind of building which is going to express the life of a growing community, coming into existence' (1966, p. 364).

In a later segment of the BBC Culture Show documentary on the LoB cited at the start of this chapter, presenter Tom Dyckhoff interviews Birmingham artist Stuart Whipps, who was commissioned to photograph elements of the Madin library before it was demolished. Dyckhoff asks him whether he will shed a tear when this Brutalist icon is gone.

Whipps: I will shed a tear. I think that regardless of my attachment to how it looks, and I do think it looks great, it would be much nicer if we had these things co-existing, so you could tell that these things happened and these decisions took place and that there's a building that is an embodiment of that.

Dyckhoff: Well Birmingham's got a history of being sometimes quite hasty, I mean it demolishes things quite wilfully - it has throughout its history hasn't it? ... It's a bit like a Stalinist approach to history isn't it - kind of airbrushing out the mistakes from the past...

Whipps: Yeah, the great thing when you look at those old photographs from Communist Russia though, is that you can always see that there is something missing and they never quite feel right, and I think it's the same in a city actually. If you just demolish what you consider to be the ills of the past, you always know that there's something not quite right.

(BBC Two, 2013)

It remains to be seen whether the uncanny residue that Whipps alludes to will materialise or etherealise itself after Birmingham's £700 million *Paradise* redevelopment and imaginering project is completed. The reference to Soviet revisionism is worth lingering on for a moment, however, through the lens of Alan's interpretation of the LoB project.

My conclusion, having spent thirteen years thinking about it, is that demolishing this library and building a new one was very much a New Labour kind of idea about – almost revisionism sort of thing – this concrete monstrosity represented the old socialist Labour almost – in fact people from the Civic Society did say it's like something from the Soviet Union. It was opened by Harold Wilson in 1974 – that didn't help to save it, in fact it probably did the opposite – almost like, *don't mention Harold Wilson if you want Labour to support your campaign!* When it was built, it was symbolic. I mean Harold-white-heat-of-technology'-Wilson – it was all about the brand new: a clean sweep – it replaced what I suppose a lot of people thought was a dingy old Victorian library which represented the past. And that's Birmingham all over. (Alan, 05/16 interview)

Alan's striking analysis suggests that rather than Birmingham embodying a 'forward' character, Birmingham's municipal momentum is in fact cyclical in nature, as each 'new' era of urban change repeats the pattern of erasing the previous era's architectural and political signature on the city. As the dominant political forces of the era oscillate between left to right like a pendulum, the weight placed the symbolic value of the city's central urban forms swings like a wrecking ball between civic pasts and futures.

Although many of FBCL's arguments for saving the Central Library were based on its architectural heritage value, Alan's starting point for saving the building was not based in architecture but in democratic public access to knowledge. Birmingham Central Library opened in the decade when Alan's children, who were home-schooled, were born and was where they learned to read: 'it was *their* library' (05/16 interview). Alan's campaign was rooted in stopping the socialist spirit embedded in the concrete walls of the central library being taken away from his children and grandchildren's generations. He did not expect his activist struggle to last over 13 years and to end in the library's demolition.

Recently, with the demolition in progress, we asked whether we would like to keep one of the concrete panels from the outside, if we could save it, but we said no thanks, we'd rather keep them all on the building! It's like they wanted to keep this concrete panel and put it somewhere, you know like in the film *2001* there's this obelisk just standing there, so somewhere in the middle of the square there would be this big panel of concrete saying this used to belong to the library which we demolished in 2016. We said no, it's not appropriate. So that's what we were up against, in a way, in trying to save this building. (Alan, 05/16 interview)

Alan's likening of the council's proposed concrete panel in the square to the black monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* suggests on the one hand, the idea of a memorialised relic signifying cataclysmic change in social and urban development, reinforcing the city's motto of *Forward*; while on the other hand it can be read as an image of a void, signifying not progressive change, but regressive loss. By rejecting the council's token gesture, Alan and his fellow campaigners refused to trade the momentum of their cause for a *memento mori*.

The sedimented residual layers of destruction and creation in the storying of Birmingham's central public library reach down to its 19<sup>th</sup>-century roots, which the final section of this chapter now excavates. It is in these foundations that can be traced the dominant rhythms that shape the culture of the city and the library.

### 4.3 19<sup>th</sup>-century library foundations and ghosts: The Civic Gospel

The opening of Birmingham's first publicly-funded library for all in 1865 was a landmark moment in defining a new age of The Civic Gospel. This was a movement founded by Nonconformist preacher George Dawson, which combined liberal theology with a philosophy of municipal activism and civic improvement, preaching to the city's leading businessmen to improve public life for all.

In its mature form its position was essentially that a city was a closer and more significant form of community than a nation or a religion, and thus it was a municipality, more than parliament or the church, that had most to contribute to the health, welfare and fairness of urban society (Briggs, 1963, p.196).

Historian Asa Briggs cites how Dawson 'compared the idea of a 'new corporation, providing numerous public libraries and education for all its citizens', with the old idea of a church, and the public library movement was in his view 'the largest and widest Church ever established' (Briggs, 1963, quoting Dawson, p.197). Birmingham Central Library was the first library for the city established through the powers of the 1850 Public Libraries Act. Situated to the west of the Town Hall in the city centre, the classical-style building, designed by city architects John Henry Chamberlain, William Martin, and Frederick Martin, included reading rooms, a newsroom and a museum and art gallery. The Lending Library was opened on 6 September 1865 and the Reference Library followed on 26 October 1866.



Figure 4.15 Opening of the first Birmingham Central Free Library, 1865 (Image source: Birmingham Heritage and Archives, 1865)

In his inaugural speech, Dawson declared at the opening ceremony:

Here in this room are gathered together the great diaries of the human race, the record of its thoughts, its struggles, its doings. [...] One of the greatest and happiest things about this Corporation Library (is that) supported as it is by rates and administered by the Corporation, it is the expression of a conviction on your part that a town exists for your moral and intellectual purposes. [...] There are few places that I would rather haunt after my death than this room (Dawson, 1865, quoted in Reekes, 2015).

The room that Dawson imagined haunting after his death expired itself only 13 years later, when the Birmingham Free Library was razed to the ground on Saturday 11th January 1879, through a raging fire caused by a fatal combination of wood shavings and gas-lighting.

The fire could not be extinguished but was prevented from spreading to other buildings nearby. Eventually the ceiling and floor collapsed, and no more could be done. Many people helped to bring out books from the fire. [...] Most of the Lending Library books were saved, but very few of the Reference Library's 50,000 books survived the fire, and water from the Fire Brigades' hosepipes. The books burnt so fiercely

that pages flew up in the air and were dispersed by the wind. Some pages were later returned to the library, some were kept in scrapbooks. (Birmingham Archives and Heritage, 2016)

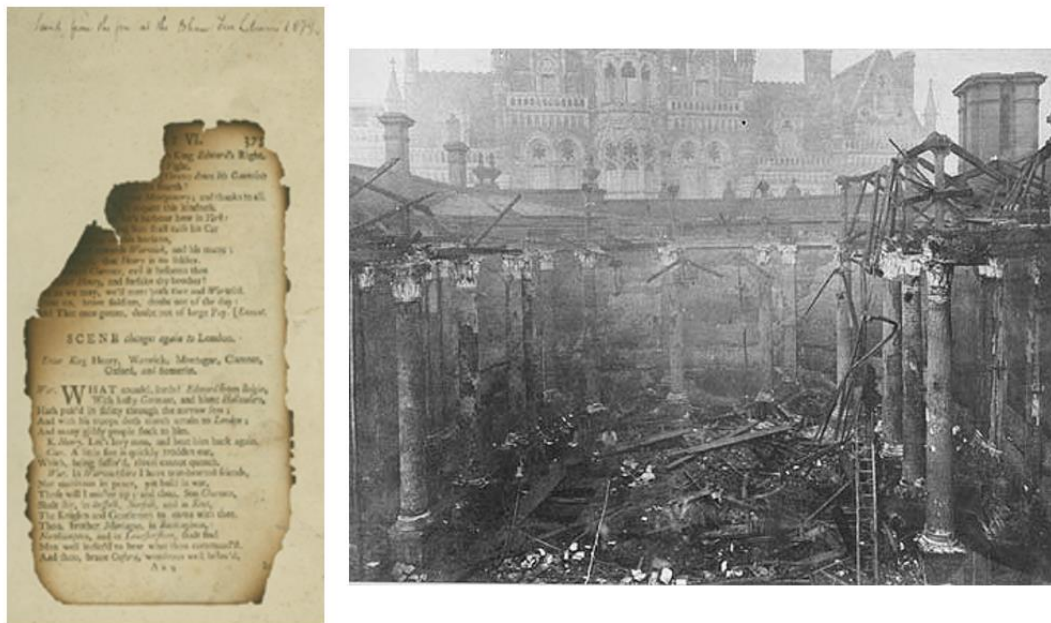


Figure 4.16 Charred remains of the original Birmingham Central Free Library, 1879

(Images: Birmingham Archives and Heritage, 2016)

The next day the *Birmingham Post* described loss: ‘The whole town suffers under a sense of severe, personal sorrow; the calamity is one that pervades every household, and that will reach as far as Birmingham men are to be found all the world over’ (ibid.). Plans for a replacement library on the same site were approved as early as 1879. The new building, which included the original interior pillars and some of the façade that had survived from the fire, was designed by J. H. Chamberlain in a Lombardic Renaissance style with a tall clerestoried Reading Room. It opened on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1882 at a cost of £54,975 (Foster, 2005, p.77). This library building survived for almost another century, before it outgrew its collection (it was designed for 30,000 books and by the 1970s stored 750,000) and was bulldozed in 1973 because it stood in the way of Manzoni and Madin’s concrete re-development of the city centre.



Figure 4.17: The Second Birmingham Central Library (1879-1973) (Images: Kovach, 2014)



Figure 4.18: Partially demolished old Birmingham Central Library (1882) adjacent to the new one (1973) (Images: Birmingham Archives and Heritage, 2016)

Joseph Chamberlain, who made his fortune in Birmingham's industrial screw trade, was Mayor of Birmingham between 1873-1876. As Mayor he municipalised the city's gas and water supplies, cleared slums and rebuilt the city centre with housing, parks, libraries, museums and recreational facilities for all, funded by borrowing against a projected rise in land values and taxes (Bounds, 2016). By the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Birmingham had established an unprecedented reputation for radical municipal progress, leading Julian Ralph to declare it 'the best governed city in the world' in Harper's Magazine in (1890). Another journalist and politician of the time eulogised:



Municipal reformers look to Birmingham as the eyes of the faithful are turned to Mecca . . . Birmingham was the first to initiate, in a broad and comprehensive spirit, the new regime of municipal socialism on which our hopes of improvement in the condition of large towns now so greatly depend (Dolman, 1895, pp.1–2).

As Matthew Key points out, however, while the notion of the Civic Gospel may have had noble origins, it ‘swiftly became a populist rhetorical device used to legitimise local entrepreneurialism and the hegemony of business interests (2017, p. 163).

Furthermore, While ‘Radical Joe’ Chamberlain is often celebrated today as the ‘Godfather of Modern Birmingham’ and ‘municipal socialism’ (Cannon, 2014), this legacy obscures the deep channels of his involvement in capitalist imperialism.

After his Mayoralty, Chamberlain left the Conservative-Liberal governing of Birmingham’s ‘city-state’ to his sons Austen and Neville Chamberlain, while he went on administering the global power of the nation-state by extending the reach of the British Empire as Colonial Secretary between 1895 – 1903 (Ward, 2005). As his biographer Professor Peter Marsh argues, Chamberlain’s trademark

was empire building. He had worked to build up the screws business, he had built up Birmingham and he used the same ethos for his work with the colonies. He raised the Empire to the height of its power at the beginning of the 20th Century (cited in *BBC News*, 2014d).

As Colonial Secretary Chamberlain also presided over the bloody Anglo-Boer War (nicknamed ‘Joe’s War’), in which over 20,000 black Africans are estimated to have been killed in British combat and ‘concentration camps’ (Dickens, 2017). This history hidden in the centre of Birmingham’s civic heritage has been critically highlighted in a recent exhibition: ‘The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire’ (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2018).

Chamberlain’s influence on politics still powerfully reverberates in the corridors of national governmental power today. As Cawood (2014) argues, Chamberlain’s political style in Parliament pioneered

a professionalised, distant political class, playing “the game of politics” in their Westminster bubble [...] some have blamed Margaret Thatcher for all this, but it is Joseph Chamberlain who should be seen as the

progenitor of this very mixed blessing for the British Parliamentary system.

The powerful imagined community of the nation state (Anderson, 1990) pioneered by Chamberlain has also held a firm grip on the Conservative leaders of present government, with Prime Minister Theresa May lauding him as her political hero, and some commentators attributing his influence on her Brexit plan (Ahmed, 2016; Kenny and Pearce, 2017).

In 2006, David Cameron visited Birmingham to give a speech to the Local Government Association, in which he drew cultural capital from the Liberal imagineering of Dawson and Chamberlain's civic legacies:

I want to talk about the importance of local democracy and the potential of local government. About what Joseph Chamberlain, in nineteenth century Birmingham, called the 'municipal gospel', the good news of reform, improvement and rebuilding. [...] But Chamberlain had a bolder vision for Birmingham. The centre of Birmingham became an economic powerhouse, and a place of beautiful urban design. I want us to recover his spirit. The spirit of Civic Pride. (Cameron 2006, quoted in Green, 2011, p. 164).

In 2010, Cameron returned to Birmingham to speak at a TV broadcast live from the Great Hall at Birmingham University, for the third and final leadership contest for the General Election, a contest fought around national anxieties about immigration and inequality. Elements of Cameron's agenda for a 'Big Society' were also introduced in this speech.

Andy Green troubles Cameron's appropriation of the Civic Gospel by reading it through lesser known archival documents that reveal the pernicious imperial racism that lay behind this historical tradition.

Cameron's comments sought to perpetuate and remap mythologised accounts of local nineteenth century reform ideologies that linked social improvements in public health, schools and education, the condition of the urban landscape and the availability of art and culture with the new growth of municipal identity. [...] Yet] the leaders of Birmingham's early civic movement were themselves surrounded by white anxieties about local and national identity. What we might call the original 'Big Society' agenda of Dawson's vision of municipal reform was itself

constructed from an ideological morass of principles and prejudices deeply embedded within British colonial history. (2011, pp.163–164)

Green reveals how the image of rational civic order and social progress 19<sup>th</sup>-century was not as linear or smooth as many nostalgic politicians would conveniently have it; rather it was a fraught site of publicness riven with social and cultural struggles between the city's diverse immigrants, abolitionists and the white hegemonic elite. As Newman puts it,

[t]he suppression of the experience of colonialism highlights the difficulties inherent in any notion of publicness or the public domain that is defined with, and delimited by, presumptions of a common people sharing a common national identity (2007, pp. 889-90).

The sedimented history of imperial power in Birmingham's buildings, books and bastions of Liberalism is relevant to understanding the struggles of the present story of the library and the city.

Today, struggles between activists fighting to save public libraries and other public goods from neoliberal dismantling clash and jar against the drives of Birmingham's civic, corporate and commercial coalitions of power at both local and national levels. The campaigners present at the opening ceremony for LoB discovered and leaked an advert made by BCC inviting private companies to bid for the running of the LoB management contract, and united with other activist groups to lobby to reverse this decision. This public pressure led to the council suspending their outsourcing process, but the campaigners continued to fight, extending their campaign to expose the bias of the subsequently created strategic management and funding body, The Library of Birmingham Development Trust. In an open letter to the Leader of the Council the Campaigners argued:

The selection of trustees with such a narrow range of business interests and ethnic backgrounds cannot take forward an inclusive vision of the Library of Birmingham as a cultural resource for all of the citizens of Birmingham. The future development of our Library of Birmingham should be citizen led not handed over to millionaires. It is appalling that there is no representation on the Development Board from Black and Minority ethnic communities. Their conception of the 'Great of the Good' of Birmingham is positively Victorian. (Friends of the Library of Birmingham, 2013)

These recursive public and counterpublic processes of city, library and state-formation are potent examples of what Williams (1966) called ‘the deep channels of the past’ that both create and obscure the structures of ‘thinking, feeling and building’ that construct the centres of the city.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The rhythm that is proper to capital is the rhythm of producing (everything: things, men, people, etc.) and destroying (through wars, through *progress*, through inventions and brutal interventions, through speculation, etc.). It is often said: ‘Yes, it was like this or that in the old days; then the world changed ...’. This isn’t wrong, but it does not go beneath the surface (Lefebvre, 2004, p.65).

While this chapter has attempted to unfold the story of Birmingham’s central libraries in a reverse chronology through three centuries, what has become apparent is that history cannot be neatly segmented into such divisions, as each era overlaps the other in complex tessellations that produce significant institutional and urban tensions. The ‘conceived spaces’ (Lefebvre 1991) of both the library and the city have throughout the centuries been orchestrated by Birmingham’s governors, planners, architects, philanthropists, engineers and imagineers against a range of regional, national and global conjunctures of social change. Each new era attempts to break away from the old, while still retaining a curious residual refrain of ‘creative destruction’. This characterisation of Birmingham’s identity is used by Liam Kennedy who argues that the city’s ‘creative destruction is a compelling urban drama in which the dialectics of erasure and renewal are forever being played out’ (2004, p.2).

Forty years after the 1970s financial crisis that stalled Madin’s Modernist library development and contributed to its downfall, the refrain of rise and fall continues to hold sway into the twenty-first century, as the cataclysmic events of the UK-Iraq invasion in 2004, and the 2008 global financial crash and subsequent national recession and austerity measures, drastically changed fortunes of Birmingham’s central

library again. The jarring thrust of social change in Birmingham is revealed to be less 'forward' and linear, and more oscillatory and recursive in its temporal movement, throwing into jeopardy Williams' challenge of what is able to grow or survive at the centre of the city. Rather than a railway line that moves from past to present to future, historical development is more like a spider's web, a 'meshwork' of dominant, residual and emergent cultures that shape the archi-textures of urban life (Williams, 1977a; Lefebvre, 1991, p. 118).

The rhythms of temporal and spatial change in Birmingham are something I discussed in my interview with Vivien, who was a senior librarian at BCC during the 1970s and '80s, and Head of the Library Service during the 1990s.

Birmingham's always been fond of restructuring; it's as though as an organisation it feels that somewhere out there is the right structure if they're going to just find it, so we'll keep on trying, keep moving stuff, but the upshot is that it takes everyone's time and energy and the fundamentals that need to change don't change.

This characterisation of a city council constantly re-configuring itself makes me reflect on the urban landscape itself, which is also in an ever-changing state of reconstruction. I ask Vivien if she thinks there might be something ingrained in the historical and cultural identity of the city that causes these dynamics.

Well if you go away from Birmingham for five years and come back it'll look different. There's this constant knocking down and building up again – it's never quite learnt to value some of the good stuff. I think it's quite, it's quite destructive really. [...] In latter part of the 19th century when the Chamberlain family were in charge [...] it was a very self-contained city, enormous civic pride – and then I think something got destroyed, maybe it was during the war. It was very badly damaged. And then again something was destroyed again during the Thatcher era, and of course Birmingham might feel it can stand on its own but it's part of that bigger west Midlands conurbation and that was one of the conurbations in the country that lost all its manufacturing during the 70s and 80s, and that did, you know, I don't think Birmingham's ever quite recovered from becoming service industry based, it kind of doesn't suit the nitty gritty city and that's the personality of the people I feel. I don't think service industries suit it somehow, it's not, it doesn't sit comfortably with the culture and the background and the history of the city. (Vivien, 05/16 interview)

The next chapter follows a sense of this discomfort through an ethnographic walk around the centre of the city and its new landmark library, following my ethnographic senses to inhabit the 'lived space' and rhythms (Lefebvre, 1991, 2004) of Birmingham, navigating along the way scenes of cultural devastation and emergent forms of commerce that reveal further cracks and layers of conjunctural crisis.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Infrastructural Explorations: Perambulating the Library of Birmingham**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

This chapter takes two rhythm-analytical perambulations through urban public space. I walk firstly around the city centre to the LoB, taking in the urban sights, sounds and interruptions that structure my journey; followed by a journey inside and around the library building, where encounters with library users, staff and materials present a myriad of spatial practices and arrhythmic disjunctures. This chapter considers how ‘deep channels of the past’ (Williams, 1966) continue to hold sway over the spatio-temporal landscape of the city centre and its library through rhythms of creative destruction.

#### **5.1 Walking to the library; sensing the city**

Most field trips began with a walk from Birmingham New Street Station to the LoB site on Centenary Square. Exiting the station via the narrow Stephenson Street, I then walk up the incline of Pinfold Street, and emerge onto the classical sandstone vista of Victoria Square, where I am greeted by an ossified sphinx, silently signalling the riddle of the city before me. The temple-like old Town Hall building stands steadfast to my left, before which Anthony Gormley’s pavement-embedded ‘Iron:Man’ statue leans, symbolising the industrial past of the region’s metalwork labourers. Straight ahead in the middle distance is the grand façade of the Council House, guarded by the bronze-cast Queen Victoria atop her high pedestal, representing the sovereignty of the city state that the Birmingham Corporation aspired to in its 19<sup>th</sup>-century age of civic pride.



Figure 5.1 Birmingham Town Hall (left) and Council House (right). (Image by author, April 2016)

The Council House building has been likened to ‘a nineteenth-century Venetian palace with Victoria Square acting as St. Mark’s [...] a bricks-and-mortar memorial to the municipal gospel’ (Hunt, 2005, p. 356). Elevated in a large semi-circular niche in the central portico is a mosaic by Salviati Burke (1879) depicting the central enthroned figure of Municipality, handing out scrolls of Stability and Power to her allegorical female counterparts Science, Art, Liberty, Law, Commerce and Industry, against a golden background.



Figure 5.2: Birmingham Council House mosaic (Image: Banerjee, The Victorian Web)



Above the mosaic is the central pediment further reinforces the importance of this ‘city of a thousand trades’, by embodying an image of the nation, the central figure personified as Britannia, whose arms are outstretched to reward the manufacturers of Birmingham with laurel wreaths (Key, 2017, p. 159).



Figure 5.3: Birmingham Council House pediment (Image: Banerjee, *The Victorian Web*)

After pausing to look at Council House my inclination is to proceed up and over Victoria Square, and approach the library via Chamberlain Square. However, when I follow my nose along this route I can only go so far, for I soon become blocked by no-entry barriers and diversion signs, which re-route me back around the shiny hoardings that protect the perimeter of the ‘Paradise’ site: seven hectares of land between Chamberlain and Centenary Squares.

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the area upon which I stand has been a centre of civic and educational power, containing buildings such as the Town Hall, Mason Science College, Birmingham and Midland Institute (adult education centre) buildings and the Central Library. In the 1960s and 70s these Victorian educational buildings were demolished, and the arena was transformed into ‘Paradise Circus’ (named after Paradise Street which skirts its south side), an elevated island roundabout circulated by Manzoni’s Inner Ring Road. Madin’s Central Library stood proud as the island’s concrete civic centrepiece, adjoined by a new School of Music building. At the end of

2015, 16 years after this area was sold to Argent Group LLP, the zone became re-named simply 'Paradise', branded hoardings were erected, and the work began to break the 'concrete collar' of the Circus to enable the city 'to breathe again' (Kennedy, 2004, p. 2). The demolition of Central Library was likened by its former Director Brian Gambles to releasing 'a cork in a bottle' (05/16 interview).

Each time I visit, I develop the habit of walking up to the chinks in the hoardings to look at the different stages of demolition. The closer I get, the more my body tunes in to the deep vibrations and grinding din of heavy machinery jarring against dense swathes of concrete. My senses are infused with the muted grey haze and limey smell and taste of mineral particles, made more potent by the constant spray of water emitted to dispel the dust, as 140,000 tonnes of library concrete are inexorably crushed and removed from the site. What once stood as a bold Brutalist totem to modernity is now being brutally dismembered layer by layer until ground zero is reached and constructing the centre of Paradise begins anew. A brief detour into the adjacent City Museum and Art Gallery that is within the Council House Extension reveals that the demolition vibrations are so strong that many exhibits have been removed from their displays to protect them from damage.



Figure 5.4: View of the demolished Central Library with LoB visible between the ruins.

(Image by author, April 2016)



Figure 5.5: view of Council house Extension<sup>32</sup>, with Birmingham Art Gallery and Museum to the right. (Image by author April 2016)

I turn back and walk along the Paradise perimeter back down across the Western side of Victoria Square, past the Town Hall, and follow the yellow diversion signs turning right along Paradise Street and under the dingy makeshift subway of Fletchers Walk. As I walk this prescribed route to Centenary Square, I am flanked by glossy white hoardings emblazoned with the red and black marketing slogans of the Paradise development project. The rhetorical chant of these taglines punctuates alternate panels and syncopates to the beat of my footsteps as I make my way to my destination.

- - -HISTORY IN THE MAKING- - -

- - -LET'S BE SOCIABLE- - -

- - -PARADISE- - -

- - -WHERE COMMERCE MEETS CULTURE- - -

- - -THE HEART OF BIRMINGHAM.

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<sup>32</sup> Across the bridge that connects the Central Library to the Council House Extension can be seen the remnants of the netting that had to be cast around the concrete structures to protect the corroded and crumbling concrete from falling on pedestrians and traffic, described by John in the previous chapter.

Stepping in line with the meter of this hyperbolic score wrapped around the demolition site, I adopt the way of Lefebvre's rhythm analyst, who 'thinks with thinks with [her] body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality. [... She] must simultaneously catch a rhythm and perceive it within the whole' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 21). Every so often, I pause and look at the panels displaying hyperreal CGI visions of smiling consumer-citizens poised in busy and convivial urban scenes, milling around cafes and courtyards, while business people stride purposefully up corporate steps.

### Destination Paradise



Figure 5.6: One Chamberlain Square. (Image by author January 2018)

The lines of Jorge Luis Borges (1960) come to mind as I circumnavigate this branded vision of an urban Eden. The poet was offered a position as Director of the National Library of Argentina at a time when he was simultaneously losing his eyesight, and reflected on this 'gift' with bittersweet irony:

Yo, que me figuraba el Paraíso    I have always imagined Paradise  
Bajo la especie de una biblioteca.    as a kind of library.

Borges may be crestfallen to find that no image of a library features in the zoned sideshow of the speculative Paradise development. John was also disappointed by the lack of lack of library references in the development's corporate rhetoric.

The images of Paradise at this point are quite boring, I suppose at this point they're just notional, and hope that maybe the buildings will be more than bland office blocks, and there'll be more to do than just sit on the steps with a takeaway sandwich and smile at each other, like in some of the pictures; there'll be things to do and see and play, and there'll be children. (John, 05/16 interview)

Paradise buildings are pitched as 'Grade A Office Space', the highest classification of metropolitan building value, The first speculative building constructed on the site of the former Central Library is named 'One Chamberlain Square', and has been sold to Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), one of the largest and wealthiest accounting firms in the world.



Figure: 5.7: Chamberlain Square CGI image (Birmingham Mail 2016)

The CGI marketing images that showcase Paradise perform and produce urban 'promissory spaces' through a particular kind of digital interface designed to 'affectively allure' global investment into the city, (Jackson and Della Dora, 2011, p. 100; Rose,



Degen and Melhuish, 2014, p. 367). In an article titled 'The Slow Death of the Public Architect', Alan Clawley demonstrates the performative power of these images:

The Library of Birmingham was 'sold' to the planning committee, city councillors and the public purely on the basis of CGIs of the outside of the building in its setting in Centenary Square. A senior councillor in charge of regeneration, Councillor Summerfield (Conservative, Harborne) admitted that he had not even seen the floor plans for the new library, yet was happy to approve the design. (Clawley, 2015c).

The 'culture' that meets 'commerce' in Paradise is not a one of public goods of aesthetic or literary value, but rather that the commercial grounds of enterprise and consumerism, set against a Victoriana backdrop of the city's classical civic architecture, monuments to a bygone age of public life. The shiny CGI veneers of commerce and culture mask a residue of past losses in the emergent shape of the city. What is falling through the gaps of 'History in the Making'? I muse on this question, and how it speaks to Williams' challenge of what should be placed at the centre of our cities, as I hurry on towards the library through Fletchers Walk underpass.

### **Creative disjunction**

Despite Argent's efforts to brighten up this temporary pedestrian tunnel with colourful splash branding cladding the concrete columns and walls, it remains a cramped and soulless thoroughfare which homeless people use to shelter from the weather, some entreating passers-by for change. The incongruity of beggars slumped against the utopian hoardings of Paradise is not lost on me and increases the cognitive dissonance I experience as I make my way through the underbelly of the disarticulated urban centre.

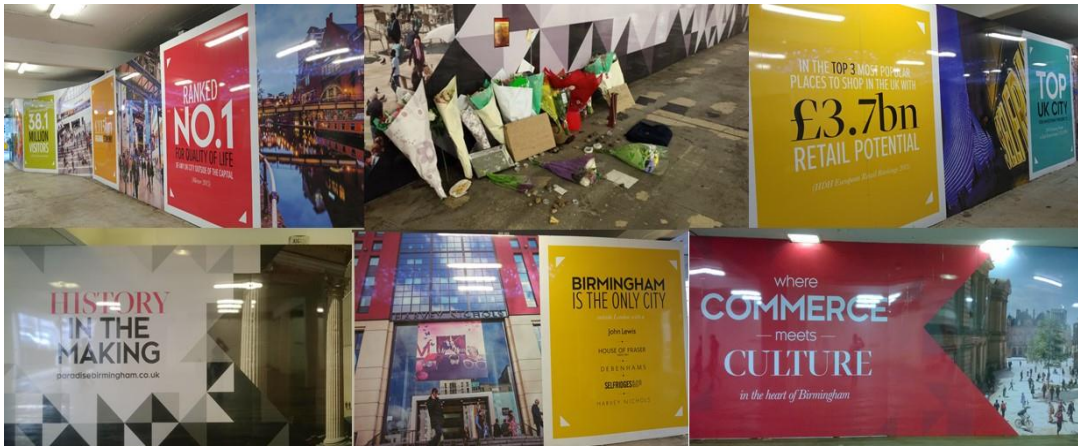


Figure 5.8: Fletchers Walk underpass

(Images: author's own except for upper centre image of floral tributes.<sup>33</sup>)

I come out the other side of the subway into the daylight and follow the arrows pointing right that divert pedestrians up a flight of steps, leading to the corner of Centenary Square. As I approach the steps, to my left I finally see LoB looming large like a stack of gilded gift boxes sandwiched between the traditional edifices of The Hall of Memory and Baskerville House.

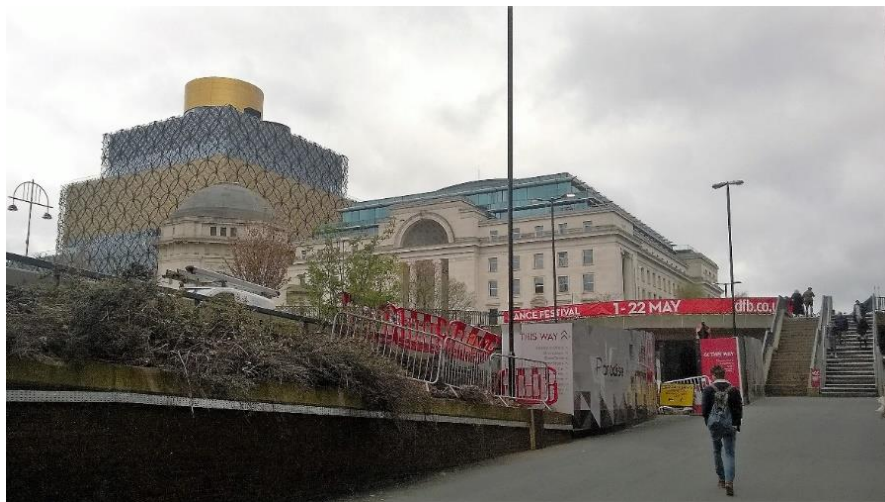


Figure 5.9: LoB approach (Image by author April 2016)

<sup>33</sup> The image of flowers and offerings next to the Paradise hoardings was published in a Birmingham Mail article that document and pay tribute to the death of a well-known homeless man in this spot (Layton, 2017).

Reaching the top of the steps, to my right I can see the other side of the demolition site. Through the ruins of the Central Library, I can see the ‘Big Brum’ clock tower on the corner of the Council House.

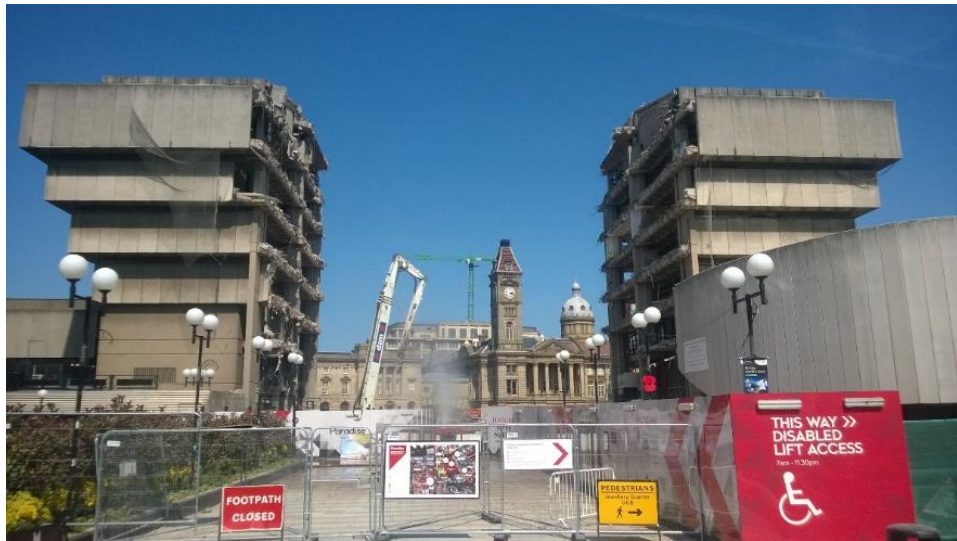


Figure 5.10: Birmingham Central Library demolition site (Image by author April 2016)

Time and space are disjoined and prized open in this ephemeral view between the centuries. The municipal majesty of the old civic clock stands stock still between the ruins of falling concrete dreams of a modernist cultural centre, torn down to make way for the corporate might of commercial advancement. This fissure reveals either a sense of loss or a sense of opportunity, depending on your perspective. City Council planners, economic development officers and their corporate partners, are clearly on the opportunity side of the view, claiming the regenerated Paradise will furnish a better future for the city’s fortunes. Heritage expert Chris Smith, Director of Planning at Historic England, however, sees the demolition of the Modernist cultural centre as a tragic loss, lamenting that ‘the most interesting things have gone from central Birmingham. Now the story has gone. [...] Inevitably, as history tells us, people will demand to know why this short-sighted plan was ever allowed to take place.’ (Smith, Birmingham Mail, 2016) These two opposing views are versions of the two potential future directions of society that Williams set out in his 1966 libraries essay, with a commercial destiny on the one hand, and an educative, cultural one on the other.



My walk to the library of the future via the disrupted channels of the past fills me with an uncomfortable uncertainty about what I will find inside it. As Charlotte Bates points out, ‘experiences of moving, and being moved, are defined not only by our own physical and psychological capabilities and skills, but also, and more importantly, by the qualities of the urban environment, which shape our movements’ (2017, p. 57). In moving through this fractured city centre to reach the library, I am being moved, both in terms of how the Paradise development zone funnels me in a choreographed fashion and direction, and in terms of the affective and emotive currents I feel as the demolition of the former Central Library impresses itself upon my senses. My inner rhythms become arrested by the city’s mantra of ‘creative destruction’ (Kennedy 2004). Maria Balshaw tweaks this concept, positing that Birmingham can be recognised through a mode of ‘creative *disjunction* between different between times, spaces, identities and communities’ (2004, p. 138, my emphasis). Such a sense of disjuncture is facing me now, here in the centre of Birmingham, through the arrhythmic gaps between libraries old and new.

In the language of urban planning and landscape architecture, ‘desire lines’ are identifiable worn pathways trodden or traversed by walkers who seek to get from A to B in the way that most efficiently or preferentially meets their desires, rather than the pre-plotted routes that are designed by planners and governors of the space. My intuitive ‘spatial tactics’ (Certeau, 2013) in reaching the library from the station was to cut across Chamberlain Square and up and over the former cultural centre designed by Madin, but this was disrupted and re-channelled by the market-driven desires of the development companies, which both engineer and imagineer the physical and psychological places and paths of the city centre, steering Birmingham towards the commercial future that Williams feared.

As I stand on the threshold between the city’s streets and its central library, about to enter a building that in principle and content is on the educational and cultural side of this forked pathway, I know from all I have read about it that it teeters on the brink of sustainability, as the narrowing walls and ceilings of financial pressure close in.

## 5.2 Library Storeys: accessing layered and liminal spaces

### (Lower) Ground Floors: Tuning in to cyclical tensions in library space

The clamour, the density, the sheer weight of the modern city is heard as a machinic, constant and ‘general assault on the senses’ (Mumford 1961: 539). And then – listen – there is the way the city comes to us in memory and reverie, its cadences, whispers and sighs like the voices of sorrowful women. (Tonkiss, 2015b, p. 303)

On a Monday morning in late April 2016, I arrive at LoB shortly after opening time at 9am. I shuffle through the revolving door on Centenary Square and enter the spacious foyer. Muted grey and pale golden light filters through the broad glass façade and suffuses with the electric blue of escalator illumination strips and the flickering LCD screens of self-service machines situated in the centre of the large open-plan atrium. The entrance hall has a café to the right, a merchandise shop to the left, and straight ahead are the reception desk, escalators leading to the upper floors, and shallow steps leading to the lower ground and basement floors. Further to the left is the foyer to the adjoining Repertory Theatre, which is sectioned off by barriers until its opening time at noon. As I enter, the library shop and reception desk are empty of staff and the escalators to the upper floors are closed off by portable barriers, guarded by two security guards. The only signs of life emanate from the café, as the grinding and steaming sounds of coffee machines and the clinks of crockery wake the space and its few inhabitants up for the day.



Figure 5.11: LoB opening hours (Image by author 05/16)

In the first year of opening, LoB was open 8am-8pm on week days and 9am-5pm on weekends. In April 2015 as a direct result of massive budget cuts, opening hours changed to 11am until 7pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, 11am-5pm Wednesdays to Saturdays, and complete closure on Sundays. Later that year, following large protests against these changes, and the introduction of some new income streams through partnership arrangements, the opening hours were increased to include some limited self-service hours on weekday mornings and evenings. The morning of my visit I entered during the 9-11am 'Express Self-Service' window of opening, which means there are no library staff to assist users and floors 1-9 are closed to the public. On the lower ground floor, members of the public are free to browse, borrow or return books from a selected range of popular fiction and non-fiction collections using the self-service machines; to sit at desks or lounge-style modular soft furnishings; and to access

free Wi-Fi and public toilet facilities. In between the ‘Book Browse’ area of the lending collections and access to the children’s library below is a glass-framed enclosed square containing desks for adult laptop users and a small bank of public PCs (only accessible to library members) – a space which for some reason is named ‘Book Box’, despite it containing no physical books.

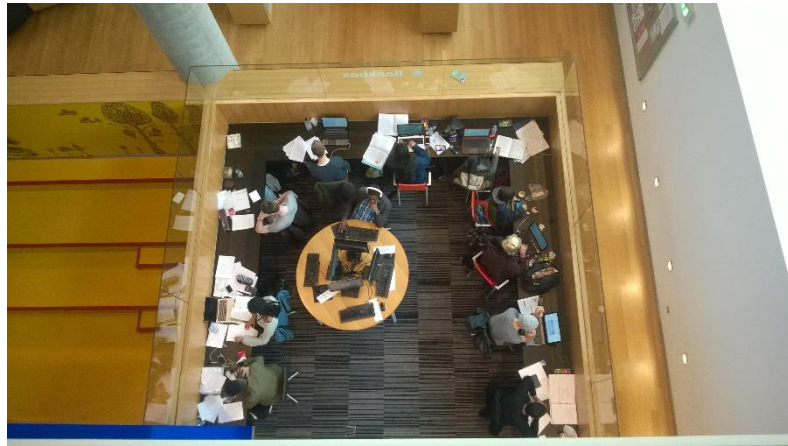


Figure 5.12: ‘Book Box’ computing space on lower ground floor. (Image by author April 2016)

I notice only a small handful of library users trickle down to find their spots or fulfil their needs in this area: two men make a beeline for the Book Box space; a homeless older man uses the toilet and settles for a rest in a cosy corner; a woman browses the fiction while another returns some books, a couple of students or young professionals settle at desks with their laptops and papers. The sloping passageway that leads down to the yellow-painted children’s library in the basement is cordoned off – this too remains closed till 11am.

As I wander round the islands of quiet activity on the lower ground floor looking for a spot in which to settle and observe the space, I stop as I hear an ethereal cadence float through the air. I follow my ears to a gap in the bookshelves where I spy the back of a cloaked figure bent over a musical instrument. I walk around the shelving unit to where it opens into a seated nook within the Travel section and meet a young man who is setting down a small harp on the low table in front of him. He is wearing a patterned African tunic and hat and a woven shawl is wrapped around his shoulders. I

ask if I can join him and sit beside him on the low-level lounge. He is welcoming and agrees to be interviewed.

Simeon tells me that when he first moved to Birmingham from London, he used to come to the library to feed his 'hunger for knowledge – to learn and read about whatever was on my mind' (04/16 interview). If his local library in Handsworth did not have the books he wanted, or he felt like a change of environment, he would come into the city centre to LoB. He likes coming in the early mornings when it is at its most peaceful. He used to come at 8am when the opening times were longer and wishes they were still. Simeon has moved on from his period of devouring the knowledge contained in books and is now in a space where he wants to 'just chill' and focus on his music. 'That's why it's a shame it often gets so packed, because sometimes you just want to sit down and chill. But right now, it's not packed, it's calm and quiet, so I just came and sat down here with my harp, and then a melody came to me straight away' (Simeon, 04/16 interview).

Simeon plays back to me the melody he had just composed, and I listen attentively, absorbed in its soothing and crystalline tones. Fragile and oblique chords undulate in a ghostly refrain, almost lullaby-like in its cadence. When it ends, Simeon asks me what I could hear. I tell him I could hear a sonic landscape that fitted my entry to the library, with the slowly cascading notes stepping down like my movement to the lower floor of the library, where we are surrounded by books which are also somehow like steps between us. I reflect further and add that I could also hear the silence between the notes; another reflection of the calm morning space of the library as it emerges into the day.

Yes, that's right [...] so you can move from chaos to silence you know, so it's like also understanding what frequency you want to align with. And that's what I was doing when I was playing [...] tuning in to collective consciousness.

Simeon's reference to moving between chaos and silence chimed clearly with my experience of moving between the urban interference of navigating the noisy demolition site to reach the library. The relatively quiet sensorium that then enveloped me inside the library was made palpable and crystalline through Simon's musical

interlude, which served as a metonym for my ability to ethnographically tune into the space. It is important to note the intersubjective relationality of this attunement, to highlight how libraries are activated as meaningful public spaces not simply through the conceived space of architectural plans and library rules, but rather through the psychosocial relations and serendipitous connections between people. As Elmborg (2011) puts it, libraries are 'the spaces between us'.

The affective aural exchange between Simeon and I can be read through Lefebvre's conceptual schema of the way in which time measures itself through the rhythmic components of speed, frequency and consistency:

We know that a rhythm is slow or lively only in relation to other rhythms [...] Spontaneously, each of us has our preferences, references, frequencies; each must appreciate rhythms by referring them to oneself, one's heart or breathing, but also to one's hours of work, of rest, of waking and of sleep (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 20).

Tuning in to spaces of stillness that exist both within his own body and the collective body of the library allowed Simeon to pluck out a melody from the vibrations in the air. As Simeon describes,

the people who come at this time in the morning already have a sort of set routine, and their mind is kind of organised in a certain way, so it's calmer, but it starts to pick up around 11 o'clock and then that hecticness comes in, everyone's like *aaarrggh* kind of energy, so the vibrations change. (04/06 interview)

This shift in atmosphere can be read as aligned to a wider rhythmic scale of political and economic change, as the access to the full range of library space and service has been squeezed by austerity and diminished opening hours. I ask Simeon how he feels about this change to the rhythms of service provision.

I have my own personal views on how the government is spending its money and all that, but I won't go into the politics of it now, but there are certain things like libraries that are very important, especially in Birmingham itself, this is the centre of Birmingham, the building itself, it says something, so to reduce the funding and the opening on something like this, it says what your priorities are. [...] The priority needs to be on places like libraries where you go in and read books. [...] the reason why we even have libraries to start with is supposed to

be to study the universe - universities - understanding how things work. So places like this now should be places where you sit down and understand - places for thinkers to come in and understand how things work. I can understand where things are right now and how they've shifted but I don't know how we're going to shift it back to how it should be because we're already there. Thinkers don't come into the library like they used to.

Simeon's astute reflections reveal dynamic tensions between silence and noise that are not limited to the acoustics of the library interior but extend to struggles between the publics and politics of the city, produced by the dominance of an economy that values the jangle of commercial experiences over the peace of unfettered spaces of thinking.

My conversation with Simeon finishes around 10:30am and I move back up into the foyer to observe the flows of people waiting to enter the upper floors. As the frenetic energy of the working day approaches, the bracketed lull of the lower ground floor time-space turns into a rising crescendo focused around the library's entry points. A queue of approximately 300 diverse people snakes round the perimeter of the foyer, out the revolving doors and several metres into the square. At least half of them appear to be young adults, presumably students. I try to observe and engage with people in the interior queue but security guards usher me to the back outside. The atmosphere towards the back of the queue is taut as the energy of anticipation and frustration accumulates, but this gradually dissipates as the barriers to the upper floors are opened and people shuffle forwards and are funnelled up the escalators and dispersed throughout the building.



Figure 5.13: Queue formed in April 2015 when opening time first moved to 11am.

(Image: Lillington, 2015)

### **First and second floors: between public and private transformations**

The first floor of the library is bypassed by the queue of people that trails around to ascend the next escalator up to the second floor and beyond. The only part of the first-floor that is visible is a bank of empty shelves along the wall. The rest of the floor is sectioned off by blue hoardings, with a sign announcing that this floor is closed to the public as it undergoes conversion for the Brasshouse Language Centre that is moving in. The first floor was designed by its architect Francine Houben to include meeting and conference rooms on one side, and study space areas for library users, amid business and learning collections and services on the other. The closure of this floor and its transformation into a language school (which will be accessible only to fee-paying students) means the loss of a large area of public study space, which increases competition for desk space on the second and lower ground floors. This concentration of circulating publics into more circumscribed and divided areas exacerbates the chaotic energy that Simeon pointed to with his thoughts on the changing rhythms of the space, as well as his more pointed reflection on the political de-prioritisation of public access.



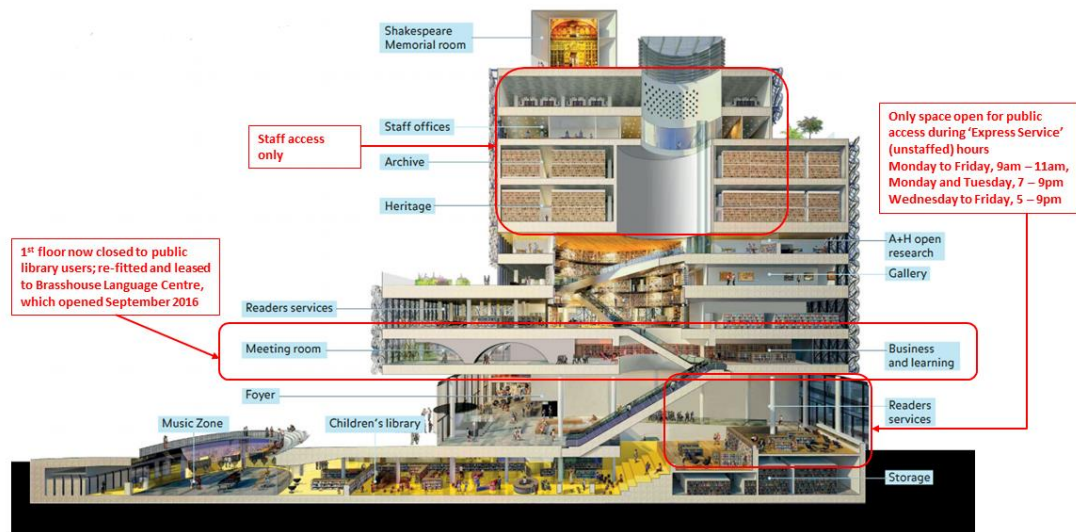


Figure 5.14: cross-section of LOB's original design (adapted image from LoB website)

The rationale for conversion of the first-floor space is an economic one, as part of a solution to meeting the extreme financial difficulties pressing the library budget. The conversion of the library's first floor into the 24 classrooms needed for the new Brasshouse Language Centre cost £2.1 million, paid for with borrowed money to be re-couped with the profits from the sale of the old language school building owned by the council. Councillor Penny Holbrook, Birmingham's cabinet member for Skills, Learning and Culture at the time of this decision, argued the rationale for the relocation of the language school to the library in terms of cost benefit analysis: 'making savings that will enable the Library of Birmingham to operate a much better set of opening hours' (Holbrook, 2015). Holbrook justified the move further by making the case for necessary increases in 'partnership working', indicating that public-private collaborations are the only viable solution for meeting the challenges of austerity.

"Partnership working" may sound like a line we trot out, but it is in reality the only game in town. When done properly, it is not just words; we can maintain public library services with new models of working. ... Local government isn't going to get any easier over the next few years, and local politicians have no choice but to rise to the transformation challenge. If we want to hang onto the services we all value, things are going to have to change (ibid.).

The ‘transformation challenge’ referred to here is quite different form of change to the library form that was envisaged by John and Brian in their reimagination of the library as an open interface, facilitated through the public infrastructure of modern librarianship. The transformation referred to here, rather, is that of holistic public services metamorphosing into public-private fragments.

Prior to closure of the first floor for language school conversion, it was occupied for six months by Google.



Figure 5.15: Google’s ‘Digital Garage’ residency at LoB, 2015.

(Source: Birmingham Post, 2015)

In 2015 a LoB formed a partnership with Google with the aim of boosting the city’s digital economy by upskilling local entrepreneurs and firms to compete in the e-commerce age. A ‘Google Digital Garage’ set up shop on the library’s first floor to offer free ‘digital tune-up’ advice and guidance to library visitors, providing tools, workshops and coaching sessions for small and medium-sized businesses to develop skills and knowledge in online marketing. Google chose LoB as its first base for this pop-up venture which would go on to appear in several other venues throughout the country. A large area of first floor library space was transformed into a Google-branded corporate tech-den with seating signs proclaiming, ‘let’s work together’ and ‘let’s

huddle<sup>34</sup>, echoing the register of the Paradise corporate rhetoric appealing to Birmingham's publics with 'let's be sociable' via social media logos.

Public libraries have a long tradition of providing resources, spaces and guidance to the business sector, but there is a difference between this being provided by public sector library staff, trained in crucial principles of neutrality, social and inclusion and privacy (especially adhering to data protection law), and provision by employees of a global commercial giant, who have a range of agendas and hidden costs to the user such as harvesting their data to generate further innovation and profit. The fact that this partnership was established shortly after over a half the library service workforce was made redundant amid exorbitant council debts and cuts to the service budget, indicates the replacement of one set of professional values and practices with another, whereby the educational and public culture of the library is subtly subsumed by the commercial and the private. This generates tension between the economic and the knowledge rhythms of the library, as financial calendric cycles take dominate the rhythms of public library life. Space and time for freely circulating library readers and dwellers become squeezed through the metrics of commercial exchange, as mechanisms of income-generation are prioritised to help balance the library books

Entering the 'Knowledge Floor' on Level 2 from the top of the escalator brings me to one of the library's many 'Rotunda' spaces, whose circular walls are encased with reference books and periodicals available on request but mainly serve decorative purposes. From here you can enter the 'Knowledge Lounge' space, where low-slung armchairs and small tables are scattered next to magazine racks, photocopiers and drinks machines. Spreading out from either side of this hub are aisles of shelving that hold the open access reference collections, interspersed with clusters of tables and chairs for readers and laptop users, as well as some networked PC stations. Around the perimeter of this level runs a chest-level desk-strip, at which users can sit on high stools, looking out at tower blocks and cranes of the city framed through the filigreed circles that decorate the library building's outer shell. I walk around the open-plan

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<sup>34</sup> a 'huddle' is a corporate term that refers to business spaces in which small teams gather and collaborate in 'blue sky thinking'-style motivational exchanges that keep the spirit of competition going (Raconteur, 2016).

floor and am unable to find a free seat with a power socket to charge my electronic research tools. Such desk spaces are highly coveted and fully occupied by people who hurriedly plug in their devices like their lives depend on it.



Figure 5.16: LoB Level 2 'Knowledge Floor' Rotunda (Image by author April 2016)



Figure 5.17: LoB Level 2 'Knowledge Lounge'. (Image by author, April 2016)





Figure 5.18: View from Level 2 Knowledge Floor. Alpha Tower<sup>35</sup> can be seen on the left, and the empty Birmingham Municipal Bank<sup>36</sup> on the right. (Image by author, April 2016)



Figure 5.19: LoB Café ground floor with mezzanine level. (Image by author June 2017)

I wander back down towards the café, buy a drink and take a seat on its upper mezzanine level. There are a range of tables and chairs available here, the bigger ones

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<sup>35</sup> Grade II Listed tower block, built in 1973 for ATV television studios, and taken over as offices for Birmingham City Council in 1982. BCC vacated the block in 2010 to save on costs, and in 2013 the tower went on sale for a quarter of its 2008 price.

<sup>36</sup> The original Municipal Bank was conceived by former Birmingham Lord Mayor, Neville Chamberlain, who created the Birmingham Corporation Savings Bank by a 1916 Act of Parliament, to raise money for World War I. It subsequently became the first and only local authority-governed bank in the country. The landmark building has been empty and mostly unused for more than a decade but at the end of 2016 The University of Birmingham bought the lease on the former bank with plans to turn it into an exhibition space for its 'research and cultural assets', contributing to the 'cultural and commercial hub', of the regenerated city centre (University of Birmingham, 2016).

of which are occupied with groups of students busily studying with their text books, note pads and laptops spread out before them. There are plug sockets on the floor and walls, however there are signs next to them prohibiting public use. I see that some of the students are using them anyway and I follow suit with my own device.



Figure 5.20: Plug socket on mezzanine level of LoB Café. (Image: by author April 2016)

The sign next to the plug socket is branded with the library logo and 'Rewriting the Book' slogan, emblematising the image of the library of the future centred on connections rather than collections. Electronic sockets are core functions of connectivity, yet the sign next to the ones in the LoB signal a disconnect; an arrhythmic disjuncture in the infrastructural capacities of the service. Power supply to the circulation of electronic publics is barred.

I speak briefly to a few of the students and learn that they are studying for further and higher education assessments and live in a range of different districts of the city. One student comments that they prefer to work here than in local or college libraries as it is easier to meet friends and study as a group. Before long a member of café staff identified by his branded catering uniform comes upstairs and surveys the space, telling us to remove our power cables from the sockets and informing the students that they must purchase food or drink from the café if they are to remain in the space. When the staff member disappears some of the students pull drinks out of

their bags and pour them into paper cups, presumably to look as if they have made a purchase. I am somewhat surprised that the café can make these demands on what appears to be public space designed for library users – there are no café accoutrements up here on the mezzanine level, just rows of tables and chairs that bear little difference to those in the library reading rooms.

The consumer conditionality placed on using this area to study is another example of arrhythmic disjunction that jars the user experience into having to jostle between the public educative sphere of the openness of library space on the one hand, and the transactional, circumscribed space of retail on the other. There is nothing inherently dissonant about including café space within library space – the option for purchasing food and drink to replenish the body or to hang out in a more convivial atmosphere is a welcome one for library users – however when the spaces of more traditional use for educational study are curtailed in the rest of the library building, and the environmental distinctions between both library and café space are blurred (for example the ‘Knowledge Lounge’ area has a café-like feel to it, with its Coca-Cola-branded drinks machines and trendy modern furniture), the different rules and expectations that govern the use of these spaces can grate upon the user experience, disrupting perceptions and experience of public space.

I notice that the man on the adjacent table to mine has been working on his laptop for some time without consuming food or drink from the café and wonder why he wasn’t approached by the café staff like the young students were. He middle-aged and dressed in smart-casual attire, and I assume he is working on a business project of some description. He notices me looking at him and asks me if I could help him with something. He is working on his CV and doesn’t understand how to change the formatting via Microsoft Word. I help him rectify the problem and we fall into conversation.

The first time Frank visited the LoB was a couple of weeks ago, and he has returned a few times since then, each time basing himself on this mezzanine level to work on job applications. He has not used the other spaces of the library, saying that he has no need for books – if he needs to know something he just Googles it. Frank lives in Sutton Coldfield, a Civil Parish of Birmingham about seven miles from the centre. I ask

him if he uses the local library there, but he reveals this is currently shut down, so he ‘drag himself in here on the bus’. Frank was born in Sutton Coldfield but has lived overseas in Qatar until recently. He was made redundant from his job in the finance industry and has come back home to figure out his next steps. He has moved in with his ageing father who distracts him from working on his CV at home.

Frank has fond memories of the Sutton Coldfield library his mother took him to as a child, sitting on its plush red seats and being read to, as portraits of Henry VIII decorated the walls above. ‘It’s all gone now’, he sighs. He thinks the new city centre library building is ‘fantastic – Birmingham needs more buildings like this, more money pumped into the city like this. It makes Birmingham better.’ I ask him if he is aware of the difficult economic situation the library is in and he is not, but this leads him to offer his political opinion on austerity:

I know the government has to make cuts, and I think the Tories are doing a great job with the economy, getting it back on track. But sometimes the big cuts are taken in the wrong places, affecting the worst-off people and making them more worse off. (Frank, 04/16 interview)

Frank feels Sutton Coldfield has become rather ‘depressing and down at heel’ since he’s been away and was surprised to count eight Big Issue vendors there the other day. He was shocked when he went to sign on at the Job Centre, since there were neither computer terminals nor support to search for jobs or work your CV, a stark difference to his memories of using unemployment services over a decade before.

I ask Frank what he thought Birmingham would be like without libraries. ‘It would just be another thing to make it more depressing. It’s been depressing for too long. It was the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution and the workshop of England but then it was left to whither’ (04/16 interview). Frank feels, along with several respondents I interviewed, that Birmingham is too often ignored by the Capital. He hopes that the regeneration of Eastside with the new HS2 terminal will change that, and a change in government might boost public spending again, ‘but by then all the libraries will probably have closed down’. Our conversation ends on this gloomy note, and I make my way to the fourth floor, in the hope that the Local History and Archives service might offer some illumination.



My time on the Mezzanine level has shown me a fusion of overlapping spaces and rhythms: the academic calendar of assessment times condenses the students around its tables, while the tempo of the cafe's monthly sales targets imposes a counter-rhythm to the use of this semi-public learning and consumption space. The juxtaposition of an unemployed local business man, next to a PhD student from London, and a group of diverse students poised to be the next generation of scholars and business people forms a typically heterogeneous social library scene. Meanwhile in other corners of the library homeless and socially marginalised publics find a place to be and spend time. As Aabø and Audunson highlight (2012, p. 147),

for the unemployed, the retired, those on disability benefits, those between jobs and so forth, the library seems to be an alternative second place. These people tend to spend long hours in the library. It gives structure to their days, in the same way as work or school structures the days of others. They seem to use the library as an office.

The reference in this quote to 'second place' is taken from Ray Oldenburg's (1989) theory of *third place* – that which is neither the everyday zones of home (first place) nor work or study places (second place), but rather a communal, accessible arena, frequented by regulars, where it is usually possible to buy something to drink and to socialise, such as cafes, clubs, parks, salons or book stores. Based on my observations and encounters at LoB, I would argue that a division of social space into three types of place does not work for the public library, which is simultaneously a home for the homeless, an extended classroom for the student, and a gathering space for diverse citizens to co-habit in semi-public sociability.

#### **Fourth floor and beyond: the archive that ends with austerity and begins with Shakespeare**

I travel up back the escalators past the Level 2 'Knowledge Floor', past the exhibition space on Level 3, and onward to ascend the spaceship-like travelator that takes me to the Archive and Heritage collections on Level 4. Here the atmosphere lightens as the bright white of the skylight filters down through a cylindrical cavity in

the core of the building, as if to suggest I am reaching the summit of enlightenment that the library has to offer.

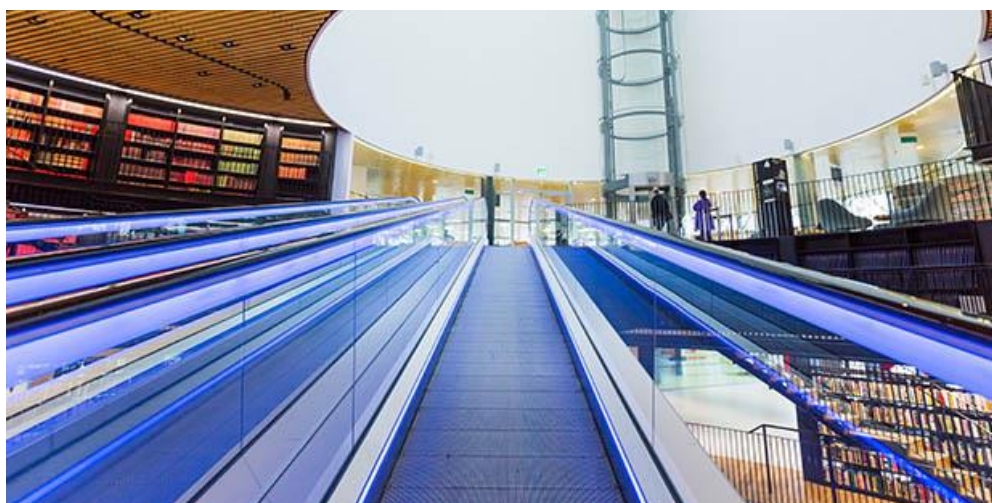


Figure 5.21: LoB travelator to Level 4. (Source: LoB website)

I approach the young man wearing the library's blue uniform with a 'Customer Experience Assistant' badge pinned to it, who is stationed at the circular island counter in the entrance area. I tell him about my research project and ask if I can access archival collections that contain images and plans of the former central libraries, as well as any internal governance and policy documentation that covers the development of the new library. He seems puzzled about where this might be and informs me that the Wolfson Centre for Archival Research is closed on Mondays, and there is no archivist in the library available to assist me today.

The door to the glass-panned archival research facility behind us has a paper sign stuck to it detailing the opening hours, which seem shorter than the periods in which it is closed. He says I am welcome to consult the open access materials in the Heritage Research Area – a open-plan space of desks, filing and display cabinets and microfilm readers to our right. The resources available in this area include genealogical sources such as parish registers, census records and marriage and death indexes, as well as local maps and newspaper archives. Between us we manage to locate a file of newspaper clippings of local press coverage of libraries in the city, and I sit down to read these. I am struck by the fragile materiality of this documented history, the handwritten dates and headers inscribed by a librarian's hand, the yellowing hue of the

paper that records the passing of time in the library's development. The date range of the newspaper clippings begins in the 1970s and ends in 2008.

2008: the year of the global financial crash, when institutional clocks and economic rhythms were re-set, and when the plan to build a new library in the centre of Birmingham went ahead regardless, buoyed by the ambitions the city's leaders. I ask the assistant why the cuttings discontinue at this point, and he is not sure but thinks it may be due to an internal decision to reduce staff time on such tasks now that online news articles are more easily accessible. I explain that from experience that local newspaper websites are not easy to search and not all articles that are published in print form are available on their curated websites. The assistant informs me that they no longer have a digital team working on making such resources digitally accessible, since mass redundancies the year before. I photocopy the articles that interest me and resolve to email the archives team to follow up my enquiries at an alternative date. I leave with a sense that the enlightenment this floor seemed to offer is a false horizon when the doors and means to acquiring archival knowledge are so often closed.

I take the lift to the library's pinnacle: the Shakespeare Memorial Room on the ninth (top) floor. There is one section of the 1882 Birmingham Central Library that has survived through the centuries, which can be as a 'museum piece to past ages', in Manzoni's terms (cited in Chapter Four). When the Victorian library was earmarked for demolition in 1971, a group of conservationists campaigned to save the building. They were unsuccessful apart from one architectural element: The Shakespeare Library. Modelled on Elizabethan-style architecture, this room is composed of intricate wood-carved panels and cabinets decorated with marquetry and metalwork representing birds, flowers and foliage, showcased under a high-arched decorative ceiling. It was designed and created and created by J. H. Chamberlain in 1882 as part of the library building that replaced its predecessor which burnt down in 1879 in a disaster that also turned 6,500 of its 7,000 Shakespeare books to ash.

Due to the controversy and conservationist protests surrounding the demolition of the Victorian library in the early 1970s, the then Environment Minister ruled that the Shakespeare Memorial room 'must be preserved and be readily accessible to the people of Birmingham' (Library of Birmingham). While the rest of the building was

demolished, the Shakespeare room was dismembered piece by piece, preserved and put into storage until a new home was found for it in the Paradise Circus complex in the School of Music building in 1986. With this complex also earmarked for demolition as part of the twenty-first century Paradise re-development, the Shakespeare Memorial Room was again deconstructed in 2011 and meticulously reconstructed on the ninth floor of the LoB that opened in 2013, serving as both a palimpsestic totem and an anachronistic token to bygone ages of library life.

From a personal point of view, I find the Shakespeare room really strange when you walk into it. It's symptomatic of Birmingham somehow. It's like keeping a lock of hair from a dead friend. Should we have kept the whole Victorian library? Well yeah of course we should have, but we've only got this little bit left to remind us. (Alan, interview 05/16)

Likening this architectural remnant to a piece of a 'dead friend' explains why Alan and his fellow campaigners refused the offer of a piece of the Central Library's body, a gesture that they felt was 'inappropriate' in its morbid tokenism.

As I walk into this relic of a room I find it crowded with hordes of international tourists photographing the architectural features and glass-cased folios and tomes, trying to capture the ghost of these preserved and fetishised knowledge-specimens. The space feels claustrophobic and tomb-like, inward-looking rather than outward.

I exit and make my way back down to the Café, where I am meeting John, the former Director of Birmingham Library Service, who left this position seven years before the present library was built.

### **5.3 Inward-facing publics and infrastructures**

A few days before LoB opened its doors to the public for the first time in September 2013, John was invited on a private tour of the building by its architect Houben, a gesture he appreciated as an acknowledgment of his key role in forming the original brief to design a new regional library for Birmingham at the turn of the century.

Recalling the tour, John describes being initially dazzled 'by the newness of it all and it

all seemed wonderful' and was particularly pleased with the living-room-feel of many of its flexible open-plan seating areas, the gardens and the large windows. On reflection, however, John identified some nagging concerns about the overall functionality of new library design.

I think it's too weighted towards inputs. It's got the proper storage and it's got the exciting shapes, it's got the bright gold thing, it's got the Shakespeare Library in a place that's accessible and interesting, but it doesn't add up to something that faces the public. ... And where that is most manifest in the last year is in the absurd splitting of the building - and I'm not against the language school per-se coming in here, I think it's a very nice mix, I know the language school well - but the way it's sliced the building in two, what that's telling me, and it's evident in the Shakespeare exhibition as well - is that it's about inputs (04/06 interview).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the in-depth research and vision that had gone into the abandoned Rogers Partnership library design was an evolved outward-facing library, the motto for which was 'turning the library inside out', which referred not simply to the see-through aesthetic of the building, but importantly to its outward-facing model of service delivery and public programming, or 'outputs' to use John's terminology. What John means by 'inputs' in the above quote is things that are literally 'put in' as functional or transactional elements, but without due consideration to how they 'put out' in the sense of a public interface facilitated, activated and curated by professional librarians.

John and I are sitting in the mezzanine level of the café near the windows and as he explains more of what he means by this, points out across the square to the public artwork by Gillian Wearing called 'A Real Birmingham Family: a bronze statue of two women, one of them pregnant, holding hands with two boys between them as they step ahead frozen in time towards the future'<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> At the time of writing the 'city's most controversial artwork' *A Real Birmingham Family* has been removed and put into storage while Centenary Square is re-developed and a new water feature installed. It is not clear whether the statue will be returned to the square or relocated elsewhere (Young, 2017). Young points out how Centenary Square is 'famous for losing statues'. When the square opened in 1991, Raymond Mason's



Figure 5.22: 'A Real Birmingham Family' public art work by Gilliam Wearing (Image source: Brianboru100, Wikipedia, 2017)

The women the sculpture is modelled on are mixed-race sisters who as 'single mothers' have formed their own alternative family unit to bring up their boys. Wearing states that she chose this family out of hundreds of self-nominated others to 'celebrate the idea that what constitutes a family should not be fixed' (Ikon Gallery, 2014).

'I wanted to see a take on Shakespeare that reflected that!', says John as he points at the sculpture. Instead, his disappointment with the 'Our Shakespeare' exhibition LoB Gallery (created in 2016 to mark 400 years since the Bard's death) was that it was 'a very academic and conventional take' on the history and collections, with treasured volumes and scripts in low-lit glass cases next to dry panels of text. Thinking

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especially-commissioned £200,000 fibre glass *Forward* (named after the municipal motto) statue was at its centre – a 9m-long 3-D panorama of citizens rising mightily out of the smoke of a factory building, symbolising the city's achievements in industry, politics, science, sport and the arts. This statue was irrevocably burnt down by young vandals in 2003. The *Flame of Hope*, a £72,000 (funded by Birmingham's churches) torch atop an elevated revolving globe, was lit by Cliff Richard at the turn of the new Millennium to mark new period of optimism and peace. The flame was extinguished in 2002 and, after council officials said they couldn't afford the £12,000-a-year running costs and the statue was later removed from the square altogether. *The Spirit of Enterprise* by Tom Lomax (1991) - an abstract bronze water fountain sculpture composed of three bowls representing intersecting faces of commerce, currency and diversity – for many years occupied the centre of the Square but was put into permanent storage in 2010 when the LoB construction began. The fate of these sculptures tells an additional tale of the rhythm of creative destruction in the city.

back to the original design brief of a new library that needed to reflect its city's very young and diverse population, John wanted to see an exhibition about Shakespeare that would relate to teenagers from some of the city's most deprived districts:

something that went on about race in Othello or Merchant of Venice, that went on about the gang warfare between the Capulets and the Montagues... what about all the cross-dressing ... what about what Julius Caesar can tell us about power and corruption? So that's what I wanted, not a low-lit box.

John uses the exhibition example as one symptom of what the overall theme that disappointed him about the new library design.

For John, the building did not up to what the vital embodiment of a library of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be, and, (more importantly) what it should *do*: a pivotal public interface in which all the infrastructural elements of library practice work together holistically to produce a dynamic space and service.

Fundamentally it was too much like the structure of the old library, so it was lending on the ground floor, and children's at the bottom, reference in the middle and archives at the top [...] What we were proposing was that the interconnection between all these different resources mirrored the interconnection or the fluidity between different kinds of learning, and the fact that people would be coming to this unique library because they want to access all this sort of stuff [...] So when I came on that visit and started to contemplate what I saw, I did see that the overall structure - *the infrastructure if you like* of the library provision - was the same. OK obviously the storage conditions were state of the art as far as I'm aware, and so on and so forth, so that kind of - *if you like the hidden infrastructure* - was amazing, but the public face, *the public infrastructure*, was pretty similar to before (John, 04/06 interview, my emphasis).

The attention drawn by John here to the public and hidden infrastructures scaffolded within the material levels of the library space is crucial to understanding his argument that a successful and progressive modern library should not be vertical and transactions-based (multi-storey 'knowledge' floors and 'stamping this out or referring to that'), but rather organic, horizontal spaces of learning, enabling fluidity and openness of access to resources and expertise. While Mecanoo's leitmotif of circular forms are

suggestive of such fluid interconnections, these are more aesthetic gestures than dynamic epistemic infrastructures or circuits of use and exchange.

Mattern (2014, n.p.) proposes

that thinking about the library as a network of integrated, mutually reinforcing, evolving infrastructures — in particular, architectural, technological, social, epistemological and ethical infrastructures — can help us better identify what roles we want our libraries to serve.

I would add economic infrastructures to this list, for as Tonkiss (2015a, p. 384) argues,

[i]n putting various things—materials, resources, capital, information, people—into circulation, in making them ‘relatable’, infrastructures involve diverse economies of investment, ownership, exchange and use.

Having state of the art archival storage facilities and web platforms (the ‘hidden infrastructures’ John refers to) are of little use value if they remain inaccessible due to the unaffordability of expertise needed to maintain, facilitate and develop them. The next chapter will look at how these multiple intersecting infrastructures are conditioned and impacted by economic constraints on the operations of the library service, attending to the tangled web of value and values caught up in this nexus.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the spaces of the city and the library through a visitor and user perspective, following the rhythmic outlines, immersions and interruptions of these changing fabrications. The next chapter will take a closer look at how these rhythms and processes are economically shaped and re-shaped, following the perspectives and stories not of those who *use* the library, but those who make it *usable*: the directors, workers and activists who make it the library work.



## CHAPTER SIX

### **From ‘rewriting the book’ to balancing the books: damaged neural networks and hollowed-out infrastructures**

#### **6.0 Introduction**

Chapters Three and Four looked at the ‘external’ constructions, demolitions and re-constructions of library and urban space. The present chapter continues this theme of building, dismantling and re-structuring, but rather than examining it through the physical architectures and social imagineering of library spaces and concepts, it considers the human infrastructures that constitute and resource the library service. Brian Larkin articulates the politics and poetics of infrastructures as ‘architecture for circulation [...] the undergirding of modern societies [that] generate the ambient environment of everyday life’ (2013, p. 328). “Circulation” is a term firmly rooted in the library lexicon, referring to the process by which library books are loaned in cycles of issue, renewal, return, re-shelving and re-issue. The material, architectural and technical infrastructures that support library collections and information resources, however, are rendered dumb and inert without the knowledgeable people employed to animate them and connect them to diverse publics.

The ‘architecture for circulation’ analysed in this chapter is made (and unmade) from these people and their practices of librarianship, community outreach, heritage, and archival work. One redundant library professional I interviewed defined these intersecting practices as a ‘neural network’, which has effectively been lobotomised via the savage cuts that have hollowed out the Library of Birmingham’s knowledge base. Robertson and McMenemy define ‘hollowing out’ in the contemporary public library context as ‘processes of efficiencies and restructuring in which library buildings stay open but the actual services, and the value of those services, is eroded through

government and local government policy, cuts, and ‘deprofessionalisation’ (2018, p. 11).

This chapter explores these processes firstly through an overview of the financial predicament of Birmingham City Council (BCC), setting the circumstantial scene of austerity and poor financial planning that has caused gross retrenchment of library service budgets and mass redundancies of staff. The second section examines the impact of these cuts and losses on the cultural and epistemic infrastructures of the library by exploring the embodied knowledge and practices that have been lost through accounts of two redundant specialist library workers. The third section looks at what is left after the redundancies and cuts have been implemented, drawing on currently employed library professionals’ accounts of keeping services going on threadbare networks of reduced provision, which throws up difficult dilemmas of how to do more with less. The fourth and fifth sections analyse the consequences of these hollowing-out processes on how value and values can be understood in the meaning of the public library service, drawing on accounts of library campaigners fighting to maintain principles of the public good through activist practices of protecting municipal service provision. The chapter argues that without these fighting practices, the hollowing out of the municipal state – particularly through its diminished libraries – is likely to result in a form of public memory loss.

## **6.1 Entering ‘the jaws of doom’: Telling library accounts**

In 2012, the then leader of Birmingham City Council (BCC) Albert Bore forecast a very bleak outlook for public services, famously predicting ‘the end of local government as we know it’ (Butler, 2012). Since austerity began in 2010, the fatal combination of severe budget cuts and rising service costs indicated that by 2017 BCC would need to make cumulative savings of over £600m, a cut of nearly half of the council's controllable spending. Bore illustrated this dire financial situation with his notorious ‘Jaws of Doom’ graph, which appeared in the council’s budget consultation

document in 2013. It was so named because the lines of the graph resemble the gaping jaws of a crocodile preying on the monstrous £600 million budget deficit.

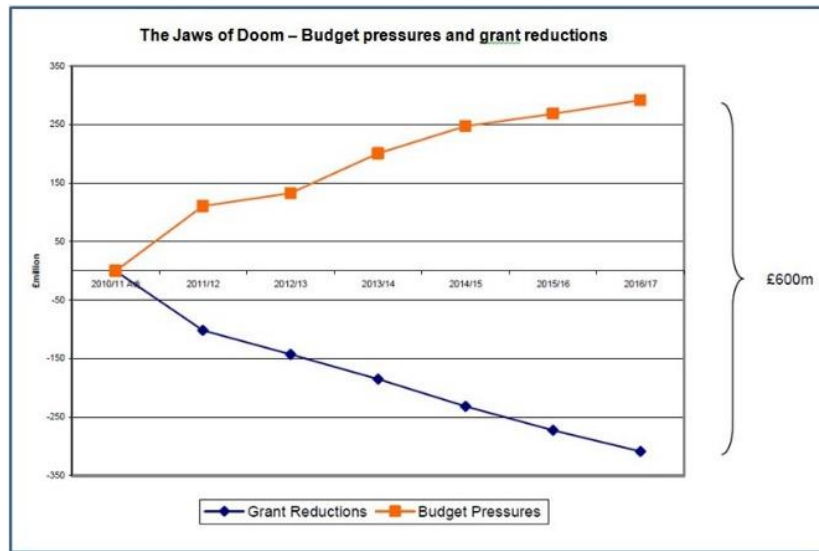


Figure 6.1: 'Jaws of Doom' graph (Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, 2013)

BCC's 2013 Budget Report highlighted that the reduction in their government funding has been more than twice the national average over the previous two years (Birmingham City Council, 2013). In December 2014, Bore claimed BCC's cut in government grant meant a 5.7% reduction on spending power for the city, which was nearly three times the average of 2% among most councils (*BBC News*, 2014f)<sup>38</sup>. This disparity can be read in light of research that argues Labour councils and in higher areas of deprivation are harder hit by austerity measures than their Conservative-run and more affluent counterparts (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014; Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2014; Hastings et al., 2015, 2017). This research shows how the greater the deprivation of the City's socio-economic demographic profile, the greater the negative impact of austerity on providing for those groups, since that deprivation weighting is no

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<sup>38</sup> Investigative research by the Guardian in argues that between 2011-2015 cuts in public spending power per citizen in Birmingham amounted to £227.28, over double that of the national average of £105.74 per head (Rogers, 2012).

longer accounted for in government grant decisions. As with many deprived cities in the North of England, public spending cuts have a disproportionately lacerative impact in Birmingham, thereby exacerbating its already-existing challenges in providing services for residents in its most deprived districts<sup>39</sup>.

The most significant way of implementing the necessary budget reductions is through staff redundancies. BCC's entire workforce is expected to have reduced to 7,000 FTE staff by the end of 2018, making it a third of the size it was in 2010 (BBC News, 2014c). As research by CILIP suggests, 'public libraries have fared worse than most other local government services' under austerity (2013, p. 3). In 2015, 53% of Birmingham library service staff were made redundant, reducing 188 full-time staff to just 88 (BBC News, 2014f). At the same time, LoB's opening hours were reduced from 73 to 40 hours per week: a 55% reduction in access for the public (ibid.) In 2015, the budget for buying new book stock for the city-wide service was frozen, meaning all libraries were unable to refresh their shelves with new publications (with some exceptions such as purchasing contracts with bestseller publishers and electronic subscriptions). The book fund suspension made national news headlines after a photograph of a flyer asking members of the public to donate recently published books to stock-starved libraries, created by a member of library staff in one of Birmingham's council-run community libraries, went viral on social media and the local and national press.

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<sup>39</sup> '40% of Birmingham's population live in areas in the 10% most deprived in England and is ranked the 6th most deprived authority in England by this measure. ... Birmingham is ranked the third most deprived Core City after Liverpool and Manchester. While there are pockets of deprivation in all parts of the city, deprivation is most heavily clustered in the area surrounding the city centre (Birmingham City Council, 2015, p. 4).

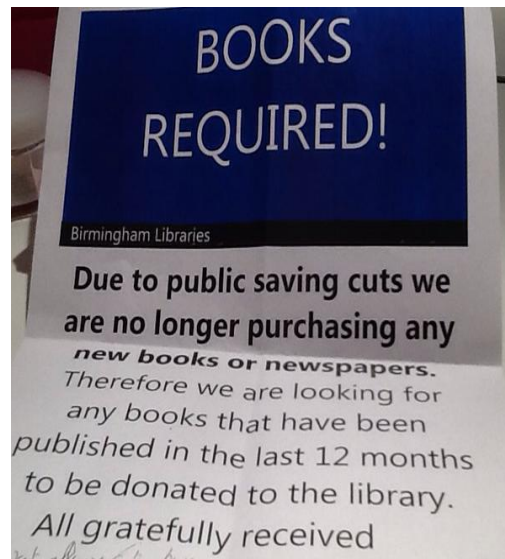


Figure 6.2: Birmingham libraries 'Books Require' flyer (Source: BBC WM 95.6, 2015)

The image circulated on social media platforms with messages of outrage from local residents, famous authors and other public commentators. In response to this furore, the BCC councillor responsible for libraries at the time told the *Guardian*:

Councils across the country are having to make hard choices about what can be afforded, and we simply cannot continue to do everything and fund everything we historically have. [...] One of those choices is a pause on the book fund. [...] Whilst we have not corporately asked for donations from the public, and this is the actions of a few libraries, we do of course welcome any support the public wish to give our community libraries and the council in general. However we do not expect the public to make up for cuts to the budget from the government. (Cllr. Holbrook, in Flood, 2015)

Cllr. Holbrook's statement reveals strong tensions between relations of structure and agency that complicate the democratic publicness of the library service, highlighting what Janet Newman (2014) frames as 'landscapes of antagonism' generated by austerity and neoliberal public sector reform. The structural authorities of national and local government are pulled in contrary directions through austerity measures, as councils are forced by central government to make 'hard choices' that leave little room for manoeuvre on how to provide adequate public services. This displaces agency (and thereby responsibility) onto individual community libraries and local citizens to source and donate resources to brittle statutory public infrastructures, thereby undermining

the structural integrity of that infrastructure through the dispersed, discretionary and volitional (and thereby volatile) nature of that bottom-up provision. Whilst BCC does not ‘corporately’ endorse this, they do ‘welcome’ the volitional support of general publics to their statutory duties to provide services. That this moment of structural inversion and public deficit was publicised and vociferously contested via online media platforms stratifies the heated publicness of the situation.

Claire, a senior community librarian and outreach specialist who has worked for Birmingham’s library service for over twenty years, discusses the effects of the book fund ‘pause’ on service delivery and usage.

Huge effects. [...] we all have commented that we know how much it’s affected our issues and our reservations, and obviously customer expectation. What I see here as a library manager out on the patch is we’re losing people, because they can’t find anything to read. [...] When you ask people what they expect from a library they expect a library to have books, even those people that don’t use libraries. It’s a little bit like you don’t go to hospital every day, but when you go you do you expect there to be bandages.

Claire’s analogy of the book-starved library being like a hospital without bandages evokes an image of a war-torn landscape of services in crisis. Deprived of vital supplies, the services themselves need critical care interventions to stop their user base haemorrhaging and their value depreciating. Claire also explains how she has learnt from a library manager in a neighbouring local authority, that ‘they’ve noticed an increase in people coming across the border because they’re still buying books. So we’re losing customers literally over the road’.

The number of books issued to borrowers every year, together with visitor footfall numbers, are vital indicators of the library’s measurable value: statistics which are collected annually by CIPFA and used as national indicators of public library success, which encourages state investment. Claire suggests that the senior council officers behind the decision, who are not library professionals, are not ‘completely grasping that this is our bread and butter. By starving us of that for this amount of time, are they actually aware of the damage that it’s doing really?’ (05/16 interview).

Claire's sustenance metaphor once again corporealizes the library service as a public body, which is becoming rapidly malnourished by the wilful neglect of its guardian.

As part of its cross-departmental service restructure following the 2015 budget cuts, BCC implemented a 'Future Council' workshop programme for all managerial staff. Claire attended one of the workshops as a library manager and recalls how the key message was 'all about reducing demand', which she felt may make sense for some areas of the council, such as rubbish collections, but was antithetical to the nature of library services which are mandated by law to provide universal equality of access.

I suppose you could say that by not buying books it's a way to naturally whittle down the service. I don't think that's been done deliberately, I don't, but it does make you think when you're looking at things and thinking about a reduction in demand that it's quite an easy way to do it really (05/16 interview).

The fact that BCC's demand-reduction strategy is couched in a '*Future Council Programme*' suggests a paradoxical temporality of stepping backwards in order to move forwards, getting stuck 'on pause' while past and future reel away. This can be argued to be a manifestation of what Ben Anderson calls 'the time of an omnipresent Present', whereby the emergency measures demanded by crisis interventions create 'a stretching or extending of the present and a temporary suspension of the transition to a future, even as a threatening future becomes present' (2016, pp. 8–9).

### **Austerity futures<sup>40</sup> built on foundations of debt**

While the severe cuts to Birmingham's library service are largely attributed to central government's austerity programme, local power geometries are also part of the problem, which has led to BCC being nationally held to account for problems in its leadership. In December 2014 The Kerslake Report was published, an independent review of the corporate governance of BCC, conducted by the then Civil Service Head Sir Bob Kerslake and commissioned by the then Secretary of State Eric Pickles. The

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<sup>40</sup> I adopt this phrase from Rebecca Coleman (2016)

report documents the council's multiple failures to fulfil child protection duties; to settle equal pay claims (a long-standing case that eventually generated a £1.2 billion compensation bill for thousands of the council's female staff); to manage a confused devolution model; and to account for unsustainable capital projects (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2014).

In the case of the LoB project, the report highlighted a failure of the council to secure external sponsorship to raise sufficient money from land sales of the Paradise Circus Central Library site, which was intended to re-pay the loan of £189 million LoB construction bill. Furthermore, the LoB's annual running costs are around £22 million per year, more than half of which accounts for interest payments on BCC's 'Prudential Borrowing'<sup>41</sup> loan secured to finance the building. The total amount of debt owed for the library construction bill amounts to around £600 million, spread over a 60-year period (Brian, 05/16 interview). It was not only the physical public building costs that broke Birmingham's bank balance, but also its digital infrastructure, outsourced to Capita at a cost of £1.2m to build the new LoB website and a further £190,000 a year to run it, an unprecedentedly exorbitant sum for any library or education institution (*BBC News*, 2014e). The new LoB website was designed to be the future 'knowledge hub' and 'learning web' for the digital age, placing Birmingham's library service at the centre of the virtual landscape of the city's culture (Blewitt and Gambles, 2010). By 2017, the expensive LoB website was abandoned (along with the Capita contract) and the digital interface of the library service was assimilated into a newly standardised website for the whole council, marking a culture change away from 'vanity projects', as one service director put it (Trendall, 2017)<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> 'The Local Government Act 2003 and the Local Government (Scotland) Act 2003 introduced a new capital financing regime, namely the Prudential Borrowing Framework (PBF); local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales became responsible for assessing the affordability, prudence and sustainability of their capital programmes and able to undertake additional borrowing on that basis' (Bailey *et al.*, 2010, p. 348).

<sup>42</sup> Service Birmingham is the name of the company owned by corporate infrastructure giant Capita, to which BCC has outsourced the management and provision of all its IT and Communications infrastructure. The public-private 'Service Birmingham' IT and Communications contract with Capita was signed in 2005 under Whitby's leadership of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition council. When Labour regained control of the city in 2012 they wanted to end the contract but were unable to until 2017. At its peak the Service Birmingham contract with Capita was costing the city council up to £120 million a year (*BBC News*, 2014b).



The original plan to finance the future of LoB was through the Library of Birmingham Development Trust, established in 2010 by Mike Whitby (then Conservative Leader of the council, now a Peer in the House of Lords). This relied on philanthropic contributions from the business sector, but in 2016 the Trust was dissolved due to its failure to generate adequate income. One news report quoted a source close to the Trust stating: ‘the aim was to raise money above and beyond the core function of the library, but as that has reduced and reduced people just started to think ‘what is the point?’’(Brown, 2016).

The desire to realise the LoB as an engine of economic and cultural growth for the city’s future was disrupted by the countervailing forces of capital and hubris: an over-confident belief in the promissory value of private markets over and above the pragmatic public value of the municipal state. Financing the Library of Birmingham project was subject to the unreliable temporality of speculation, building futures upon shifting layers of promise: promissory spaces and the promise to pay. As Lisa Adkins (2017, pp. 458–459) argues, ‘in the time of securitized debt, pasts, presents and futures do not stand in a pre-set relation to one another, but are open to a constant state of revision: they may be drawn and redrawn, assembled and disassembled, set and reset’. This temporality has thrown the infrastructures of Birmingham’s library network into a state of fragmentation and flux, with local community libraries competing with the central LoB for vital resources, and thinly-stretched library staff bearing the brunt of the burden of a service skating on thin ice to cover its areas of statutory provision. The local debt owed by BCC for loans secured to finance the LoB capital project can be read as echoing the deficit of the national economic deficit brought about through speculative banking on a global scale. In this sense, the local scales of finance and public service infrastructure in Birmingham are entangled with global spatio-temporal politics of neoliberal market rule (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2015), and underscores the way in which ‘debt creates a future of always paying for the past’ (Montgomerie, 2015).

Ash, a former member of Birmingham library service staff, decries the false economy of speculatively building a ‘future library’ on a foundation of debt:

they've built a library that's so expensive to run we've got no money as a result. Some people might say – couldn't you build the library as a kind of visionary future? No sorry, you can't build a library for a fifth of a billion pounds and think somehow it's OK. The money's going to have to come from somewhere. [...] We all agreed as colleagues: it's too expensive – it's going to cause a mess – we didn't want it (05/16 interview).

Ash and his colleagues' prediction of the 'mess' that would result from the new library's precarious economic foundations turned into the reality of the very service infrastructure that underpins the library's function and purpose being pulled apart at the seams with the mass redundancies of over half its workforce. While this structural undoing can be attributed to both BCC's poor financial planning and governance *and* the impact of central government-imposed austerity measures, both these causal forces are encompassed within the same 'common sense' economic rationality and political ideology that naturalises the deterministic power of 'the market' to mediate public problems and relies on mechanisms of debt to further profit (Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2015).

Speaking to the local press in March 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron voiced anger and disapproval at BCC's failure to finance its new library efficiently and accused it of playing political games with its economic strategy:

I am angry about Birmingham City Library, because it is a brilliant building. Every time I come into Birmingham it is glinting in the sunlight because of that wonderful metallic framework. It's a wonderful iconic building but it's not just a building, it's providing vital services. [...] now it is being used almost as a sort of political tool by Birmingham City Council to parade their campaign about finances. [...] BCC] needs, as I think everybody knows, some root and branch reform [...] to use the money more wisely as it has plenty of potential financial firepower to deliver good services. But it has a lot of work to do (Birmingham Mail, 2015).

By highlighting LoB as an 'iconic building', Cameron is appealing primarily to an *image* of symbolic value, rather than the reality of what that building can *do* through the human infrastructures that deliver its function. This recalls John's recounting of rejected architect Richard Rogers' point (discussed in Chapter Three) that:

we don't build iconic buildings, buildings become iconic by virtue of the way they're used [...] so it's not what it looks like, it's what it does that matters [...] what it *does* is being dismantled (John, 05/16 interview).

Cameron's rhetoric of 'root and branch reform' conjures an image of *pruning*, while his injunction to 'use the money more wisely' resounds of *prudence* – both tropes that underpin the Conservative ideology of austerity and welfare reform, premised on the people and organisations living and operating within reduced means while neoliberal market rule can freely expand. As Clayton et al. argue (2015, p. 25),

ritualised language, such as 'we're all in this together' [...] 'making tough decisions in tough times' and 'in the national interest' are powerful semiotic tools repeatedly used for convincing that there is no alternative.

This forceful rhetoric is also a central way of governing power relations through the construction of subjectivised and moralised economies, in this case blaming BCC for being bad with money, and hence needs to work hard on itself to be a better manager and producer of both actual and symbolic capital. As Lazzarato argues, 'the effects of debt on subjectivity (guilt and responsibility) allow capitalism to bridge the gap between present and future (2012, p. 46).

By opening his public judgement of BCC's fortunes with a declaration of anger, Cameron harnesses the strategically emotional public registers through what Clarke and Newman (2012) 'alchemy of austerity', which have interpellated national public imaginaries of a new 'virtuous common sense' of fiscal responsibility which is foisted onto local actors and organisations (Blyth, 2013; Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2015). An emotive yet reasoned response to such phenomena is provided by Ash, who argues that the webs of crisis and accountability constricting public services has been spun by central governmental tactics to strengthen the centre of power while undermining local power and publicness, thereby cancelling the future potential of public library development.

I came across a comment recently in the press that described the local cuts that were being made in terms of "local authority austerity". I remember jumping onto a [online] forum and laying into this and saying, 'do not refer to this as local authority austerity - it is not local

authority austerity, it is central government austerity which forces councils to make certain kinds of cuts – I understand why you're saying this, but it's an ideological move to shift the blame onto local authorities and displace the blame away from central government'. I want you to put that in there<sup>43</sup>. It's disgusting! [...] We are where we are today with the decimation of services because of a whole range of neoliberal policies and practices that have absolutely stripped local authorities and library services of resources they needed or could have been channelled better to do stuff. (Ash, idem.)

Ash argues that the *local* governmental practices of outsourced infrastructures and mounting debt are both ensnared in and produced by *central* government ideological and economic mechanisms of austerity and market rule. His impassioned account articulates the doubly-binding and contradictory ways in which both national and local governmental neoliberal forces reinforce each other and ultimately produce greater social inequality.

Ash's argument comes from live, embodied experience of the issues he addresses. Having been made redundant (along with approximately 100 of his colleagues) from his permanent post with the library service just nine months before I interviewed him, such double-binds were thrown into sharp relief through Ash's own predicament. Ash's outreach work, which he delivered through over a decade of employment with the library service, was firmly grounded in a specialist practice that bridged social, cultural and economic inequalities across the diverse city of Birmingham. His redundancy has placed him in an inequitable situation whereby he has become one of the precarious publics he previously served, seeking to apply his expertise in a rapidly diminishing and unstable employment market, finding ways to survive on temporary contracts against uncertain future horizons. These consequences are part of what Rebecca Coleman identifies as the 'affective economy' of austerity and indebtedness, through which 'the blurring or recalibration of the boundaries between past, present and future are affective – *felt and lived out*' (2016, p. 93, her emphasis). The next section explores further angles on such experience through accounts of redundant specialist library professionals whose expert practices and values have been

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<sup>43</sup> i.e. in the thesis

excised from the library's living infrastructure, leaving behind hollow spaces and disconnected temporal lobes in the city's knowledge cortex.

## 6.2 Cutting neural networks: the life and death of connections and collections

Ash recounts starting his role at Birmingham Central Library over a decade ago, recalling being impressed by the phenomenal numbers and expertise of staff he was adding to: 'it was a fully functioning, thriving workplace - *really powerful!*' (05/16 interview). He was struck by the longevity of service of his colleagues, many of whom had worked there for between 25 and 50 years (one librarian had worked in the Victorian, Modernist and post-modern library buildings during her half-century career), demonstrating true commitment to their specialist practices in a wide range public library service delivery, from outreach and education work, to archival and acquisitions work, to children's librarianship and partnership work with arts and culture organisations, all of which raised Birmingham Library Service to a benchmark institution for service excellence (John, 05/16 interview).

Within the space of a few years, however, Ash started to feel the wealth of knowledge practices 'whittle down, and after 2008 it sort of whittled down even more', with organisational restructures and wholesale deletion of specialist 'permanent' posts.

When the VR [voluntary redundancy] came, we said the library had lost 2,000 years in that VR sweep, all the people, 100 staff or so meant the library had lost the aggregate total of 2,000 years expertise. [...] It's devastating. (Ash, 05/16 interview)

The temporal value calculation made by Ash and his colleagues reveals how the cumulative historical weight of expert library practice – two millennia-worth of knowledge – is subtracted from the library's public value in the rapidly compressed time-space of declining years, months and days that followed the global economic crisis. In the blink of an eye, a once thriving and awe-inspiring workforce was dwindled

to a hollow shell of its former self. The euphemistic human resources jargon of ‘voluntary redundancy’ is a cold mask for this inhumane process, as there is little agency left to those in the ‘devastating’ position of ‘choosing’ between the survival of the library and their own livelihoods. Another important story of this loss of agency and value is told through Pete’s experience.

Pete worked for over 25 years for Birmingham library service in a bespoke role as a head curator of photography collections, before being made redundant in summer 2015. Along with the deletion of his post, the entire photography department team of archivists was made redundant. Pete describes a key moment that defined his vocational calling, which occurred when he was an art history MA student at Birmingham Polytechnic in the late 1980s, specialising in early photography. He spent long hours in Birmingham Central Library exploring their extensive collection of early photography periodicals and uncatalogued photographic archives of photography inventors and pioneers Benjamin Stone and William Jerome Harrison.

I came to one of the collections and one of the library assistants here in the old building said ‘oh you’ve come to see the *dead collections*’, and I was like what d’you mean by ‘dead collections’? ‘oh well they’re just like dormant you know, they just sit here and wait for somebody to come and look at them but we don’t actually do anything with them.’  
*... but how can you bear to have something so remarkable and not be inspired to try and do something with it?* So everything really went from that moment about, it was always about animating the archives, developing the archives, putting them in the public domain, curating them, putting them in contact with researchers, it was all about bringing them to light so I always thought of myself as a collections animator rather than a curator as such (Pete, 04/16 interview, his emphasis).

The corporeal image of bringing dead collections to life is a potent one that encapsulates what Pete goes on to narrate about how his career at the library evolved along with the growth of the photography collections themselves.

After graduating, he offered to catalogue the photography archives and connect them with the bibliographic works dispersed across the general reference collections which evaded classification due to what he calls the ‘slippery’ epistemic form of photography, which led to his unique post being created by the library director. Pete’s

position evolved to eventually getting a small team of his own and running huge Arts Council-funded projects that turned the library's collections into a regional centre for contemporary and historical photography, led the MLA to award the library 'designated status', authorising both national and international significance to the collections.

As well as working with the existing collections of early photography, Pete also expanded the collections by proactively commissioning new work by local, national and international photographers that represented the diverse cultural makeup of the city, 'expanding the archive so that you're making a statement not only about now but about the future' (Pete, 04/16 interview). Copies of newly commissioned works by black and minority ethnic and working-class photographers were curated as part of annual outdoor exhibitions in the public square, democratising access and attracting new audiences into the library. As this work developed, so did the range of public enquiries on accessing the collections.

Pete describes how collections are discovered by library users not simply through card catalogues and search engines,

but actually, all that knowledge exists in a neural network between a group of people and if that gets lost or that jigsaw gets broken then knowledge or the access to those collections, for all of those groups of users, then gets lost. ... as a team if somebody came in or emailed in an enquiry and one person didn't know or knew a bit they could ask the others and you could put the bits of the jigsaw together and you can say oh yes I've seen that, that sounds like that and somebody else could say it's in that shelf or it's down there, so you collectively find things and in doing that you'd discover more about your own collections and about the history of photography and about how you might answer that enquiry but that's all locked up in those individuals (04/16 interview).

With this striking neurological metaphor Pete articulates how public knowledge infrastructures are made of people above all else. While the physical and digital objects of knowledge are positioned within walls, shelves, servers and wires, they are listless without the human synaptic nodes that animate them and connect them to other living, desiring beings. The neural network of librarians, archivists and photography curators grew connections with increasingly diverse and global publics, democratising the

library's reach and proliferating a growing circulatory system of production, dissemination and access around visual works of creativity and knowledge. By 2015, the Library of Birmingham photography collection rivalled that of the British Library or the Victoria and Albert Museum, comprising 'over 3.5m items: negatives, prints, lantern slides, photographic albums, books and albums illustrated with original photographic prints, and a large collection of literature associated with photography' (Seymour, 2015). With the mass redundancies and departmental restructure of 2015, the neural network that animated access to this collection was effectively lobotomised.

Ash adds to this point with his reflection on the flattening out of knowledge that occurred with the re-structured staffing model.

The neoliberal model is that they don't want anyone to be extremely good - everybody should be able to fit into any role - and the problem is if you do that you de-specialise - you end up with a load of people who are just average at stuff. ... I mean a library is fundamentally about knowledge and information. How can you make people not experts in that? How can you create a situation where the very people who you rely upon for knowledge and information - are extremely average at their jobs, or so pushed for time that they can't help you? (Ash, 05/16 interview)

Echoing Ash's concerns, Pete reflects how staff employed at LoB post-cuts lack the expertise and time to animate the collections and turn them into live connections between people to generate new forms of knowledge and creativity.

There's a lot of new temporary staff and the staff who have that long-term knowledge have largely gone. People are so pressurised now it's just about service delivery and stuff, and no time for creative thinking around what that service is. So despite the proposition of this building being all about being a research centre it's gone back to being, it's almost come full circle in a way, the collections have gone back to being dead collections (Pete, 04/16 interview).



## Returning to dead collections: haunted hollows

The missing cognitive connections in the library's nerve centre produce voids in Birmingham's institutional and cultural memory. Pete describes how the staff offices that occupy the upper floors of the Library of Birmingham, designed to house hives of activity hidden from public view, are now 'huge barren spaces where there's all these desks and work terminals but there's nobody to operate them. It's like the *Mary Celeste* up there, it's extraordinary'. This image of a lonely ghost ship is a haunting one, and recalls the words of Minister George Dawson who, in his inaugural speech that opened the first Birmingham Central Free Library in 1865, declared '[t]here are few places that I would rather haunt after my death than this room'<sup>44</sup>. The fate of that original library flew up in the flames that engulfed it, a ruination that was to be repeated in the bulldozing of its replacement library in 1973 and the demolition of the Madin library in 2016. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century library befalls a different kind of demolition. As Dawson's ghost traces its way through three centuries rise and fall in the centre of Birmingham's knowledge constructions, there are plenty of spaces within their infrastructural cavities for him to haunt.

As Avery Gordon aptly puts it (2008, p. 190), 'to be haunted is to be tied to social and historical effects'. Vivien, who was a senior librarian at BCC during the 1970s and '80s, and Head of the Library Service during the 1990s, describes feeling an affective tie of this nature every time she visits the new library or local communities where she may encounter former colleagues. Despite having left the service several years before the latest economic crises hit the library service, Vivien is pained by the effects on the professional people and practices she knew and valued in her long career in Birmingham libraries.

Vivien was a specialist children's librarian and directed leading-edge work in the 1990s that created the national Centre for the Child in the heart of Birmingham

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<sup>44</sup> Discussed in Chapter 4, section 3

Central Library, pioneered the establishment the national Bookstart<sup>45</sup> early literacy scheme, and leading training in best practice for library and education practitioners (CILIP, 2002). When Vivien first visited the new children's library in the new LoB basement she admits she 'was terribly shocked. It's dark, it's airless, it's patently not seen as an important space in the building, it's poorly staffed' (05/16 interview). The de-prioritisation of public library services for children is not unique to Birmingham. Recent research has revealed that between 2010-2016 across the English public library network, there has been an overall 78% decline in children's staff, with 22% of authorities having eliminated all specialist children's roles from their library services within this period (Robertson and McMenemy, 2018, p. 10).

Vivien narrates another occasion she visited LoB when she'd met up with some former colleagues (retired heads of services for children from other local authorities) in Birmingham for a meal, and they'd asked to see the new library. She took them into the children's library, where she ran into a member of staff she had worked closely with years before on children's activities. 'She came up to me and just burst into tears and said, 'they've all gone it's dreadful here now I hate it I hate it!'' The emotion in Vivien's account is palpable, and loss of knowledge and practice she testifies to is laid bare in her admission that she 'has trouble going into libraries these days'.

I dread meeting library staff in the street [...] We were - as an organisation the culture was if someone was leaving or moving on you'd maybe have a little do and you made a speech and they got a present and everybody was made to feel they'd been important even if they were leaving. [...] Recently I was talking to someone I used to work with there and she said, '*I just went into the library one day, and picked up this letter saying I was dismissed. I looked around there wasn't a single person I really had known for longer than about a couple of months. I walked off down the road thinking I've worked for that service for thirty years*'. It really has been very distressing for a lot of people. (Vivien, 05/16 interview)

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<sup>45</sup> Bookstart national charitable programme founded in 1992 that provides free books for 0-5-year-olds to encourage reading from infancy. Books and early years literacy advocacy are delivered to parents via public libraries outreach programmes, Surestart children's centres NHS health visiting services, all of which have been drastically cut and hollowed out since 2010 (Robertson and McMenemy, 2018b).

The sudden mass termination of life lines that sustained the public infrastructure of the library service leaves behind a disturbing void. There is a jarring temporality to this process, as people who invested their life's work into the library are abruptly dismissed and displaced from one time-space to another, from a network of familiar relations with long-term colleagues sharing common spaces, values and ends, to a lonely walk 'down the road' to an unknown end. While the doors to the Marie Celeste-like library close behind them, these redundant workers are denied a sense of psychological or social closure. Vivien dreads encountering former colleagues in the street and avoids going into libraries as the 'social and historical effects' that these 'ghostly matters' are tied to are too much to bear (Gordon, 2008). The centuries-old spectral rhythms of creative destruction and disjunction rattle the library and the city in the present era of hollowed out public service landscapes and disconnected neural networks.

### **6.3 Staying 'open for learning': between quality and quantity, cradle and grave**

The cuts in opening hours and staff that threatened to turn the prestigious LoB building into an 'empty shell' just over a year after it first opened generated wide coverage in the national and regional press, and were described as 'embarrassing' by the council (BBC News, 2015b). What was less widely publicised, however, was the hollowing out of the city's community library service. At the time of my fieldwork in 2016, Birmingham's community library service network comprised 39 libraries (one of which was run by a voluntary organisation). Between 2011-2015 BCC's budget that funds this community library network dropped from £9m to £4m. The impact on the staffing infrastructure, and thereby the quality of service they can provide to their publics, has been severe. Claire recalls how prior to austerity there was one community librarian for every neighbourhood library 'and that person knew their community absolutely inside out, they had all the detail around the service they were delivering, and they were really personalising what each library was doing to support the community they were serving ... providing a cradle to the grave service' (05/16

interview). By 2016, however, 39 community librarian posts were reduced to 11, still serving 39 libraries with an increased population.

Librarians now manage multiple sites across different wards so there is no time or capacity to develop and deliver holistic library services tailored to each community. Most of their time is spent firefighting ‘building issues or staffing issues’ across the sites they manage, leaving little or no time for actual community librarianship or service development (idem.). ‘Staff are really quite exhausted from covering with hardly anybody else being there, and I think morale is exceedingly low, which is really sad, because I think if you look at our staff traditionally people stay within the service for a very long time, a career really’ (Claire, 05/16 interview).

Given the need to maintain a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ statutory service under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, library service directors are placed in an impossible situation of how to maintain sufficient coverage of delivery with rapidly diminishing resources (HMSO, 1964). Brian articulates how this problem results in a catch-22 situation whereby whatever strategy of implementing the cuts is taken, the result is equally bad:

I think you can look at the usage patterns of public libraries because there’s potentially a very dangerous cycle of service reductions that we’ve entered into where if hours are reduced then the usage goes down and that justifies further reduction in hours and eventually closure. The politicians in one sense have been quite right to say we’ll cut the hours across the board rather than close a percentage of libraries under our control, because they’re quite right to say you will never get it back. But on the other hand, that means that the use of all libraries tends to go down because the hours have been reduced. (Brian, 05/16 interview)

By highlighting how cuts to library services correlates with declines in their usage, Brian shows how the part of the legislative clause that stipulates statutory public library service provision should be ‘for all persons desiring to make use thereof’ is as vital as the ‘comprehensive and efficient’ part, for how can people know or access what they desire to use unless a comprehensive and efficient range of resources are available to them? The quality versus quantity dilemma in a sense becomes a choice between comprehensiveness *or* efficiency – by having to make efficiency savings the council is

unable offer a comprehensive service, so one cancels out the other, emptying out the meaning of what a public library can be.

The contorted positions of having to provide whilst at the same time taking away is articulated by another BCC decision-maker, Alex, who is responsible for directing services that sit within the council's 'Neighbourhoods and Communities' division, which includes the strategic direction of all Birmingham's 39 community libraries, as well as responsibility for council tax, welfare and benefits services; youth and careers services; school crossing patrols; community centres; governing district committees; and commissioning third sector advice. No service director wants to cut or close libraries, Alex argues, but faced with the ever-increasing problem of how to square the widening circle of public need with rapidly diminishing resources, they remain stuck between two equally undesirable options on how to move forward.

It's this balance I suppose between downsizing within the reduced resource that you've got versus well, what investment do you need to make to maintain your library service into something that is more looking to the future (Alex, 05/16 interview).

The conundrum Alex describes evokes an image of an impossible balancing act where moving forwards will result in either toppling over or dropping some vital provisions.

Alex reduces these challenges to the 'bottom line' of choosing between quality and quantity of service:

If it wasn't such a sensitive and well-loved service area, you could say with the resources we've got we'll provide less library facilities but of a better quality whereby you can get a range of things that we would like to offer through the library service provision. But that's a very hard nut to crack, because most of the pushback around the service provision will be about numbers of locations. It's almost an easier thing to do to generate a larger number of lower quality libraries than it is to provide a smaller number of better quality libraries because of the resistance that is out there about the locality of having something that is easily accessible.

The 'pushback' and 'resistance' Alex refers to here results from a political climate where local councillors often do not want to see the community library in their ward closed, due to the activist campaigns and bad publicity that would erupt and threaten

their electoral security. As the then Deputy Leader of BCC Ian Ward disapprovingly puts it, ‘there’s a worrying political view that’s emerged that as long as you keep the buildings open that ticks the box, that’s the job done’ (05/16 interview).

Under his broad service remit, Alex co-developed a strategy framework labelled ‘Open for Learning’, which he describes as ‘a combination of property versus service review as to how services could work more closely together’ (05/16 interview). I ask Alex about the choice of ‘Open for Learning’ as the name for this strategy and he replies that it was a way of encompassing keeping a range of neighbourhood services ‘open’ for the development of the community, while the way in which those services are housed may need to change, emphasising a ‘service-focused not asset-focused approach’. The implied point here is not where or how they are accessed but that they can be accessed at all. ‘Open for Learning’ plans include selling antiquated library buildings and combining housing and benefits advice desks and library services under one modern roof, in ‘one stop shop’-style community ‘hubs’.

Library Assistant Helena explains that as a result of one council’s strategy proposal to consolidate its neighbourhood service outputs, frontline library staff would be expected to carry out verifications of citizens’ benefit applications – scanning and verifying forms and identity documents and sending them to the relevant department for processing – a time consuming over the counter procedure that used to be done in local authority neighbourhood welfare offices by Grade 4 level staff but has now been downgraded to Grade 2 staff. ‘So rather than concentrating on library related funding or anything like that to enhance the library services that we offer, it’s more about getting other council services in libraries to make us more busy and save money’ (Helena, 04/16 interview). Helena is concerned that ‘people who need to access the neighbourhood offices have different needs to library users’, which could pose conflicts of interest, particularly among vulnerable user groups. Ash shares Helena’s concern about the mixing of different kinds of welfare services in a library space: ‘cynically, I wonder how much intentional a move that is by local authorities to kill off particular libraries, because once you deaden the feeling around a particular local community library and people don’t want to go, is that relocation the death knell for that service? I suspect it is’ (Ash, 05/16 interview).

BCC's 2016 Budget Plan outlines cuts and savings to be made from this rationalisation of local assets as rising from £1.7m in 2016/17 to £12.2m by 2019/20 (Birmingham City Council, 2016). The Birmingham Libraries Campaign group issued a public response to this, arguing:

these proposals mark a move to the wholesale closure of Community Libraries in the city. Taken with the number of posts identified to be at risk from the recently issued Section 188 notice, a nearly 50% of the current library workforce, this proposal represents an unprecedented level of cut and reduction to the CLS [Community Library Services] in the city. [...] Apart from the 'rationalisation of local assets' there is no strategic vision as to what role the CLS is to play in the life of Birmingham's citizens. The aim of rationalising, cutting and closing, local assets clearly leads the 'Open for Learning' approach.

Activists from Birmingham Library Campaigns have plenty of first-hand experience of how this process of asset-stripping impacts local communities, gained from their struggles to protect libraries from closure in some of the city's most deprived neighbourhoods. The final section of this chapter will examine the value and values at stake in their fight to save and sustain a comprehensive library service for the whole city of Birmingham, exposing the qualitative value and embodied labour that underpins the market logics of dividing library infrastructures into 'rationalised assets'.

#### **6.4 False economies: falling between value and values**

The infrastructures and drivers that keep libraries 'open for learning' are not simply those behind neatly titled council strategies, nor the stoic efforts of undervalued library employees, but also a hidden army of unpaid labour by volunteer campaigners fighting to keep the doors open and their values upheld. I interviewed a group of three such campaigners who narrated the numerous local libraries they have been fighting to save from closure and hollowing-out, particularly those in deprived neighbourhoods. One of the campaigners, Ann, pointed out the false economy that austerity measures and welfare reform is based on, as well as the invisible labour that gets missed in discussions on public service leadership and value.

Do you know what though, librarians are cheap compared to lots of other people – they're not consultants, they're not head teachers, they're cheap. And from that point of view, the cuts are a totally false economy. But they get consultants in on 90 grand to sort out the cuts. I found one of them on Twitter and called him out, and our [BCC] Chief Exec chimed in: 'you have to pay for good leadership', and I said 'actually, there's loads of people doing good leadership, and most of them are not paid anything'. [...] right across the city there are people giving squillions of hours of time and energy (04/16 interview).

Ann highlights here the 'people as infrastructure' (Simone, 2004)<sup>46</sup> of activist and community work done out of principled values that are allied to the value of the municipal welfare state. Ann and her campaigner colleagues invest countless hours of their unpaid labour to fight austerity cuts and protect their public services. This, argues Ann, is a vital form of leadership needed to keep communities and services afloat – a contribution to the city that cannot be measured in the quantitative terms of financial consultancy or investment in 'the visitor economy' that the LoB project appeals to. The activist labour of campaign meetings, preparing, publicising and performing protest actions are vital but hidden and unaccounted for infrastructural practices. Ann feels that in excising and devaluing the people that make the library work, i.e. the professionals that activate and facilitate resources for its vulnerable users, and the campaigners that fight to keep this possible, the result is an even greater deficit of social value. These hidden labours and value contradictions will be explored in subsequent chapters by examining the practices of volunteers running library services in New Cross.

Social activism also came into effect in efforts to save the LoB photography department from decimation. An acerbic blog post by published by Francis Hodgson, Professor in the Culture of Photography at the University of Brighton, denounced the council's excision of this knowledge domain from the library's infrastructure as a deeply regressive and political act, urging publics to intervene and rally to reverse the decision.

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<sup>46</sup> As introduced in Chapter One, Simone's analytical concept defines the collaborative social infrastructures of provisioning that emerge in post-colonial contexts of urban and municipal precarity. The way in which I adapt this concept for my own research field is explored in greater depth in Chapter Nine.



If it's perfectly all right for photography effectively to cease being a care of the Library of Birmingham, then we go back forty, fifty years without a blink. It's a disaster. It's also entirely avoidable. Culture costs relatively nothing, and its contribution is relatively huge. Take that equation out of the hands of accountants and put it in the hands even of the spinners who need to fight the next election and it becomes a very powerful argument (Hodgson, 2014).

A high-profile campaign was launched to save the library's photography department, with some renowned depositors threatening to withdraw their work from the collections. A petition was signed by 3,247 people, including famous photographers and leading cultural experts from around the world, and submitted to the leader of the council, but ultimately proved unsuccessful (Change.org, 2015).

I ask Pete if the monumental value of the photographic collections could not have been used as a weapon in the library's argument to keep their specialist staff. Cuts-wielding politicians may not be able to grasp the aesthetic and epistemic value of the collections, but perhaps if they understood their financial worth they could understand the importance of their being safeguarded for the cultural heritage of Birmingham.

I think it's a double-edged sword, part of our argument was that we'd raised over one and a half million pounds in terms of grants and sponsorship over the ten years to support the collections, which in the scheme of things isn't a lot, but by only two of us, so we thought that was pretty good. But I think the other thing is if you tell the councillors now that they have assets that are worth a lot of money, they'll sell them ...so it's bound up in all other kinds of local and national politics, but the thing that's fallen through the middle is the vision of what the library is, what the library can be, what it should be, what kind of an asset it is and how they're going to make that work for the city. It's just become, it's almost as if it's become a millstone round their neck now. What do we do with the library? (Pete, 04/16 interview)

A millstone is a dead weight with a hole in the centre, through which – following Pete's metaphor – the meaning of the library falls. This recalls Raymond William's enduring question of what should be placed at the centre of our communities in times of rapid social and economic change. In the case of Birmingham, a shiny new library building is planted at the centre, glittering on the outside with symbolic cultural

capital, but internally eviscerated of the capacity to catalyse that capital into applied, intrinsic educational value for its public users. What becomes emptied out here, as well as in the brutal cuts to Birmingham's community library services, is also the meaning of an informed democratic society 'because learning is the deepest meaning of the society we are trying to create' (Williams, 1966, p. 365).

An excerpt from the group interview with Birmingham Libraries Campaign activists reveals how the societal direction in which Birmingham is careering is the other kind that Williams' feared would take root, namely one based on the value of capital.

Ann: they keep saying 'oh it's about the budget it's about the budget', but the truth is, they're having this square renovated, we're having Paradise re-built, we're having more offices, more flats, they're spending squillions extending the tram, so there's money for certain things. [...] One of the narratives which is very unsettling is this idea that if we attract big companies – like Deutsche Bank, which we already have in Broad Street –well Deutsche Bank doesn't give a fuck about social justice, Deutsche Bank is making money. And the truth is, if we don't look after the people at the bottom, they'll be the ones draining the health service, they'll be the ones not going to school or can't get a job, they will be the ones who the police are dealing with.

Martin: ...well given that the massive cuts came in within what, a year of opening? The council doesn't join up the dots. They're obsessed with marketing Birmingham.

Ann: Yes. Marketing Birmingham is big.

Jeevan: Commercial City. It's a commercial city rather than a city for the people.

Martin: Someone should have joined up the dots and said 'we're 700 million short on this - can we carry that on? Because we're already in a period of long term cuts'. No. What would be the consequence of opening this massive library with all these services extra to what was there before and then we'll have to close them? Well the answer was obvious.

Ann: Well I think [names another local library campaign leader] saw all this even before the library was built - he could see all this was coming

Martin: that was what the demo was about when it opened.

(Campaigners group interview, 04/16)

The campaigners' reflections draw attention to both the values and value at stake in the creative destruction of their city and their library. Their collective feeling is that the city council values its own image more than it does the welfare of its people, a propensity that blinds it to understanding the real cost or value of living and learning, which is subsumed by commercial values. As concerned citizens invested in public welfare and social justice, the campaigners have foresight into the deficits and decline that this myopia will inevitably produce, which spurs them into action with activist interventions as they try to stay ahead of the game in the fight to maintain public services.

Retired LoB Director Brian reflects on a tricky value distinction between that which can be accounted for or measured, and that which counts or matters.

So when I said the library will be a visitor attraction I don't think I quite knew what we meant by that, what the implications would be. That delivered the numbers, people still come to see it as a phenomenal building and an interesting public space I suppose. I'm not sure where the economic value in that is, it could be somebody would work out a methodology for that. But again, how much of that would you trade for one child who is inspired to learn because whether they're a three-year-old and they have a tantrum when they're asked to leave the library or a cynical fourteen-year-old who comes in a library and says this is a cool place I'm coming back, how do you reconcile those as different sets of values? (05/16 interview)

Reconciling these different sets of values, as Brian highlights, is an enduring problem in demonstrating the value of libraries. The qualitative experiences and impacts of the many services public libraries provide through social and professional infrastructures, are notoriously difficult to measure in numbers alone, which means they are at risk of being subtracted from that which *counts* (in both senses of the word) in the economic

models and neoliberal logics and metrics that govern public services (Usherwood and Linley, 1999). McMenemy argues that the public library is a service that ‘constantly has to defend its right to exist’, a challenge that is exacerbated through the pressure to quantitatively demonstrate its value to politicians (2007, p. 273). McMenemy maintains, however, that the social and educational value of library services cannot be reduced to ‘pounds, shilling and pence’, since analysing the number of times books have been borrowed tells us nothing about the experience of reading those books and the benefit that has on both individuals and society (p. 275). What is clear, is the negative impact hollowed-out library services has on society (Lansdall-Welfare, Lampos and Cristianini, 2012; McCahill, Birdi and Jones, 2018; Robertson and McMenemy, 2018).

## **6.5 ‘Alzheimer’s in the nation’s brain’**

A telling anecdote from library campaigner Ann can be read as an allegory for the social value and institutional memory loss that is falling through the central cavity of the hollowed out and fragmented library service.

... it sounds like a library isn't essential. Your house, food and water are essential. But if you've got your house food and water you then need entertainment and learning and one of the dilemmas is, we talk a lot about social isolation and the damage to people's health, and I would argue a welcoming library makes a lot of difference. Like in West Heath, it's a little enclave, and there's a lot of elderly people there. There's a little elderly lady with dementia and she walks down there with her books a few times a week hoping to return them and doesn't really realise it's closed and walks back. (05/16 interview)



Figure 6.3: West Heath Library (Image source: Birmingham Libraries Campaigns, 2014b)

There was a lively campaign to save West Heath Library from closure, which was unfortunately unsuccessful. Present in the loss of this battle is another kind of loss, that of memory, symbolised poignantly in the lonely image of the old woman with dementia who fails to remember her local library is no longer open. I remark to Ann that this anecdote reminds me of a Ted Hughes poem that was commissioned to preface an national report published in 1997 titled “New Library: The People’s Network”. This report, which coincided with the inauguration of the New Labour era (as well as the first plans for a new Library of Birmingham), launched a national infrastructure of public computing in public libraries across the country, with curated online content tied to lifelong learning objectives (Library and Information Commission, 1997). The report was an optimistic one celebrating this moment, however Hughes’ opening 11-stanza poem had a foreboding tone, warning of the dangers of politics and conflict that have caused the libricide of libraries throughout the centuries. The poem’s central stanza reads:

Where any nation starts awake  
Books are the memory. And it's plain  
Decay of libraries is like  
Alzheimer's in the nation's brain.

Hughes' portentous lines are a sobering lens through which to read the institutional memory loss that has occurred with the lobotomisation of Birmingham libraries' neural network.

The elderly woman who repeatedly forgets that her library is closed can be read as an allegorical trope to illustrate Paul Connerton's (2009) theory of *How Modernity Forgets*, which emphasises the rooted association between memory and human geography, as multiple embodied temporalities shape the order of localised urban and institutional spaces. In the modern context of advanced capitalism, lived temporalities precipitate collective memory failure, through accelerated velocities of 'the time of the labour process, the time of consumption, the time of career structures, and the time of information and media production' (Connerton, 2009, p. 40). Connerton argues how 'the casualisation of labour conditions' has both legally and normatively eroded 'social trust' and diminishes public confidence in the state and in social justice (p. 75). This erosion thereby dissolves people's experience of time, weakening abilities to plan for the future and undermining 'the same expectations that yield guidelines for the conduct of our everyday life', engendering a general social condition of being 'hyper-present' with jeopardised capacities to remember (p. 76). As Fontefrancesco puts it,

Modernity seems to be crushing all the elements that permitted the individual to keep living memory of her life: the labour is forgotten in the rhetoric of commerce, the urban space continuously remodelled, the cycle of life of the new products is almost zeroized. (2010, p. 145)

In the silencing, devaluing and forgetting of specialist labour necessary for keeping the public library-as-infrastructure (Mattern, 2014) alive, the life-cycles of people using the library are also compromised.

As well as highlighting the institutional memory losses that impact elderly library users, Birmingham's library campaigners lament the loss of spatial practices that affect the lives of much younger generations. Ann and Martin remark on the loss of children's furniture, mats and toys which used to be a highlight for families using the old Central Library but were discarded with the move to the new building.

Ann:           Where's the value in that? You know if you move house, you don't just throw everything out ... Whoever

designed this had no idea what it's like to be out with a two or three year old.

Martin: There was a huge range of children's activities, and they've all gone. All sorts of things have gone.

Alice: What's left?

Ann: What's left? Temporary staff. Self-service machines.

What's left is the fight to save what's left of the public library infrastructure and safeguard further losses of buildings and permanent specialist staff.

The social value of the public library is what pushes Ann and her activist volunteer colleagues to keep campaigning at local, regional and national scales against austerity and for the integrity of the statutory public library form. Ann, Martin and Jeevan took a keen interest in the London public library context, having joined forces with library campaigners from around the country in a national 'Speak up for Libraries' event in London on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2016 to lobby parliament against the 'national scandal' of public library losses (Onwuemezi, 2016). At the time of my conversation with the Birmingham campaigners, in early April 2016, a nine-day-long activist occupation of a Carnegie public library building in Lambeth was taking place as a protest against its closure along with that of nine others in the borough (BBC News, 2016). The Birmingham campaigners posted messages of solidarity to the Lambeth activists on their blog and images of the occupation made national news headlines. The author and illustrator Chris Riddell, who was the Children's Laureate in 2016, published online a drawing he made to support the Lambeth Carnegie Library occupation:



Figure 6.4: 'Carnegie Library Occupation' Riddell, 2016

This illustration of a child suspended in a 'hyper-present' space between the closed doors of the past and the future encapsulates Connerton's theory of the cultural amnesia of modernity. The Carnegie Library building in Lambeth was transformed the following year into a private gym where paying members enter to run on treadmills that go nowhere. The building retains a few books and a self-service machine for adults to enable borrowing: an empty token gesture towards its former self as a living human library infrastructure.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the LoB, which was designed to 'rewrite the book' of both the library and the city through its future-oriented public interface, is now barely able to provide for the future of that city through its lobotomised neural



networks and hollowed-out human infrastructures. The telling ‘accounts’ of both the library’s financial balance sheets and the experiences of its current and former staff narrate a story of a municipal state struggling to survive, with the valiant efforts of professional library staff and volunteer library activists combining to form its life support mechanisms.

The next three chapters offer another angle on this story of how the state of the public library embodies the state of the municipal state. Turning now to a volunteer-run public library in South East London, the rhythms of Birmingham’s creative destruction can be discerned here as instead a sort of destructive creation, or as Kirsten Forkert puts it, ‘austere creativity’ (2016a), whereby the local state is transformed through processes of ‘community asset transfer’ and counter-public activist practices. Through a detailed reading of this site, connections can be drawn between how the values of learning and public equity of access push against the value of capital, as contested claims to publicness are (re)made through networks of austerity localism.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Whose library? Situating the public struggles and openings of New Cross Learning**

Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space ... new social relations demand a new space, and vice-versa (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 59).

#### **7.0 Introduction**

This extended introduction sets out the governmental policy and economic context in which the New Cross Learning (NXL) ethnographic site is embedded in order to establish what kind of institutional entity it is and inform the terms of debate in the chapters that follow. It also introduces the key analytical frames for this chapter's focus on how space, place and publics are produced and politicised. The key question this chapter explores is: how do localised spatial practices of NXL contribute to wider public struggles against dominant governmental spaces of neoliberalism and austerity, while at the same time participating in those spaces?

The first half of the chapter locates NXL in time and space, tracing its historical architectural and urban formations, before turning to the contemporary design of the building's 'shop front', so-called because of its former life as a local supermarket. By examining the public interface of the library façade, a multi-layered view of social and political space can be discerned, which reveals multiple ways in which cities are being re-made through the social life of urban form (Tonkiss, 2013b). Reading the library's shop front also reveals ways in which publics and counter-publics (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002a) are curated and addressed, thereby speaking to Janet Newman's (2006) question of how a politics of 'the public' can be understood and restated.

The second half of the chapter explores the politics of space through NXL's origin story as a site of social struggle. A range of activists resisted the closure of the library under austerity and fought for their rights to public space and service using conflicting spatial tactics and compromised negotiations, thereby convening counter-publics against the dominant spaces and logics of austerity and neoliberalisation of public services. These two parts of the chapter work together to make an argument that challenges the binary logics of service/space and state/community, by revealing the multiple and entangled dynamics and trajectories that work simultaneously to produce social space and value.

### **What is NXL?**

NXL is a community library in the London Borough of Lewisham, staffed entirely by volunteers which has been open as such since 13<sup>th</sup> August 2011. Defining what constitutes a community library in England today is by no means straightforward. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and early part of the 21<sup>st</sup>, “community library” denoted a neighbourhood library run by local authorities as part of a national public library network. Within this network community libraries were delivered across every district and borough of the country, tailored to serve the cultural, leisure and learning needs and interests of each specific neighbourhood while upholding national statutory library standards (Black and Muddiman, 1997; McMenemy, 2009). More recently, the term is used as a catch-all for “community-supported libraries”, “community-managed libraries”, “commissioned community libraries” or “independent community libraries” (Locality, 2012; DCMS Libraries Taskforce, 2018): varying organisational models that have emerged in the wake of austerity and the Localism Act 2011. NXL can be understood as an example of a “community managed library”, defined by Locality (2012, p.9) as ‘community-led and largely community delivered, rarely with paid staff, but often with some form of ongoing Council support and often still part of the public library network’. NXL was formerly a council-run branch library of Lewisham Library and Information Service, which still provides book stock, circulation hardware and software, peripatetic liaison support from council staff and a lease on the building.

The Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010 cut 26% from Lewisham's overall budget (totalling £88m spread over four years). By February 2011, the Labour-stronghold council decided it could no longer afford to run a full public library service which was delivered from 12 buildings across the borough, claiming that 'a radical approach is needed to respond to the challenges that the Council faces' (London Borough of Lewisham, 2011b). Lewisham council defines its Library and Information Service as comprising 'lending, reference, reader development, literacy, access to technology, children's programmes and community information' services. The 2010/11 council budget report argues that savings of

£755k will be achieved through a staffing restructure of the library and information service. A new structure has been proposed that will continue to deliver the Council's Library and Information Service following the proposed closure of 5 library buildings in Sydenham, Blackheath, Crofton Park, Grove Park and New Cross (London Borough of Lewisham, 2011a).

This proposed new structure of continued service delivery from the five closed libraries was based on tendering out the management of the library buildings and collections to third sector organisations via Community Asset Transfer (CAT) proceedings.

In spring 2011, a local social enterprise called Eco Computer Systems Ltd. (later re-named Eco Communities), which recycles used IT hardware and provides IT training, won the CAT bid to take over responsibility for three of the library buildings cut from the council's portfolio; while Age Exchange, a charity that supports older people with dementia, took over the contract for the fourth library. New Cross Library was not initially allocated to any bidders and in early 2011 was closed, amid rumours that the premises would be sold to a pound store franchise. The council's decision-making report argued that the building's maintenance and repair costs were too high, and the asset 'could lend itself to an alternative shop use that would influence the potential site value' (London Borough of Lewisham, 2011b). This predicament is redolent of Julian Dobson's analysis of 'a series of disconnected decisions [that] have helped to kill town centres', as public services and facilities in our high streets are closed and transformed into homogenised commercial chains (Dobson, 2015, p. 139).

Concerned local residents quickly mobilised to mount a campaign to save New Cross Library, petitioning the council to re-open it for the local community. A range of different activists converged around the cause to save the library, which at one point involved an overnight occupation of the building. The space was ultimately reclaimed through the persistent campaigning efforts of some key campaigners who formed a 'New Cross People's Library' (NXPL) committee. After protracted negotiations requiring the support of sympathetic councillors and forming a strategic alliance with a neighbourhood charity, by September 2011 the NXPL Committee managed to secure a temporary lease on the building and its circulating book stock. The lease has since been renewed to run until 2022. When the council closed New Cross Library in 2011 it was 100 years since the first public library was opened in New Cross in 1911, a centenary which was not acknowledged at the time.

In explaining what he describes as 'the Lewisham model' of re-organised library service provision under localism austerity conditions, Lewis, a senior council official responsible for re-shaping Lewisham's library service, makes an interesting distinction between how 'service' and 'space' are conceived.

There are two different things that we need to keep in mind when we talk about public libraries: there is a public library service – and that includes me – and there is a public library space and that doesn't necessarily include me, and New Cross is an example of that – when there is a group of people that find a need to share a particular space because it makes sense to that community (04/14 interview).

The model Lewis describes includes the council continuing to provide and maintain the circulation of book stock at each of the borough's 12 libraries and ensuring that the libraries co-operate as a local network within the national public library network, which is in part facilitated through liaison and input from council-employed librarians. This is what he defines as 'the service', as it is what is funded from the departmental budget. Lewis subtracts himself (i.e. the council) from the provision of the library 'space', however, since under the new model of community-managed libraries, the volunteers are the collective agents who practice the everyday lived space of the library by managing and facilitating all the interactions within it and shaping its identity and direction. While these actions of the volunteers are indeed part and parcel of delivering

a *service* to its users, Lewis keeps 'service' and 'space' distinct in his definition to emphasise the autonomy of what can happen in the space when it is relinquished from direct local authority control, management and funding, and reconfigured and produced by 'a group of people' who are there to 'make sense' in, of and for their 'community'.

In this chapter I examine how this sense-making happens at NXL. I am not concerned with the meaning of Lewis's term 'community' – a problematic concept loaded with governmental and identitarian discursive baggage<sup>47</sup> – but rather how the people of NXL make sense of their library through specific spatial practices that produce changing public and urban forms. Lewis' use of the term will be critiqued towards the end of the chapter.

## 7.1 Tracing NXL openings and crossings through time and space

The first public library in New Cross opened on 25 July 1911, a building designed by Castle and Warren architects and funded by Andrew Carnegie. It was built according to 'the Carnegie formula', which required financial and operational commitments from the municipal body that received the donation. Carnegie required public support rather than private endowments (as was the case with many of the first English public library buildings) because, as he wrote:

an endowed institution is liable to become the prey of a clique. The public ceases to take interest in it, or, rather, never acquires interest in it. The rule has been violated which requires the recipients to help themselves. Everything has been done for the community instead of its being only helped to help itself. (Carnegie, 1889a, p. 689)

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<sup>47</sup> As Marjorie Mayo highlights, the problem with "community" 'is not just that the term has been used ambiguously, it has been contested, fought over and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify different politics, policies and practices' (1994, p. 48).

This forewarning is interesting to hold onto as the story of New Cross communities having to 'help themselves' through voluntary provision unfolds in subsequent chapters.

The name New Cross comes from a tollgate established in 1728 on the site where New Cross Gate train station now operates on New Cross Road, just a few metres along from where NXL now stands. In 1906 London's largest tram depot was opened in New Cross, which has since been replaced by a bus terminal. In the industrial landscape of the late 19th century, the local area became known as the 'New Cross Tangle' because of its numerous railway lines, two train stations (which at the time shared the same name) and location as a stopping point for coaches traversing the thoroughfare that connects central London to the coastal port of Dover. London Docklands industries operated a stone's throw away in neighbouring Deptford on the south bank of the Thames, but these riverside industries fell into decline after the Second World War, which also tore a hole in the local economy of New Cross, when a V-2 rocket destroyed a large Woolworths store and adjacent shops and houses on New Cross Road in 1944, killing 168 people and injuring 122, in one of the worst civilian disasters of the war. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw further damage to the local economy and urban culture. As Les Back recalls (2017, p. 21), 'in the late 1970s and early 1980s New Cross and Deptford ... were ruined by de-industrialisation, dock closures resulting from containerisation and urban decline'. The purpose-built New Cross Library Carnegie building was sold by the council to a music studio company in 1992, as part of a cost-saving strategy and the library moved to a re-purposed retail building (also on the site of the V-2 bomb) half a mile along New Cross Road, a more affordable site which had better accessibility.

The historic mobile sociabilities and urban transformations rooted in New Cross's infrastructural entanglements can be traced and sensed in the routes and public spaces of the area today. The busy arterial route of New Cross Road is still constantly thick with the noise and pollution of traffic. Positioned as a social and informational hub where both established and transient populations can share intersecting routes and spaces, NXL both absorbs and facilitates the lively diversity of the Borough. During my fieldwork as a library volunteer at NXL between September 2013 – July 2014 I helped

many people who were passing through the area, or were stuck between one place and the next and had an urgent need to access the public IT facilities to print travel documents, process visa or immigration applications; as well as supporting many local residents with accessing vital information that would help them cross bridges or move forward with the next step of their lives. These spatial and social mobilities show how New Cross is indeed a place of many crossings and connections; bridges between old and new, outside and inside, means and ends.

Chapters Four and Five explored how the conceived space of city master plans and flagship library building in Birmingham translated into lived spatial experiences on the ground. As Tonkiss highlights, urban design not only concerns these grand architectural plans, but also ‘formal and informal practices that shape urban environments, produce and address urban problems, organize people as well as ordering space’ (2013b, p. 1). ‘Design’ implies an intentional purpose and schema, but so much about urban design is unplanned, improvised and bottom-up. NXL is a prime example of this; a space which has seen several re-inventions in recent decades to adapt to social needs and problems. This section will show how the design metaphor of ‘library as interface’ (Mattern, 2007b) explored in chapter three can be observed at NXL not through the lens of master planners’ and architects’ visions of *conceived* space, but rather through the evolving and grounded practices of people living, working and surviving in the living space of the New Cross neighbourhood. It does this through looking at how the library building’s façade operates as an interface between the urbanism of the street and the multiplicity of public spaces and practices that unfold within the library.

As Mattern points out, ‘the public library is an interface in that it provides a site, an opportunity, for users to access worlds of knowledge and culture and to interact with other members of the community’ (2007, p. 143). While NXL was previously designed as such by the local authority, under voluntary stewardship it has unfolded into a different kind of public interface, one in which knowledge and culture is produced and shared through human infrastructures and interactions born of precarity and necessity rather than professional public service design. Since writing her 2007 book *The New Downtown Library: designing with communities*, which examined the



‘third wave’ library building boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s<sup>48</sup>, Mattern has acknowledged the changing form of urban and community libraries in the simultaneous contexts of public service cuts, privatisation and outsourcing of library services, and the profusion of digital information interfaces. In these contexts, many

little libraries on the urban margins’ have emerged using DIY spatial tactics and practices, in efforts ‘to reclaim – for the commons ... 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 (Mattern, 2012 online).

In this sense, it is possible to explore another perspective on Raymond Williams’ question of what should be placed in the centres of our communities in times of rapid economic and social change, and ‘the kind of thinking, the kind of feeling, and the kind of building’ that can be discerned and expressed there (Williams, 1966, p. 364).

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<sup>48</sup> The first wave being Victorian Carnegie-style buildings and the second wave being Modernist mid-century buildings.



Figure 7.1: Original New Cross Library, 116 – 118 New Cross Road. (Image: Chandler, 2016)



Figure 7.2: New Cross Library, 283-285 New Cross Rd. Opened as a Lewisham council branch library 1992 and closed as such in 2011. (Image: Xixi Zheng, East London Lines, 2011)



Figure 7.3: The New Cross Library building when it was a grocery store, highlighted to the right of Woolworths, early 1960s following post-war reconstruction. (Image: The Woolworths Museum, 1960)



Figure 7.4: NXL, 2013

The building re-opened as New Cross People’s Library summer 2011 and re-launched as New Cross Learning May 2012. (Image: still from film by Fernandes, 2013 YouTube)

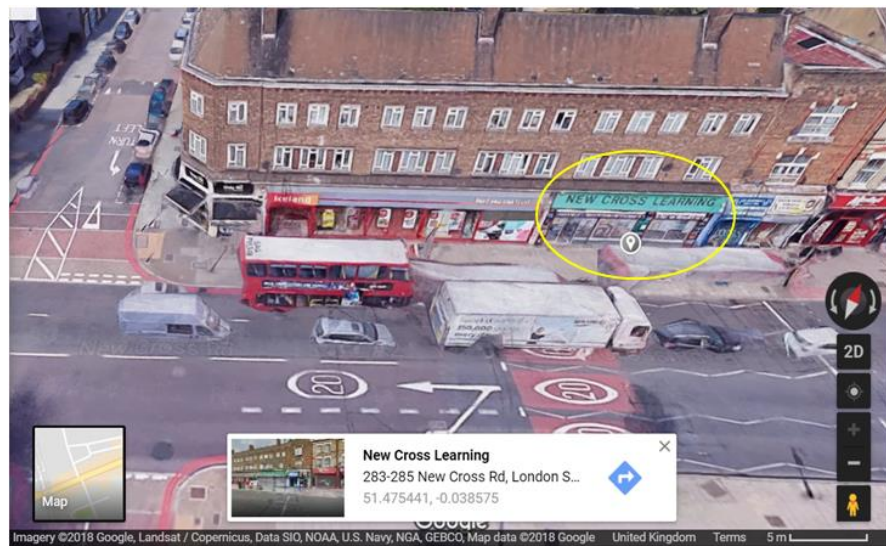


Figure 7:5 Aerial view of NXL on New Cross Road in 2018 (Image: Google Maps)

### NXL’s shop front design

As depicted in the images above, the NXL building has seen several changes over the last century. Today, it is situated alongside a café, a frozen food supermarket, a second-hand mobile phone shop, Afro-Caribbean barber shop and a fried chicken shop on New Cross Road. The library building’s façade has retained the former supermarket’s large-

format glazing, which provides all the natural light for the library as well as a display area for community information. The windows are inscribed with a frosted white design composed of jumbled computer keyboard symbols in sweeping wave formations representing the 'surf' of internet space. This feature is left over from when the space was designed by the local authority and has been integrated into re-designs by community groups managing the space.



Figure 7.6: New Cross Learning shop front. (Image: Google, March 2015)

With the aid of a small arts grant, the NXL volunteer management committee gave the building façade a makeover in 2012, undertaken by Patricio Forrester, a member of a local street art activist collective who filled the narrow spaces that frame the shopfront with digital images of book spines. This library simulacra, titled 'Fictional Bookshelf' (Artmongers, 2012), encodes an image of publicness into the library's physical interface, one that is 'as much notional as empirical', as Michael Warner (2002b, p. 414) puts it. The digitally-produced representations of shelved books, whose titles were empirically sourced from members of the library's reading publics through surveys and workshops, are inscribed onto a public building which faces the social imaginary of 'the general public'. Also layered within this interface is the remaking of 'the public' under New Labour and neo-Conservative governance spaces, whereby localist and neoliberal agendas invoke 'community' and 'neighbourhood' as strategic sites for 'social innovation' in solving public problems, thereby eliding 'the



public' into 'the social' (Amin, 2005; Newman, 2006). As Janet Newman argues (2006, p. 173), these developments 'imply a remaking of the imagined spaces and places of citizenship from something held in common to something that is localised or specific'. In the case of NXL, the branch library of a national public service infrastructure becomes a community library managed by local people and transformed into a 'community learning hub' (council rhetoric) managed by local people.

After the New Cross People's Library committee won the fight to take on the running of the library space in Summer 2011, the place became known as New Cross People's Library for a year, with the tagline *by the people for the people*. In May 2012, the name was officially changed to New Cross Learning, which coincided with the shop front makeover. The building's name sign was painted green and fixed with a NEW CROSS LEARNING sign in large chrome capital letters. Most of these letters are the original ones left over from the building's previous incarnation when it was called New Cross Library under council management. The change of name followed advice given to the fledgling voluntary organisation that it would be more likely to receive charity funding without the word 'library' in its name (the sub-text being that as statutory services they should still be funded by the state). The name New Cross Learning was chosen following a re-naming competition (led by NXL's supporting neighbourhood charity) targeted at library users and local primary schools, with large numbers of children voting for the winning concept 'learning'.

### **Austere creativity**

The need to change the library's name to attract more funding and support, and volunteers' thrifty artfulness in renovating and re-branding the building's façade, can be understood in terms of what Forkert terms *austere creativity*: 'stripped of any oppositional or transgressive aspects, it is used to mean the resourcefulness and ingenuity of citizens to adapt and 'problem solve' in the face of cuts to the welfare state' (2016, p.11). This kind of necessity-induced creativity is also influenced by a pre-austerity discourse of 'neoliberal creativity' propounded by New Labour

governments, which made ‘utopian promises in cultural, urban and employment policy about how creative work and creativity itself could lift people out of poverty, fix economies, and provide work satisfaction’ (Forkert, 2016 p.12). This ideology was increasingly couched in terms of business values of innovation and competition, emptying out subversive potential from creative work and turning artists into figures of entrepreneurialism and resilience (ibid).

In the absence of the word library on the building’s sign, the visual signifiers of the ‘Fictional Bookshelf’ perform a multi-layered and interpretive conception of library space and can lead passers-by to not know what it is they are looking at. Emma recalls how she did not at first realise the NXL building was a library, due to its ambiguous name.

I'd only lived here a few weeks and I walked past it and thought 'what's that'? I was at the time being forced by the Department of Work and Pensions to do a course in employability that was run by an enterprise called 'Free2Learn' – so I was aware of these places that make a profit out of teaching people basic skills – they're given a contract by the Job Centre. So anyway because it was called New Cross Learning I assumed it was something creepy to do with the government. So I didn't go in there, I continued to cycle or walk past. (05/14 interview)

Emma subsequently went on to volunteer for a year at NXL after she realised it was a creative and politically interesting space that was not linked to the DWP or any ‘creepy’ corporate welfare contracts, and soon realised that everyone still called it the library. Another volunteer I worked alongside, Shula, felt that ‘learning shouldn’t have a capital ‘L’, it should be a by-product of interest and inspiration, of life and living, not something you’re told you should have’ (Shula, 04/14 field notes). Shula preferred the name New Cross People’s Library, arguing that ‘you can’t copyright the word *people* can you?’ Perhaps “people” can’t be copyrighted, but the “public” it signifies can be dis-invested, hence NXL’s need to adopt a name that would attract more funding from charitable trusts that measure value through learning outcomes.

Jackson, a regular NXL user, is also averse to the change of name, and says he will always call it the People’s Library. In considering the sense of space it offers in the urban environment, Jackson feels the revitalised library building provides a much

needed sense of culture and meaningful information in an otherwise uninspiring stretch of consumer outlets.

I think where it is on this street, it's the only civilised spot in a street that's just full of chicken shops and mobile phone places, and it really needs to stay here otherwise this area is completely devoid of any kind of creativity or information, or sense of anything, so it is really an essential library. Much more essential than most. (05/14 interview)

Jackson's description of local urban space does not include the large university across the road, which I point out to him. 'That doesn't feel...', he replies, '...it's not for the people. It's for would-be intellectuals and students. There's a sense of competition at Goldsmiths. It's a space where everybody's vying to have the most interesting mind'. NXL, by contrast, with its prosaic retail-outlet architecture, is for Jackson 'more accessible, yeah. More average. I think the average atmosphere is good' (idem.). This perception of urban space makes a distinction between different kinds of publics, where the architecture of NXL fosters a social-levelling dimensionality, whereas the university appeals to a more select and aspirational set of publics. Jackson's dislike of the new library name, however, betrays an element of competition also present in the edifice of NXL, namely that of the 'austere creativity' elaborated by Forkert (2016) above.

The importance Jackson ascribes to accessibility and averageness is echoed by Jennifer, a volunteer member of NXL's management committee.

You can look through the library and see whether you're going to be alright in there, which you can't in many libraries. You can get through the door without a buzzer or somebody in charge like a security guard deciding whether you're allowed in. You can be here without needing any money or without being able to read or speak English. And being on the street level helps too. A lot of libraries have steps up to them. Maybe shops are much better places for libraries - there are empty shops on most high streets nowadays (05/14 interview).

Jackson and Jennifer's perception of the quotidian space of the library building is quite different to the grand architectural statements explored in the Birmingham library story, since its sense of publicness operates by accident rather than design. Another volunteer library manager, Mary, concurs that physical transparency and openness is key to making the library an accessible and inviting space. Mary's practice on her shift

is to always keep the front doors open, whatever the weather. She does this not only to mitigate the cumbersomeness of the broken automatic sensor, which makes pushing the heavy doors challenging for some people, but also as a symbolic gesture, ‘because actually by opening the door, you're saying *this is an open space*’ (Mary, 05/14 interview, my emphasis).

### **(Counter)public spatial tactics**

These examples of different participants’ experiences of the NXL building’s interface reveal ways in which passers-by can engage with it as a lived space rather than simply a fixed place on a busy street. Here I am drawing on de Certeau’s distinction between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*), whereby a place is an ordered configuration of positions in their own ‘proper’ location, which implies a fixity or stability of relationships, while space is a nexus of mobile elements – ‘vectors of direction, velocities, time variables’ – actuated by the movement of these intersections [...] In short, *space is a practiced place* (de Certeau, 2013, p. 117). Some important mobile elements and spatial practices inscribed into the NXL’s public interface are the publicity images and documents adorning its large windows, which serve as eye-catching notice boards for people walking by. These posters and leaflets are stuck on the windows from the inside, filtering the light that passes through and obscuring areas of transparency. They advertise various NXL library events and activities, as well as campaigns with which NXL is associated.





Figure 7.7: NXL windows advertising free library activities and courses.

(Image by author May 2014)

This form of designing the building's interface shows that informing the public is more important to NXL volunteers than the aesthetic value of uninterrupted visual space and light – a different kind of 'conceived space' (Lefebvre, 1991) to that which is designed by signature architects or local authority planners. NXL's spatial practices are born of different values and priorities, as well as the very practical consideration that it is easier for volunteers in an un-funded organisation to share publicity in analogue forms, than in the time, money and expertise it takes to maintain social media and web platforms. Furthermore, a large proportion of NXL's users do not have the digital literacy skills to access such digital platforms, and hence the physical window displays are the most accessible ways of informing local publics.

At the time of my fieldwork one of the advertisements in the window was a large red and white posters reading 'Don't Keep Calm – Get Angry and Save Lewisham A&E' under a symbol of the sovereign crown, subverting the iconic British wartime national poster 'Keep Calm and Carry On' by enjoining the public to do the opposite – to harness their outrage and oppose the Government's austerity plans to close the borough hospital's Accident and Emergency department.



Figure 7.8: Lewisham Hospital Campaign Poster

(Image: Save Lewisham Hospital campaign, 2012)

Owen Hatherley's analysis of what he calls 'austerity nostalgia' is relevant here. Hatherley makes the important observation that the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' poster was never mass-produced until 2008. It is a historical object of a very peculiar sort' (2017, p. 16). The poster and associated trinkets reached a peak of popularity around 2009 which Hatherley argues tapped into a 'particularly English Malaise' that connects a 'stiff upper lip' resolve against national crisis, connecting the global financial crash and credit crunch of 2008-09 to the aerial Battle of Britain in 1940-41 (ibid.). Hatherley argues that the returned popularity of the poster 'is a *nostalgia for the state of being repressed* - solid, stoic, public-spirited, as opposed to the depoliticised, hysterical and privatised reality of Britain over the last thirty years.' (2017, p. 21). While the Lewisham Hospital campaign poster is a call to arms against the repression of austerity, the iconography and symbolism it conjures up is also situated within a visual discourse of nostalgia that enhances the moral and political ambiguity of volunteers running public services while at the same time defending public services from further erosion.

The hospital campaign's subversion of the 'carry on' slogan is an example of what Forkert (2016 p.26) calls '*anti-austerity creativity*' (my emphasis), turning the old wartime ethic of 'making do with less' (a nostalgic notion commandeered by the Cameron administration's austerity agenda) into a different kind of fighting spirit, that of refusing to accept the cuts and using activist people power to reverse austerity policy. Throughout 2012-13, NXL became a hub of organising and publicity for the high-profile Save Lewisham Hospital campaign. Library volunteers made badges, placards and posters, disseminated petitions and hosted campaign meetings in the library space after hours. The campaign made national headline news after they filed for a Judicial Review and took the then Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt to court, contesting his decision to reduce vital local NHS services and close Lewisham A&E and Maternity departments. The campaign group won the case at both the High Court and the Court of Appeals, which ruled that Hunt had acted unlawfully outside his powers (BBC News, 2013b).

The 'shop front' of NXL, then, is both a platform for publicity as well as a portal to practising public space and services. The building's façade is a palimpsest through which can be read the different traces and layers of high street architecture and public service design as they have changed through time. The affordances of the building's previous life as a supermarket offer both public accessibility and organisational opportunity for promoting different kinds of public engagement. Like any public library across the country, NXL publicises its programmes of educational and cultural activity that accord with the public library purpose of promoting multiple literacies, creativity and social inclusion (UNESCO, 1994). Unlike statutory public libraries, however, which are required to present as neutral in their publicity and information provision, the window interface at NXL is also bevelled with a political edge. Display items such as the Lewisham Hospital campaign poster invite people on the street to engage with matters of public and national concern and passing through the library's open door will take them further into a rich lifeworld of freely circulating literature, publicity and communication interfaces.

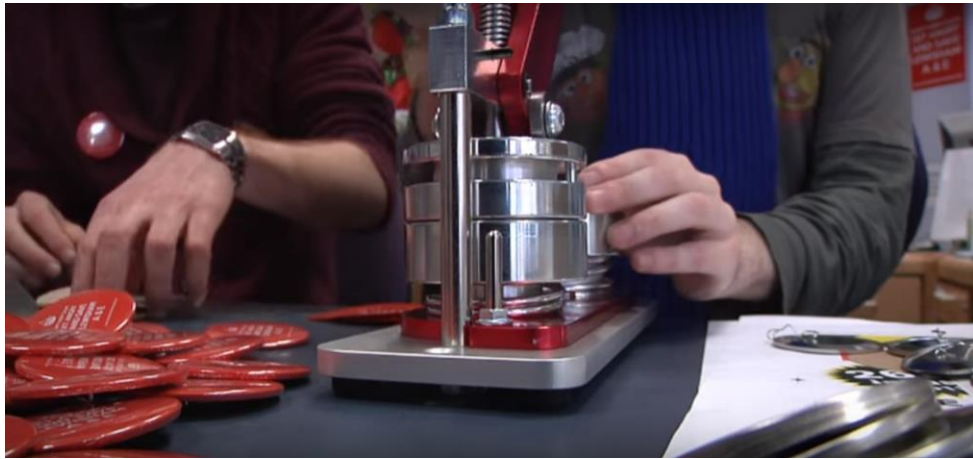


Figure 7.9: Volunteers sitting at the NXL help desk making Lewisham Hospital Campaign badges. (Image: still from film by Fernandes, 2013)



Figure 7.10: NXL volunteer managers Kathy (centre) and Gill (right) next to the library help desk adorned with Lewisham hospital campaign ephemera. (Image: still from film by Fernandes, 2013)

After passing through a small foyer full of community information leaflets between the two sets of double doors, the first thing members of the public encounter on the left-hand side is a large, solid library help desk, next to a wall of community notice boards. The help desk is covered in more flyers and leaflets, library membership application forms, a public comments book, public computer signing-in book, volunteer signing-in book, two staff PCs, adjacent to a printer-copier-scanner machine which is in regular staff and public use.

Far from being static objects in the library space, the service desk and infrastructural machinery are alive with mobile interactions. As council librarian Sally describes: 'what always strikes me as really amazing here is that although they have the

big desk, staff are always moving around asking people if they need help. It's about people sometimes as much as it's about the space' (05/14 interview). Almost every space and surface in the library serves a multi-functional purpose, as shifting interfaces between different forms of public interface. The library help desk doubles up as a bar and ticket office during evening cultural events (which often raise funds for local political causes) and the shelving units serve as display stands for art projects.

'Publicity' here can be understood not simply in terms of communications and campaigns, but also as a particular kind of public space in which opinions can form and social networks can grow through embodied practices, values and connections. In this way, NXL offers 'informal spatial infrastructure for political action and association' (Tonkiss, 2005 p. 65) where people can access and exchange information and share strategies in the conditions of austerity that unite them. The autonomy of volunteers running the space means that there is more room for a counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990) to emerge through politicised activities that counter the dominant space of the state and the market. The evolving practiced place of NXL demonstrates that the public issues and activist spirit which produced it as a volunteer-run library, namely the fight to oppose austerity-imposed cuts to local authority services, have continued to live on in its everyday modes of spatial production. As Lefebvre avers:

We know what counter-projects consist or what counter-space consists in – because practice demonstrates it. When a community fights the construction of urban motorways or housing developments, when it demands 'amenities' or empty spaces for play and encounter, we can see how a counter-space can insert itself into spatial reality (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 381–2).

The second half of this chapter now focuses in on NXL's origin story as a library re-claimed from closure. The different forms public and counter-public struggles involved in this fight to save the library reveals entangled spatial politics of negotiation, contradiction and compromise as different groups deploy conflicting spatial tactics and claims to public services. This story will further clarify what kind of publics, politics and values are at stake in the making of this ambiguous institutional entity.

## 7.2 Saving and resisting space: activist alliances and pragmatic publics

Libraries can be, and often are, sites for debate and resistance – to privatization, social atomization, segregation, commercialization etc. – and it is this potential for resistance, I think, that should compel us to seek more appropriate theoretical models to think about how today’s library functions in its civic context, as an institution and for its inhabitants (Mattern, 2007a, p. 286).



Figure 7.11: New Cross Library during the campaign to save it from closure. (Image: Transpontine, 2010)

The convergence of live political issues that brought together different activist tactics and causes and catalysed the save libraries campaign in Lewisham are a rich example of the way in which ‘issues spark a public into being’ (Dewey, 1927; Marres, 2005). Between the autumns of 2010 and 2011, multiple activist voices, bodies and signs clamoured together to save New Cross Library from closure through a range of spatial practices. Local interventions included marches, leafleting, paper petitioning,

social media campaigns, and lobbying at local council meetings; while central government-targeted actions included joining national campaigns to lobby parliament and hand-submitting an appeal to the Secretary of State to intervene against unlawful withdrawals of statutory services in Lewisham under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act. The letter was accompanied by a copy of the paper petition demanding the reversal of library cuts and withdrawal of council provision, which consisted of over 20,000 signatures (5,000 of which were for the New Cross Cause (the rest for the other four Lewisham branch libraries being cut from council delivery).

Gill, one of the lead campaigners, recalls how easy it was to gather the New Cross Library petition signatures in a short space of time, 'due to the fact that we had Goldsmiths College students, who were fuming at the Lib Dems at the time for doing a U-turn on tuition fees – they were queuing up to sign it!' (07/14 interview). The zeitgeist of social protest was ripe among student communities at this juncture, which culminated in tens of thousands of protesters marching through central London and staging direct action interventions in November 2011, an eruption of activist energy to fuel movements against the marketisation of education. In this confluence of interests, the differentiated spaces between the 'average' public library and the 'elite' university in New Cross, identified by Jackson earlier, were levelled out against the same socio-economic horizon of the hollowing out and marketisation of culture and education, which sparked collective publics into being.

### **Embodying public libraries and re-claiming urban space**

In October 2010, shortly after Lewisham's budgets cuts were announced, 200 local residents and library workers marched through the borough to the Town Hall, carrying 'Save Our Libraries' banners along with a wooden coffin labelled 'Lewisham Libraries'.





Figure 7.12: Save Lewisham Libraries Demonstration, October 2010 (Image: Transpontine, 2010)

On 19 February 2011, a much bigger local demonstration took place, with approximately 1000 people marching through the borough's streets in a 'Carnival Against Cuts' parade, defying the dreary rain-soaked streets by wearing colourful costumes, singing songs of resistance and making percussive sounds with drums, pots and pans. The spectre of public death made an appearance in ghostly and skeletal puppets that joined the procession, drumming to the arrhythmic beat of austerity.





Figure 7.13: Lewisham Carnival Against Cuts Demonstration, February 2011. (Image: Sue Luxton via Transpontine, 2011)

Just over a week later, to mark the implementation of the cuts, symbols of morbidity reappeared on Lewisham's streets, as members of the local anti-austerity political party 'Lewisham People Before Profit', dressed as pall bearers and carried a coffin labelled 'R.I.P. Local Democracy & Public Services' to the Town Hall. An activist dressed as a priest read out the last rights of local public services, with five of the borough's libraries playing a prominent role in his elegy.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today, to mourn the passing of public services in the London Borough of Lewisham. ... Five from one family massacred in one fell swoop – the library family – Blackheath, Sydenham, Grove Park, Crofton Park, and New Cross. And their neighbours, the children's centres, sacrificed to the alter of privatisation ... We know there is a greater power that can bring these things back to life: the greater power of mass action of the people (Lewisham People Before Profit, 2011).



Figure 7.14: Film still of Lewisham public service ‘funeral’ (Image source: YouTube, Lewisham People Before Profit, 2011)

In these embodied counter-spatial tactics of resistance, library services are personified in familial, mortal forms, with each branch library death symptomatic of a wider fatal condition: the death of the municipal body politic inflicted by the dual drivers of austerity and privatisation. Performing activists argue that the resurrection of these expired services is only possible through grass roots mobilisation of activist publics.

A month earlier on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 'Carnivals of Resistance' took place on a national scale across England in a coordinated 'Save our Libraries' day of action to defend the 450 libraries threatened with closure throughout the country (Anstice, 2011). Famous authors and artists joined local citizens for 'Read-Ins' in over 40 UK libraries to perform, read and peacefully demonstrate together to raise awareness about the vital value of these threatened spaces and services (Page, 2011). As part of this nationwide protest, a Read-In event took place at New Cross Library, and wound up making national news headlines for being the only library event where daytime action crossed the border into the night, as activists refused to leave the library at closing time and remained there until the next afternoon in a staged occupation.

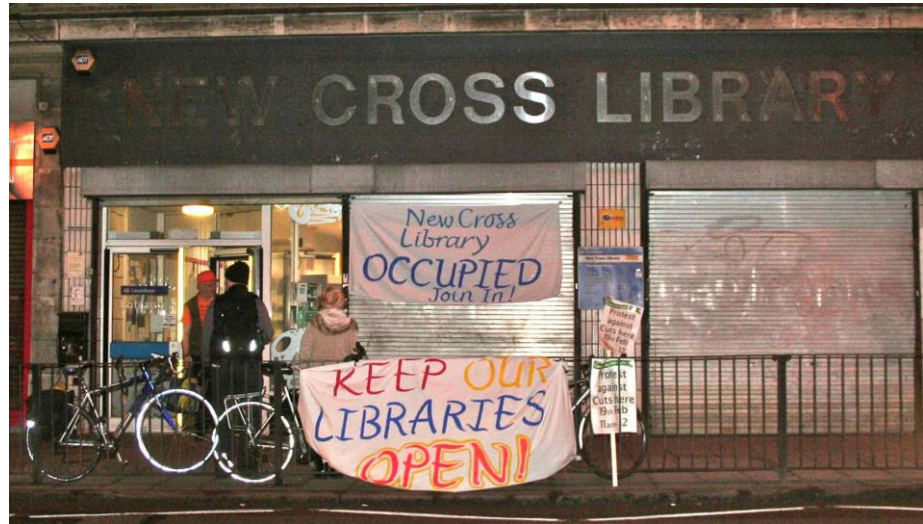


Figure 7.15: New Cross Library occupation exterior (Image: Solidarity Federation, 2011)



Figure 7.16: New Cross Library Occupation interior (Image: Paul, 2011)

Approximately 40 people stayed in the building overnight accompanied by a council officer and were escorted out by police at noon the following day. By using their bodies to take up space within the library, the occupiers were, to use de Certeau's

language, enacting a tactical spatial move ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’ (2013, p. 37), aimed to symbolically draw attention to the rights to public space and property and the dominance of neoliberal and capital logic foreclosing that space.

Some of the occupiers were unsuspecting participants of the daytime Read-in who had not planned to perform an overnight occupation but stayed in solidarity, while others were activists from alliances of radical-Left groups who had planned the occupation (Solidarity Federation, 2011). As one of the organised activists points out, the cause to save the library mobilised some ‘people who had never been involved in political things before’ into wider networks of resistance (Forkert, 2016b, p. 20). Although the event happened several months before the wave of ‘Occupy’ mass demonstrations that swept New York, London and other world cities in 2011-12, it was arguably immanent in the same conjunctural moment that produced these ‘waves’ of global social movements that erupted to resist the unequal power relations that dominate our cities, spaces and services (Hall and Massey, 2010; Fominaya, 2017).

The act of ‘occupying’ a building to make a political point is a resolutely spatial act, and while the occupation may be in a relatively confined physical space, it opens up wider spaces of conversation and (counter)public imagination. As Doreen Massey argued in her talk given at the Occupy encampment at St Pauls near the London Stock Exchange in October 2011, ‘the negotiation of space is an on-going social thing’, a point immediately apparent as she addressed the shape-shifting ground upon which she and hundreds of people stood in a social scene of resistant publics using their bodies and words to take over the dominant spaces of finance capital (Featherstone and Painter, 2013, citing Miller’s account of Massey’s talk).

### **Conflicting spatial tactics**

Cultural theorist and artist Kirsten Forkert was living in Lewisham during 2010-11 and became active in the Lewisham Anti-Cuts Alliance (LACA). Forkert participated as an activist in a number of lively and inventive Lewisham demonstrations (including the library occupation) and analyses these events as examples of ‘a fleeting

glimpse of what an anti-austerity creativity might look like (creativity as the opening up of political space) however brief and ephemeral' (Forkert, 2016b, p. 26). This brief chink in the clouds signified for Forkert and her fellow activists another that social order might be possible, echoing the voice of the protestor performing the public service funeral, who proclaimed life could be restored to the libraries through the power of resistant publics. Forkert concedes, however, that such a radical opening could only ever be fleeting, since their campaign principles advanced an ultimately unrealisable goal.

The [LACA] campaign to save the Lewisham libraries was a defensive campaign, and was about preserving the status quo (functioning but severely underfunded libraries), and was marked by an underlying feeling, based on my conversations with other campaigners, that a win was unlikely because the council would not listen, so protest could only ever be symbolic. (Forkert, 2016, pp. 25–26)

Forkert recalls how a 'clash between two activist cultures' – with traditional campaigners favouring stalls, marches, petitions and strikes on one side, and more creative and radical advocates of disruptive direct action, marches, occupations and social media tactics on the other – led to fractious LACA campaign meetings, which she reflects was 'symptomatic ... of many of the impasses of the Left' (2016, p. 19). These internal conflicts highlight how the politics of space and grammars of social movements operate through multi-scalar levels and fragmented layers, from national movements to defend public spaces and services, to local tussles of tactical positioning within leftist political organising. The clashes and confusions that arise from these multiple layers comes from the way in which, through these social struggles, 'urban space is both the object of political agency and its medium' (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 63).

Although the overnight occupation of the library garnered significant media attention for both for the local campaign and the national save libraries movement, leading local resident library campaigners Kathy and Gill chose not to participate in these particular spatial tactics. Forkert's point that the LACA fight was a symbolic one about defending and preserving the status quo of the municipal state infrastructure (albeit an impoverished one), which could only ever be short-lived, was precisely the

reason why Kathy, Gill and others took a different strategy. Driven by the conviction that a library run by volunteers would be better than no library at all in the socially-deprived area of New Cross, Kathy and Gill took the tactics of winning the ear of the Lewisham Mayor and Cabinet. They made a case to keep the library open built on their alliances with local schools and nurseries, some of which relied upon the public library in the absence of having school libraries. Kathy and Gill knew the needs of the neighbourhood very well, having lived there for over thirty years and brought up their families on local estates.

Gill a retired teacher and special educational needs coordinator who had worked in deprived inner city schools, saw it as particularly ‘cruel’ to deprive local people, especially children, of books (07/14 interview)<sup>49</sup>. Gill’s friend and neighbour Kathy, a dyslexic, visually-impaired mother of four from a working-class background, knew from personal experience of the vital need for a public library in New Cross, which she and her family had been using for decades. Kathy was also involved in her Constituency Labour Party and through this formed an alliance with a Labour councillor who serves the Telegraph Hill ward in New Cross. Cllr Bell helped Kathy to have her voice heard in the Mayor and Cabinet meeting at the Council Chamber, at the Scrutiny Committee that reviewed the fate of NXL. In her speech to the Mayor, Kathy argued that ‘our library is the only library out of the five libraries doomed for closure that can say it services three secondary schools, four primary and nursery schools as well as a university. New Cross Library is in the centre of so much learning, so complete closure seems unrealistic’ (NXL internal archive, 2013).

NXL volunteer manager Mary recalls how the strategic alliances with key local councillors, in particular the socialist stance of Cllr Bell, helped to make the re-claiming of the NXL space possible.

If you can get support from people who are in powerful positions where they can support you and can get things done, it’s crucial. Kathy

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<sup>49</sup> This sentiment is echoed by a public comment made by author Alan Bennett at the same time as the NXL struggle, namely, ‘closing a public library is child abuse really because it hinders child development’ (BBC News, 2011a).

and Gill knew people already, and they learnt how to press the right buttons (04/14 interview).

Cllr Bell coined the name *New Cross People's Library* and remains an adviser on the NXL management committee today. Speaking in the local press at the time he proclaimed:

We believe New Cross People's Library is worth fighting for. It is a movement not born of a Big Society but of a community working together for others. I think we all want the council to provide these services with paid staff, but idealism always needs to be tempered by pragmatism. The future battles ahead will be challenging but we can achieve a long-lasting legacy to defy those that say New Cross does not need a library (Baskett, 2011).

Bell's rhetoric articulates compromised values and tactics, whereby the social democrat principle of municipal bodies serving public needs – 'a community working together for others' – can easily slip into the Conservative ideological frame of 'Big Society'. This shows how readily spatial struggles become discursive struggles and underlines the power of Big Society as a rhetorical intervention. Other Lewisham activists on the Left viewed working with Labour Party councillors as being complicit with the power relations that contributed to the cuts in the first place. One activist interviewed by Forkert (2016, p.20) saw the administration of cuts by a Labour council as 'essentially an issue of failed democracy', while others suspected that councillors joining the libraries cause were strategically managing dissent and damage limitation. This is another example of what Forkert termed a 'clash of cultures' on the Left, as the tensions and conflicts at stake in the struggles and political imaginaries of municipal spaces, publics and services cross purposes.

Kathy and Gill maintained that the only way in which the library space could be protected and provided for the people of New Cross, would be to take the 'tempered' path between idealism and pragmatism articulated by Bell. This strategy, along with backing and brokerage from a local neighbourhood community development charity, culminated with Kathy and Gill as its Co-Chairs being given the keys with a temporary six-week lease to take control of the building on a pilot basis. The brevity of this lease was based on the council's assumption that an un-constituted group of people (as opposed to an established social enterprise or charity, as with the other four libraries transferred to volunteers) would not have the organisational ability to keep the newly

formed library going. As Gill recalls, ‘we were doomed to fail within the first six weeks of our temporary license. Because they thought we couldn't manage’ (07/14 interview). Kathy adds that it took a long time for the council to realise that what they perceived as anarchist occupiers wouldn't be running the library and trust the NXPL committee to safeguard the local authority's property and reputation.

I ask Gill and Kathy what they think would have happened to the library if they had not been around to re-claim it and the more radical activists had taken the lead of the campaign. ‘It would have closed within six weeks without a doubt’ Gill replied, with Kathy adding ‘no they wouldn't. It would have just closed. It would have been occupied, maybe, somebody might have got in, who knows. But it would have become a Pound Shop’ (idem.).

At stake in Gill and Kathy's reflections are different kinds of struggles over social space and public interest. The activists who wanted to ‘occupy’ and disrupt library space for politically symbolic purposes were fighting against the spaces of austerity and neoliberalism subsuming public services. Their fight was immediate and symbolic in its ‘direct action’ tactics, whereas Kathy and Gill's fight against the same dominant spaces is much more longitudinal in its duration and uncertain in its outcome yet grounded in its pragmatism and municipal values. Tonkiss highlights the differing temporalities of such spatial practices: ‘[c]ounter-spaces in the city can be enduring or very provisional, entrenched or highly vulnerable, mundane or risky. But they open up cracks in the totalizing logic of the capitalist city’ (2005, p. 64).

The ‘clash of activist cultures’ that Forkert (2016) referred to in describing the different types of library protest tactics may be irreconcilable, but the values that underpin them are not. Their ends – for library services to stay public and part of statutory social and material infrastructures – are the same, only their means of getting there – the spatial routes, tactics and strategies they follow – are different. As educators, mothers and grandmothers embedded and invested in their neighbourhood, Gill and Kathy are fighting the long fight and keeping the library doors open for as long as possible, in the radical hope that the political grounds of public practice will take a turn into a future where services will return to statutory provision with secure funding and support. Their everyday practice of voluntarily delivering a public service through



values of civic care is one way of practising this long fight; another is their continued activism within local political organisations and campaigns and facilitating critical spaces of political debate and learning within the library, counter-spaces which will be explored in Chapter Nine. Rather than a ‘clash’ of cultures, then, what has unravelled in the space of New Cross is an *entanglement* through which different political spatial tactics tussle and trip in the struggle to argue who and what the library is *for* and how. The spatial practices of NXL volunteers demonstrate a commitment to a refusal of neoliberal futures, by paradoxically holding on to values of the municipal past.

### 7.3 Conclusion

Place ... does – as many argue – change us, not through some visceral belonging (some barely changed rootedness, as so many would have it) but through the *practising* of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us.  
(Massey, 2005, p. 154)

This chapter has shown how a tangled web of tensions and contestations have converged in the local time-space of Lewisham in a national conjuncture of austerity and activist movements and practices to counter it. These findings reinforce Massey’s argument that the spatial is always constituted by negotiation: ‘an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification ... a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism’ (1994, p. 3), thereby troubling the distinction made between service and space posed by Lewis at the beginning of the chapter. Activist volunteers produce both public space *and* deliver public services at NXL in concert with a range of other territorial dynamics and normative tensions, as they link their practices with other social justice movements in the city such as the hospital campaign. In this sense, NXL volunteers’ spatial practices and organisational tactics can be understood in terms of what Featherstone et al. call ‘progressive localism’: political ‘forms of place-based organising [that] can shape localisms in contested and solidaristic ways’ (2012, p. 179).

As these authors point out, there are important genealogies to such practices, after all, the welfare state largely emerged out of ‘local schemes of cooperative and mutual aid among working-class groups’ (ibid., p. 180).

This chapter has only begun to scratch the surface of what kind of public entity NXL is. In one sense it can be understood as a voluntary organisation, insofar as it is a space and service run by volunteers with support from a local neighbourhood charity. However, Ishkanian and Ali (2018, p. 15) define voluntary organisations as ‘formal civil society organizations that are registered, have some professional staff, and receive funding from a wide set of donors, including from statutory bodies, international aid agencies, foundations, and the public’. NXL certainly does not fit this definition. Perhaps it can be approximated at best as an organisation that is ‘other than public’ (Rex, 2018): a blended form of public-voluntary partnership that fits into the model of Big Society, yet at the same time is oriented against that model and resists its ideology. As Szreter and Ishkanian point out, the Big Society ‘has to be understood in the first instance as a rhetorical intervention’, as a slogan for both communicating with and invoking a social imaginary of the general public (2012, p. 2 citing Martin Albrow in the same volume). The publics that are ‘summoned’ into being (Dewey, 1927; Marres, 2005) in the case of New Cross, then, take quite a twisted and paradoxical shape.

The chapter has also demonstrated how the (re)designs of NXL’s architecture and public interface are enfolded with multiple senses of publicness, reflecting and projecting images of both local and national practices, institutions and values. These productions of space are conceived both in terms of how that space is modelled from the top-down conception of local authority service managers and central government policy, and in terms of the bottom-up curation and practical re-configuration of the building’s shop front and interior. Both practices of producing space ‘raise questions about the kinds of social and political imaginary being opened up and closed down in the remaking of publics’, as Newman (2006, p. 174) puts it. The case of NXL also helps to illuminate Newman’s (2006, p. 163) question of ‘how we can now understand the shifting configurations of ‘the public’, while at the same time attempting to defend it from the onslaughts of neoliberalism?’. The next chapter will further illuminate this question, by turning to how space is produced and mediated through the practices of

both users and volunteers in the library's everyday activities, as well as in exceptional public events that incorporate the seeds of social protest that were sown into NXL's conditions of existence as a library re-claimed by people power.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **NXL publics and architectures of sociability: practicing open space**

#### **8.0 Prelude: Setting the social scene of spatial practice**

Since 2012, NXL have led an annual procession around the streets of New Cross carrying a large colourful model of a zodiac animal to celebrate Chinese New Year. NXL began this tradition to reach out to Chinese and Vietnamese communities living nearby, as well as to inject some general celebratory energy into dark winter months through a family-friendly participatory public event. The papier-mâché body parts of a dragon and a snake used in the previous two years' parades decorated the top of library shelving units during my field work at NXL in 2013-14. I participated in the 2014 parade, which celebrated the year of the horse.

#### **Friday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2014**

*I arrive at the library at around 4:30pm on another dark day of cold, relentless rain. There are yellow notices on the door saying 'Library open for Chinese New Year Workshop Only' (NXL is usually closed to the public on Fridays). The windows are covered in red posters advertising the horse-building workshop, which I am just catching the tail end of. The parade is due to start at 5pm. There are fewer people there than I expected – about 4 young children and 5 adults, one of whom is breastfeeding her baby. Perhaps the cold wet weather has deterred people. The atmosphere is quite calm. The body of the horse is laid out on the tables in the children's area, next to the head on the floor by the radiator. The structure is still glistening with wet red, orange, and yellow paint, decorated with many blue and green children's hand prints, and covered in a layer of PVA glue to seal it from the rain. The smell of drying poster paint and glue reminds me faintly of a warm primary school feeling. I smile at the artist volunteer leading the workshop, whom I recognise from a Christmas event, and she puts me to work with a school girl on making*

*the finishing touches to the horse. We make a tail out of old scarves, flowers and recycled jangly bits. When it is done we climb under the body and switch on the fairy lights taped inside. The girl gets excited and sense of movement builds up in the room. More people trickle into the library from outside and Kathy offers everyone a children's musical instrument from the red sack that is used for Baby Bounce sessions. Patricio arrives, full of beans and bravado and wearing a big drum, which he begins beating as he leads us all out into the street to begin the parade.*



Figure 8.1: NXL Chinese New Year 1 (Image by author, January 2014)

*Outside the rain is still drizzling but it doesn't matter. I am in the middle of the horse's body behind Xia, a student from China, and we all move our feet to the drum beat. We amble slowly along New Cross Road, stopping at all the local independent shops. Kathy and Gill know all the shop keepers and take the head of the horse inside the shop doorways to wish them a Happy New Year. Cars honk their horns in support, some people stop to take pictures and exchange greetings, and children peer through shop windows and stand and stare in the street. We return to the library with the horse more or less in one piece – torn only slightly here and there where our hands gripped the sides. People stay in the library to chat and mingle for a while over tea and biscuits and the windows steam up. Everyone is in a really good mood.*

(02/14 fieldnotes)



Figure 8.2: NXL Chinese New Year 2 (Image: Martin Le Santo-Smith)

Several audible linear or bodily rhythms took place during the procession: the beat of the drum and musical instruments; the andante tempo of footsteps on wet paving slabs; the intermittent honking of cars and beeping of pedestrian lights; the high notes of children’s shrieks and hubbub of adults’ chatter; and the lilting refrain of “Happy New Year” as the doors of local shops swung open and closed. Experiencing New Cross from the waist down offered me a novel perspective on the city, focusing my attention on the movement of feet on the pavement and relying on non-visual senses to tune in to the atmosphere of the streets. Through this gestalt shift away from my ordinary perspective of looking straight ahead as I rushed between academic commitments at Goldsmiths and shifts at the library, I experienced the streets of New Cross as a collective body of people connected by a structure that was literally carried

and embodied as an object over our heads and shoulders, as well as metaphorically via a symbol of the subjective spirit<sup>50</sup> of the locality.

As I embodied the sound of collective feet on concrete at the Clifton Rise juncture of the walk, I recalled traces of the very different ‘marchers and steppers’ (Back, 2017) that stood their ground on that very spot on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1977, when thousands of anti-racist protesters who outnumbered the National Front and their police allies stopped the Neo-Nazi march in its tracks and a bloody conflict erupted (Anim-Addo, 1995). Mounted police were brought in to break up the struggle, generating sounds of hooves and snorts clashing with protest chants, and drum beats on riot shields. These distant echoes jar against the jubilant rhythms of the Chinese New Year parade but are important to remember to recognise the dual spirits of celebration and resistance that can be discerned in the historicity of NXL’s urban fabric.

As Les Back demonstrates in his spatial story of retracing the concrete struggles that hit the post-colonial landscape of New Cross in the 1970s and 80s, ‘[w]alking here was much more than an everyday stroll; rather political struggles against racism were embodied in ways of moving through the city on foot’ (2017, p. 23). Rhythms and counter-rhythms of ‘stepping’, a dance style of dub reggae sound system music that flourished in New Cross in this era, also inculcated a culture of both resistance and jubilation into the history of its public spaces, which can still be traced in the ‘playful irreverence of South-East Londoners’ today (ibid., pp. 32, 23). Back teaches how the practice of collective walking through the city offers a way of learning the ‘hidden archive of the streets’ (ibid., p. 21), challenging us to think differently about the urban contexts of knowledge-making, particularly when those contexts are on the doorsteps of a university and a public library.

By stepping in concert with the Chinese New Year parade, I became aware that we were also stepping through time, as traces of urban conflict lay beneath the present form of multi-cultural celebration. I recalled the spirit of social protest that has

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<sup>50</sup> In Chinese culture the horse represents symbolizes the subjective spirit and moral standards of the Chinese nation. Here I am transposing that notion onto a ‘spirit of Lewisham’ rooted in its municipal socialist motto and history of social protest.

endured throughout the centuries as the people of Lewisham fought to take up space and claim their collective rights to the city in different eras, from Lewisham transport workers' participation in the 1926 General Strike which saw mass picket lines at the New Cross Tollgate; to the 1977 'Battle of Lewisham' mentioned above; to the 1981 national Black People's Day of Action where 1500 people marched from Fordham Park (behind Clifton Rise) to Hyde Park to protest against institutional neglect of the 13 young people who died in a house fire on New Cross Road in a suspected racist arson attack. As the previous chapter shows, the marches that took place in 2010-11 to protest the closure of the borough's libraries is another step in this urban tradition.

Sally, a librarian from the borough who has worked for the library service for twenty five years claims that Lewisham has a certain spirit of solidarity and social justice woven into its urban fabric:

There's something about the Lewisham people, you know, when the odds are against us - we come together – the hospital campaign, libraries, all of that – there's a social passion within the borough that certain things will stir, and it will create *an open and fluid response*, which may not always be the case in other spaces (05/14 interview, my emphasis).

In this sense, perhaps the borough's municipal motto is *Salus Populi Suprema Lex* (the welfare of the people is the highest law) motto rings true, only from a bottom-up grass roots response to institutional injustices as opposed to a paternalistic provider of services. Publics in New Cross are 'summoned' and 'sparked' into being through social issues of concern rather than constructed through governmental architectures (Dewey, 1927; Marres, 2005; Barnett, 2008; Newman and Clarke, 2010).

The broad cyclical rhythm through which the event New Year event occurred is the turning of one year into another on the lunar calendar – the half-way-point between the winter and spring equinoxes – symbolised in Chinese culture with animalistic powers and celebrating the casting off the old and the cold and moving towards new growth, colour and light. As I left the event that winter evening I imagined Kathy and Gill were hoping the symbolic ritual would serve as a good omen for the library's fortunes. 2014 was to be both a celebratory and a challenging year for them, as the lease on the building would be formally signed over to them by the council



(after two years of a precarious temporary lease). With the lease, however, would come higher stakes: increased rent and overheads and expectations punctuating the linear rhythms of the library year with a pressing point, as monthly bills demand thrifty ways in which to generate funds while keeping the political and playful spirit of the library alive.

## 8.1 Introduction

Sally's identification of an 'open and fluid response' produced by Lewisham publics and spatial practices is a key focus of enquiry for this chapter. What is it about the social production of space at NXL that creates such responses to issues of public concern? What kinds of public practices constitute this openness and fluidity? This chapter considers how the spirit of solidarity that Sally highlights plays out in NXL's 'architectures of sociability' (Tonkiss, 2005, pp. 67–68): mediums and practices through which people come together and share strategies of survival in austere times (Tonkiss, 2013a). It does this through ethnographic descriptions of NXL's everyday interactions, activities and special events, supported by accounts from library users, volunteers and affiliated council-employed library staff. These spatial stories reveal how local publics are being reconstituted and forming spaces of both resistance and compliance within the conjuncture of neoliberal 'austerity localism' (Hall and Massey, 2010; Featherstone *et al.*, 2012). The story of the Chinese New Year event is just one example of this process. It can be read in terms of neoliberal forms of 'austere creativity' critiqued via Forkert (2016) in the previous chapter, whereby communities who have had their public services stripped back find new ways to 'make do and mend', creatively innovate and provide local resources; and it can also be read as following in a longer tradition of bottom-up rhythms of public solidarity encapsulated in Sally's reflection on the Lewisham spirit.

The Chinese New Year event is one of many cultural activities programmed by NXL volunteers under the organisation's broad focus on promoting creative ways in for people to learn through both structured and informal practices. Children and families

were invited to learn about Chinese culture through books and online resources in the library; learn arts and craft techniques in the horse-building workshop, and the through the practice of play (through musical instruments and dramatizing the body of the horse); as well as learning the places and faces of the high street as they set off on the convivial urban parade. This chapter explores the multiplicity of learning practices and mediums that take place at NXL, looking at how people spend their free time to further personal and social development in both structured and unstructured ways.

As argued in Chapters One and Two, it is important to understand publicness through the normative lens of communicative practices and public actions rather than reducing them to spatial imaginaries. Following architectures of sociability in my analysis of NXL as a site of public practices enables me to demonstrate the spatial nature of these practices without reducing them to a spatial ontology. Where NXL sits as an institutional entity within 'the public sector' is far from clear, and calls into question the very meaning, role, scale and terrain of such a sector. I therefore look to the micro-politics of spatial practices at NXL to help to illuminate how they relate to the ever-changing landscape of public service provision and democratic life within the context of austerity localism.

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first part (8.2) surveys the structured activities and events of NXL which facilitate lively architectures of learning through convening diverse people, materials and spatial practices that reproduce traditional public library programmes as well as more inventive and politically-conscious ones. The second part (8.3) of the chapter then zooms in on two of these more politically conscious events and analyses the way in which publics and counter-publics are convened to address pressing social issues in the current conjuncture. What is interesting here is the question of how and why such events are more likely to happen in a community library run by volunteers in a context of austerity localism, as opposed to standard council-run public library spaces. The third part (8.4) of the chapter explores the spatial qualities of NXL that differentiate it from more official public spaces through the experiences of some of its regular users, before moving on to consider the practices of library volunteers in facilitating and brokering these communal learning spaces. These 'spatial stories' of NXL's users and volunteers offer a

fascinating window on the particular ‘openness’ of NXL as a public entity, which can be understood to be at once both emancipatory and bounded.

The central questions this chapter addresses are: how can the ‘practiced place’ (Certeau, 2013) of NXL be understood in terms of ‘architectures of sociability’ (Tonkiss, 2005), and how do these social infrastructures operate in tension with wider structural geometries of power (Massey, 2005)? I argue that NXL is not a fixed spatial entity or public but moves between inside and outside zones of contact and circulation, connecting a diversity of people, spaces and times through fluid and flexible encounters and relationalities of learning. I show how the seeds of resistance and solidarity sown into NXL’s conditions of formation have enabled new forms of communal and political practice to emerge through the relatively unregulated nature of activities and events that can take place at the library. I also argue that spatial practices of ‘publicness’ at NXL are produced and mediated through an ambiguous form of ‘openness’ which is at once both liberating, conflictual and constricting.

## 8.2 Architectures of learning and sociability

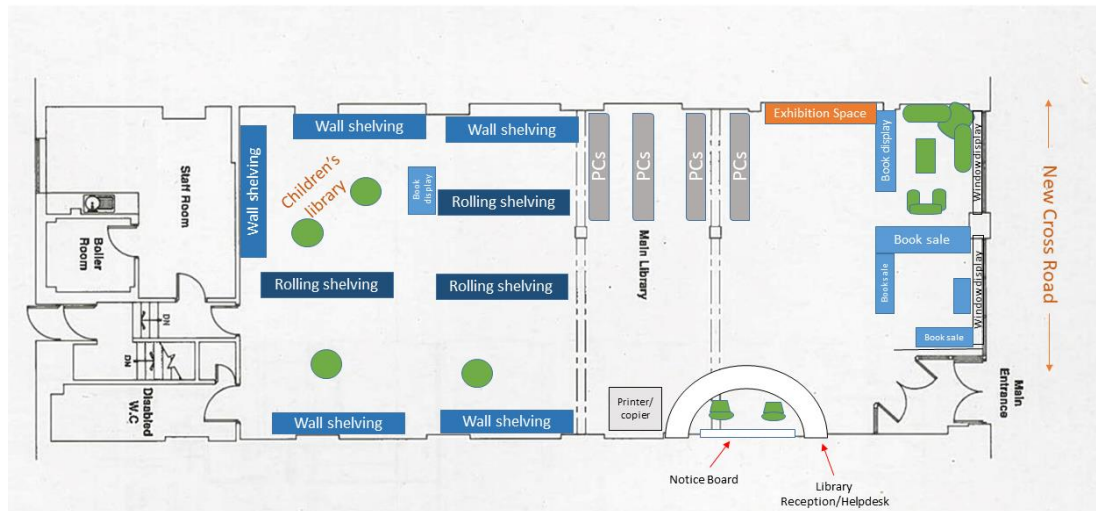


Figure 8.3: NXL Floorplan

The physical layout of the public space of the library is a single rectangular open plan area, about three times as long as it is wide. This has been structured into sub-sections by modular furniture and aisles of metal bookshelves on castors, which can be pushed to the sides of the room when large events are taking place, creating an open arena for performances and audiences to interact.

The flexibility and agility of the space enables volunteers to maximise its affordances for a multitude of activities and uses. Kathy and Gill have designed fixed areas of the space with a user-centred focus. For example, when they inherited the space in its council-organised configuration, the children's library was situated in front of the public toilet at the rear left and quarter of the public floor. Kathy and Gill wanted to prioritise a much larger, safer and more sanitary area for children's play and learning, so moved the children's library to the other side of the space, with a division of shelving protecting them from adults accessing the toilets. They also refurbished the toilet room to be more accessible to users with disabilities and parents or carers with babies and young children. Another area configured for vulnerable users is the readers' lounge space at the front of the library, a cosy corner sectioned off by book shelves filled with natural light from the large windows overlooking the street. Here users can sit on comfy chairs and read newspapers, magazines or books, relax in semi-privacy, or meet in small groups. Kathy and Gill tell me that they designed this space by

prioritising the needs of people ‘who don’t without have a living room of their own’, decorating it with plants, a standard lamp and pictures because ‘why shouldn’t the homeless have somewhere nice to sit?’ (07/14 interview).



Figure 8.4: NXL lounge space. (Image by author, June 2017)

As its name signifies, NXL is a place of learning. Learning activities and spaces at NXL frequently merge with those of leisure, both through programmes of timetabled cultural, educational, fitness and creative activity sessions, and through the relaxed nature of the physical space in which people hang out and spend their free time. Both ‘learning’ and ‘leisure’<sup>51</sup> are fuzzy concepts which make little sense unless read through empirical practices of sociability that take place through these activities and spaces. The daily, weekly and monthly rhythms of practice that bring people to the library include the clockwork issue, renewal and return of borrowed books; timed-pressured slots on public computers; elastic times of creative play; intimate and practical patterns of care-giving and care-taking; learning times of reading, study or training; idle times of rest or shelter; waiting times of unemployment and job-seeking; and political times of social-justice-themed events and campaigns. Spatial practices of interactive learning and

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<sup>51</sup> The commonplace definition of ‘leisure’ as time spent that is not ‘work’, as well as its association with voluntarism or freedom of choice, is particularly slippery when it comes to analysing leisure activity in an austerity-induced volunteer-run library where the boundaries between worker and user are not always distinct. The relation of voluntary labour to the public life of the library will be explored in depth in the next chapter. As Rojek (2009) highlights, in contemporary society leisure practices all invariably involve labour practices.

leisure take place through a wide range of programmed and occasional public activities and events at the library. Activity sessions that ran weekly during my field work in 2013-14 are listed in Table 8.1 below, including their time and location within the space. Table 8.2 details the occasional special events that occurred during the same period<sup>52</sup>.



Figure 8.5: NXL 'Baby Bounce' and Story Time session<sup>53</sup> (Image: author's own, March 2014)



Figure 8.6: Close-up from weekly Knitting Group session (Image: Margaret Jennings, August 2016)

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<sup>52</sup> NXL is generally closed to the public on Sundays, Mondays and Fridays. All activities and events were offered to the general public free of charge and facilitated by voluntary labour.

<sup>53</sup> This shows a typical group size for the weekly Tuesday Baby Bounce session. Book shelves are pushed to the sides of the room to accommodate people. Prior to 2011 under council management, Baby Bounce sessions attracted only 6-10 participants on average; since volunteers took over average weekly attendance is 40 participants (Sally, 04/14 interview).





Figure 8.7: NXL children’s arts and crafts workshop (Image: Margaret Jennings, August 2016)

### NXL weekly activity programme

Tuesdays (open 10am-5pm)	Wednesdays (open 10am-7pm)	Thursdays (open 10am-7pm)	Saturdays (open 10am-5pm)
<p><b>11am Baby Bounce</b> Songs and stories for early literacy development in the children’s library area on chairs, beanbags and floorspace.</p>	<p><b>11am Class visits</b> from local primary schools. Children’s library area &amp; service points. Children return and borrow books with guidance and storytelling from volunteers.</p>	<p><b>IT skills &amp; employability training</b> Adult desktop PC area. Supporting adults with digital literacy, job applications and accessing online council services (e.g. benefits).</p>	<p><b>11am Baby Bounce</b> Children’s library area. Smaller version of the Tuesday session.</p>
<p><b>4pm Street Dance</b> Classes aimed at 4-11-year-olds in children’s library area.</p>	<p><b>4pm Film Club</b> Children’s library area <b>6pm Language Exchange</b> Drop-in conversation group in lounge area sharing diverse linguistic phrases.</p>	<p><b>5pm Poetry Workshop</b> Self-organised creative writing support group in lounge area.</p>	<p><b>1:30pm Knitting Group</b> Self-organised circle in study tables adult fiction area.</p>

Table 8.8: NXL weekly activity programme, autumn 2013

The weekly programmed sessions listed above are common types of activity to be found in many public libraries across the country (although street dance may be less common), as a range of cultural and creative forms of learning and leisure pursuits supplement the core ‘reading offer’ of libraries. NXL is not contractually obliged to programme any activities beyond those that support local and national government literacy agendas, so the range of activity on offer here is elective and comes from bottom-up, self-selecting communities of interest. In addition to weekly timetabled activities, NXL also organises and hosts a range of ad-hoc and seasonal special events.

Special events that took place during my participant observation as an NXL volunteer in 2013-14 are listed in table 8.2 below.

### Sample of NXL seasonal and special events

July – August 2013 & 2014	<p><b>Local mystery walks and picnics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every Friday in the summer holidays led by volunteer managers Gill and Kathy. Sponsored by NHS to support healthy living agendas for families living in economically-deprived areas.</li> </ul> <p><b>Summer Reading Challenge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nationwide annual promotional reading programme for children aged 4-11 who sign up to read 6 books during the summer holidays. It was started in 1999 and is run annually by The Reading Agency with public library services across the country. Lewisham library service supports NXL with promotional materials.</li> </ul>
October 2013	<p><b>Big Book Sale</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sunday fundraising event selling donated books to the public. Shelves of lending collections are pushed to the sides of the space and the central area is filled with table top sales of second hand books.</li> </ul> <p><b>‘Project Wild: Get your kids back to nature’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evening documentary film screening and discussion with film maker David bond, to promote a national charitable campaign to reorient children away from digital and urban environments and back to nature.</li> </ul> <p><b>Black History Month events</b></p> <p><u>Exhibitions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>‘From Gospel to Garage’</b> – large-scale collage artwork by Nathan Kidd and Rosanna Thompson (NXL volunteers) documenting the history of black music.</li> <li>• <b>Black Panther Newspaper (1969-1972)</b> archives display</li> </ul> <p><u>Film screenings:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>‘Triptych: Dead Air / All is Fear / Loose Ends’</b> – 3 short films screened by Washington Brown LLP</li> <li>• <b>‘Black Power Mixtape’</b> - 2011 documentary by Göran Olsson, examining the evolution of the Black Power movement in American society from 1967 to 1975.</li> </ul> <p><u>Talks &amp; debates</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit and discussion with Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin and JoNina Abron-Ervin, veteran American civil rights campaigners, authors and former Black Panther Party activists.</li> </ul>
December 2013	<p><b>‘A Christmas Carol’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-man theatrical rendition of the Charles Dickens story performed during the school day for classes from local primary schools.</li> </ul>
January 2014	<p><b>Chinese New Year</b> horse-making workshop and public parade.</p>
February 2014	<p><b>‘Food Waste Scandal’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentary film screening by local activist.</li> </ul>
March 2014	<p><b>New Cross Assembly meeting.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A quarterly meeting for New Cross residents and workers facilitated by Lewisham council Community Development Officer and ward councillors. The meeting invites local publics to discuss and decide on how to improve their local area with support from the council.</li> </ul> <p><b>‘Palestinian Women’s Stories of Occupied Life’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit from a group of 15 Palestinian women on a 10-day UK tour to inform British people about the realities of living in Gaza. Marking International Women’s day, in partnership with South East London Palestine Solidarity Campaign.</li> </ul>
May 2014	<p><b>The Equality Trust: presentation and discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk and information session from Bill Kerry, co-founder of The Equality Trust, highlighting UK statistics and contexts of UK income inequality. Free information resources for participants.</li> </ul> <p><b>‘Spirit of ‘45’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film screening and live Q&amp;A with director Ken Loach, focusing on the rise and fall of the welfare state.</li> </ul>
September 2014	<p><b>‘The Travelling People’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live poetry and song performed by Gypsies and Travellers (organised by Goldsmiths music student). Public discussion on inequality and discrimination against Traveller and Gypsy communities.</li> </ul>

Figure 8.9: NXL seasonal and special events (2013-14)



All special events and activities are offered free to the public, with occasional requests for donations to specific charitable causes associated with the event. The annual Summer Reading Challenge<sup>54</sup> and the quarterly New Cross Assembly Meeting events had organisational and infrastructural support from Lewisham Council as part of local and regional government priorities. Similarly, the seasonal Mystery Walk and Picnic activities was supported through NHS funding as part of the council's Healthier Communities strategy, yet organised and facilitated by NXL volunteers. All other events on this list were organised and facilitated solely by NXL volunteers, allied with other grass-roots organisations and social justice campaigns across associated communities of practice. The next section zooms in on two events that stood out during my time participating in and observing the practiced place of NXL. I will describe what happened in each event-space and then analyse both cases through the lens of publics-formation and conjunctures of resistance.

### **Event (i): Black Panthers in the Library**

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin and JoNina Abron-Ervin are veteran civil rights activists, authors and former Black Panther Party members. The couple were visiting the UK in October 2013 as part of a speaking tour with engagements at Anarchist book fairs and academic institutions. They happened to notice a tweet sent out from the NXL Twitter account, advertising the exhibition they had on for Black History Month, which included a large collage on the subject of black music (made by NXL volunteers) as well as a display cabinet of original Black Panther magazines, which had been donated to the library from someone in the neighbourhood who had noticed them being thrown out as part of a local house clearance. JoNina Abron-Ervin was the last editor of the Black Panther Newspaper and was amazed to find out some of these artefacts were on display at a small South East London community library. A Twitter

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<sup>54</sup> The Summer Reading Challenge is a national reading promotion scheme for children aged 4-11. It was started in 1999 and is run annually by The Reading Agency with the public library network (98% of UK libraries take part), featuring different themes per year (<https://summerreadingchallenge.org.uk/>).

conversation ensued, which led to the couple making a trip to New Cross to see the exhibit and lead a public discussion about black power activism in the library.



Figure 8.10: Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin at NXL (Image: Delores William, October 2013)



Figure 8.11: Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin being interviewed by local independent journalist and NXL supporter Delores William. The 'Gospel to Garage' exhibition can be seen behind them (Image by author, October 2013)

The event was arranged at short notice with little opportunity for publicity and therefore did not draw a large audience, but the dozen or so people who attended listened with rapt attention to Lorenzo's story of when he hijacked a plane to Cuba in 1969 to evade prosecution for allegedly trying to kill a Ku Klux Klan leader, and how he was released from a life sentence in prison after serving 15 years thanks to legal challenges and an international campaign to free him. Lorenzo told how the prison library was an important lifeline for him to liberate his mind, as it was here that he researched and wrote his book *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* (1994). JoNina talked about the importance of publishing in social justice movements based on her work in international journalism and academia. Her book *Driven by the Movement: Activists of the Black Power Era* was published in 2014.

One of the volunteers on shift that day was a young black man serving a community service order, and I wondered how this extraordinary event might have impressed upon his senses and assumptions about libraries. He stood at the side lines with his arms folded and did not speak, but I could see that he was listening intently. Audience members who did speak included a black mother of teenage boys who talked about the problem of territorial youth violence and knife crime in Lewisham, to which the Ervins responded with stories of black-led community organising in US cities with similar problems. General discussions that ensued revolved around the generational shifts in social struggles in the UK and across the Atlantic and the Ervins talked about the burgeoning racial justice movements of Black Lives Matter that was emerging at the time in response to police shootings of black men. The discussion of racist police brutality conjured the aforementioned spirit of 1977 which saw thousands of activists fight back against the white supremacy of the National Front and Metropolitan Police on the streets of Lewisham.

As the activists were talking, the everyday life of the library continued in the background as children wandered in with parents after school to issue and return books. I was struck by the juxtaposition of spatial stories in this scene, as at one moment the quotidian public action of a mother and child borrowing library books on a self-service machine occurred simultaneously and just a metre away from an elderly

couple from America talking about hijacking planes to Cuba and liberating minds with texts that reach beyond the confines of prison bars. The spontaneous way in which this event took place through organic and serendipitous connections, as well as the political nature of its content, was unique to the spirit and practice of NXL. While many council-run public libraries across the country programme culturally diverse and politically-themed public events, the bureaucratic structures through which these are organised generally prohibit spontaneity and avoid invitations to engage in activism against the state.

### **Event (ii): Spirit of '45 in the Library**

The largest number of people to have visited the library at any one time was when the socialist filmmaker Ken Loach gave a talk following a public screening of his 2013 protest film *Spirit of '45*. On 1<sup>st</sup> May 2014, approximately 300 people sat and stood in every nook and cranny of the library space and participated in a lively debate during the Q&A with the director. Beginning with black and white archival scenes of jubilant VE Day celebrations of young people frolicking in Trafalgar Square, the first half of the film is about the spirit of unity and optimism that characterised post-war society under the Labour government of Clement Attlee, which came to power in 1945 and nationalisation of transport and utilities infrastructures and established the NHS and welfare state. The film's second half focuses on the demise and dismantling of this spirit and infrastructure through the rise of neoliberalism and privatisation of state assets in the Thatcher era and beyond. Both archival footage and contemporary interview are woven throughout the narrative. The film ends with scenes of recent 'Save the NHS', 'Occupy' and anti-austerity protests, and then cuts back to the original VE Day footage but this time in colour.

Loach supported the event on a pro-bono basis to support the efforts of the activists and volunteers running and defending public services in New Cross. Addressing the packed room for the audience Q&A after the film, Loach linked the local success of the Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign with the spirit of 1945, arguing that united people power leads to more egalitarian and healthy lives and continues the principle of the public good. Audience members who spoke during the public debate

included people from younger generations who narrated positions of working for outsourced mental health services on minimum wage, the difficulties of unionising precarious staff, and advocates of the People's Assembly<sup>55</sup> movement. An older man spoke about a significant memory from his life in 1964 when he would come home from working on the Ford plant and watch social realist television plays by Ken Loach on the BBC, realising for the first time that 'the personal is political'. He asked why there can't be more of this on mainstream TV today, to which Loach replied that such creativity is no longer possible through the national media establishment, so broadcasting and political organising had to start in rooms like this one. Loach's final message to the audience was:

What we can do together is strong. We take care of each other. If you think people here can keep the hospital open and keep the library going, all these campaigns up and down the country, we got together so people will be unstoppable. (Fieldnotes, 02/05/2014)

The atmosphere in the room was fizzing with public feelings and opinions, and the intergenerational public debate continued for at least an hour after Loach left to catch his train out of London. There was an underlying sense of emergency that conditioned people's discussions about what can be done to reverse the demise of the welfare state. Ben Anderson defines emergency as 'a sense that something valued (life, health, security) is at risk and, importantly, a sense that there is a limited time within which to curtail irreparable harm or damage to whatever it is that has been valued' (2016, p. 465). The spirits of both 1945 and 1964 (Public Libraries Act) are present in this social scene (Blum, 2001; Puwar, 2007), which are also overlaid with the cotemporary spirit of volunteers and activists delivering critical care to crumbling municipal and civic infrastructures.

The audience left the building after 10pm and volunteers stayed behind for another hour to tidy away the chairs, vacuum, wash glasses, dispose of drinks cans and put the bookshelves back in place ready for the next day of ordinary library use. Seeing the room restored to its usual layout highlighted how deftly it can shift between an

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<sup>55</sup> National anti-austerity pressure group launched in 2013 with backing from left-wing political leaders Tony Benn, Len McCluskey and Jeremy Corbyn.

open agora and enclaves of learning as different architectures of sociability require its boundaries to expand and contract. However, this after-hours mundane moment of cleaning up the public space can also be read in a murkier light, as it highlights how producing counter-public spaces for resisting neoliberal welfare reform is predicated on the free and invisible labour of volunteers who keep those spaces accessible for public use<sup>56</sup>.



Figure 8.12 Ken Loach addressing NXL audience (Image: Malcolm Fernandes, May 2014)



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<sup>56</sup> This tension will be closely examined in Chapter Eight which makes visible the hidden labour and caring practices of NXL volunteers as crucial infrastructures for both reproducing and resisting austerity localism.

Figure 8.13: NXL audience at during Q & A with Ken Loach

(Image: Malcolm Fernandes, May 2014)

## Architectures of counter-public sociability

In both the events described above several layered processes and practices of publicness and public-making were going on. As outlined in Chapter Two, publics and counter-publics are summoned or convened into being through issues of common concern (Dewey, 1927; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002a; Marres, 2005; Newman and Clarke, 2010; Newman, 2011). At these two NXL events, publics were addressed and convened through the enduring problems of systemic inequalities produced by racist, capitalist and neoliberal structures that govern social life. Groups of people were gathered in the physical space of the library to watch, listen to, interact with and learn from leaders and archives of social justice projects. However, it is not simply the physical bodies, building and artefacts that constitute a public, rather it is the modes of discursive practice and architectures of sociability through which these practices are convened that bring publics into being.

In the case of the Lorenzo and JoNina Ervin event, the publics being convened were already in formation long before they physically entered the building, through the ongoing struggles for racial equality and social justice that exist both globally and in the local public sphere of Lewisham, as traced in the opening vignette of this chapter<sup>57</sup>. Furthermore, these American Black Power activists found their way to NXL through the serendipitous spatial story of an NXL Tweet that circulated the digital social media sphere, advertising an exhibition of analogue media objects: original Black Panther Newspapers found in the archival refuse of the street. Further layers of public

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<sup>57</sup> In the 1977 Battle of Lewisham and the 1981 Black People's Day of action, a key organising figure who led these activist struggles in the borough was Darcus Howe, who helped to form the British Black Panther Party in the 1970s. This practice of public-making can be connected through space and time to the Black History Month event that happened at NXL in October 2013, when former U.S. Black Panthers visited the library. These spatio-temporal threads of public practice continue today. At the time of writing in April 2018, NXL volunteers are liaising with Lewisham council and Goldsmiths university on a project to create a large public mural on the side of a building directly behind NXL, depicting the anti-racist struggles that took place in this era, which figures an image of Howe addressing a crowd of protesters through a megaphone on Clifton Rise.

mediation and communication occurred with the audio-visual recording of the public discussion that unfolded both online and in the physical NXL space. Similarly, the Ken Loach event was entwined with multiple mediums and modes of address and communication, as the archival footage of past and present UK social welfare struggles spoke to multiple generations in different ways, and the presence of local press and social media coverage of the discussion with the director formed its own digital archive that will continue to address publics struggling over the same issues at different points in time. At the Loach event the space was heaving not simply with bodies in a room but with normative issues that convene communities of interest in wider struggles against inequality, welfare reform and austerity. Moreover, the very focus of the film and subsequent debate was summoned through the major social imaginary of the welfare state, defending the spirit of 'the public good' for the welfare of British people. This macro form of address connected with the micro practices of volunteers, activists and allies defending the same principles for local publics.

Multi-scalar figurations and confluent practices of discourse and mediation spark and summon publics at NXL events through the architectures of sociability that are woven in to its conditions of existence and production as a community-run library. At the same time, the state-provided infrastructures of library books and circulatory borrowing systems continue to convene and mediate publics in the space of the library as the events take place: in the above people could be seen browsing the book shelves during the Loach talk and the ordinary practices of parents and children borrowing books via the self-service machine continued in the immediate background of the black activism debate. Intergenerational relations of sociability are also interesting forms of public-making through the learning spaces afforded by NXL's events. The encounter of the young offender who listened to Lorenzo's story as he served his community service order in the library was entangled with and preconditioned on wider public infrastructures both of criminal justice systems on the one hand, and activist counter-practices of providing open discursive space on the other. Likewise, the retired Ford plant worker recalling his political awakening through Loach's TV programmes, was brought into relational circuits of discursive exchange with younger activists and workers in outsourced public services.



Perhaps most striking in the circulating publics convened by these two events is the confluence of different histories and geographies occurring within the grounded place of NXL, within a specific municipal moment of crisis that contains within it the echoes of older moments and projections of future soundings against further crises to come. These spatial stories of resistance and solidarity within ongoing states of emergency that threaten the infrastructures of the welfare state and the wellbeing of its citizens condense into what Massey calls a ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (2005).

### **8.3 Soft infrastructures of sociability and learning**

The next three sections examine experience of NXL’s social space through the stories of some of its regular users, as well its volunteer facilitators, who together forge networks of public familiarity and ‘soft infrastructures’ (Tonkiss, 2015a) of learning. These stories reveal the ways which NXL’s practitioners broker non-hierarchical architectures of sociability afford an openness of practice which generates both fruitful and challenging outcomes.

#### **Learning through public familiarity and stranger sociability**

Libraries are one of the only places where public and private collide, aren't they? We're not Spain, we don't have all these squares that we can sit in at all times and juggle and do things like that, we want to be inside in general, so libraries are one of the only places that bring people together in that way. But this is related to that the library is one of the only places in which you can learn on your own terms and in your own time, in your own little space that you've found, and not through an education institution. (Emma, NXL volunteer, 05/14 interview)

Emma’s reflections on libraries come from having spent a year observing the comings and goings of NXL and participating in its different learning practices. Throughout our

interview she talked about the learning that she has personally gained from answering a range of public enquiries and connecting people with other people and sources of information, as well as the learning gained through books, timetabled activities and creative practices in the library. Her differentiation between this kind of learning and that which is gained through a formal education institution recalls the future societal vision of *education permanente* advocated by Raymond Williams in his 1966 libraries essay. To illustrate his argument Williams tells the story of a boy who, by the time he goes to school, ‘has already learnt from his family, which is a major source of influence, from his house and the street that it’s in, from the way that street relates to others in the centre of his city, an idea of himself and his world’ (1966, pp. 364–365). As he moves through his school years he is all the time learning both inside and outside the classroom, comparing and connecting the in-built values and social relations of institutions to those of other people and forms of media he encounters.

And this is why it is permanent education, because that process does not stop when he leaves school, and he does not continue it only by taking a refresher course in this or that, by getting some more training or by using his public library. He gets it by the work relations he finds himself in, he gets it by the way his city is shaped, he gets it by the way the whole country he belongs to presents itself to him, and that country’s relations to the world (ibid).

Having freely available cultural spaces such as libraries, museums and arts centres at the centre of communities, argues Williams, is the way in which a society built on permanent education can triumph over one built on bureaucratic and market relations.

Williams’ argument is also relevant to Jackson’s reflections on his relationality to NXL. An active member of the library, Jackson visits several times a week and finds it a welcome reprieve from the drudgery of surviving urban life as an unemployed middle-aged single parent living in temporary housing. Jackson and a friend set up the weekly poetry workshop sessions ‘initially as a sort of therapy group’ to support each other in creatively expressing the challenges in their lives. He describes his poetry as being ‘mainly about alienation and a sort of war of survival between the hare-brained poet and the city as a huge machine that seems to be crushing people, like money-hungry worms in an empire of concrete’ (05/14 interview). In more prosaic terms, he

describes going to the council-run library in a neighbouring district of the borough to complete necessary tasks of online welfare, housing and job-seeking administration, as he would rather get these tasks over and done with in space that is still 'part of the system' as he put it. He comes to NXL for the opposite experience:

I feel more comfortable here than in your average library because it hasn't got the sanction of official space – I think it's the unofficial anarchic feel I like about it. The fact that everybody's here because they want to be and not because they've got a career as a librarian - they're ordinary citizens like yourself. We're all sticking together to reassert ourselves as individuals in a growingly oppressive social state. ... And spaces like this are essential for your ordinary individual to come to exchange likeminded views with his fellow citizens.

Jackson feels oppressed by the deadening demands and conservative spaces of governmental frameworks and expectations for being a productive citizen, and therefore for him it is important to demarcate between inhabiting different kinds of 'official' and 'unofficial' sites for different purposes. NXL offers him a different kind of productivity – one that is creative, relaxed and spontaneous, operating in an open spirit of solidarity and resistance against state-sanctioned norms. In answer to my question about what kind of learning the space offers him, Jackson replies that he learns 'soft skills', which he identifies as being able to 'practice social interaction and keep working on your communication. I think that's what's really learned in a place like this. But the main thing is that it fights that feeling that you're really on your own.'

The valuable spatial practices of sociability and learning that Jackson articulates can be understood as inhering in what Tonkiss (drawing on Star, 1999), calls 'the soft infrastructure of sociality that mediates and holds the collective lives of strangers and nearstrangers' (Tonkiss, 2015a, p. 385). The way in which NXL affords such an intimate yet impersonal architecture can also be seen in the account of another regular library user, David. I approached David and his friend Nile in the lounge area of the library on a Saturday afternoon, having observed them for an hour as they sat deep in quiet conversation. David informs me that he comes to NXL at least twice weekly, usually on Wednesdays and Saturdays, to 'use computers for the internet, do personal searches, research work, catch up on news all over the world, borrow some books [...] but it's not only for academic purposes, there is the social element as well'. David likes

that at NXL he gets acknowledged by name and there are lots of ‘personal touches’ in his exchanges with volunteers, who take the time to talk to him and share information. He particularly likes what he calls the ‘informal’ nature of NXL space.

It’s a place people can use as a thoroughfare, a social convergence where you can have your own conversations with friends and relations ... you can also cross paths with people within the community you've not met before, that can ignite another strata of relationship ... This is the sort of atmosphere that I think draws us to the library. (05/14 interview)

David’s reflections chime with Jackson’s in the way in which NXL affords a more familial and sociable ‘convergence’ zone of contact than the formulaic architectures of ‘professional’ public library space.

Nile is less talkative than his friend and seems quite wary of my questions. He eventually informs me that he is unable to read or write, but the reason he comes to NXL is to meet David, who ‘helps me out on the computer and stuff like that’. David frames Nile’s position in empowering terms: ‘he’s got a library card, so that is the first key that unlocks access to other resources’. The library card, as a material device of Lewisham council’s digitally networked information infrastructure, is on the one hand a practical means to learning: it enables library members to borrow books via self-service technology, as well as to book on to public computers to access digital resources. On the other hand, it signifies membership of a public service and an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1990) of reading publics, serving as a social key to potential reservoirs of cultural capital. David and Nile engage in two main kinds of learning through the NXL space: the functional and instrumental learning of accessing information online via the public computers; and the more intrinsic and open-ended forms of social learning (*education permanente*, in Williams’ terms) that come from sitting and engaging in conversation with each other and a range of familiar strangers and newcomers to the space.

### **Practices of social brokerage: ‘learning your community’**

When I interviewed Sally and Jane, the professional library staff employed by Lewisham council to liaise with community library volunteers, they had just finished having a working lunch with Gill and Kathy at a local café in New Cross. ‘The waiter came over and said, ‘how's the library?’, because you know, Kath and Gill are so well known as working in the library (Jane, 05/14 interview). It is not only local business proprietors who regularly recognise the library’s leaders in the New Cross neighbourhood. Kathy and Gill frequently bump into young NXL members as they go about their local errands.

Kathy: we've only got to walk around here, and everywhere they'll be – [waving, smiling] *Oh hi Kathy, or hey that's her from the library!* – morning noon and night, in Sainsbury's, Iceland, in the park, wherever.

Gill: we say hello to little people we don't even recognise!

Kathy: they look different without their uniforms

Gill: and you say hello! and you get back this great big beam!  
[smiles broadly] (06/17 interview)

Gill and Kathy can also be understood as what Jacobs (1993 [1961]) called ‘public characters’, as their eyes and ears are ever-alert to the social spaces of both the library and its surrounding urban environs, detecting and bridging the gaps between people and possibilities, problems and solutions. Jane Jacobs describes such public characters as self-appointed local figures upon whom living urban informational and social connections hang.

A public character is anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people and who is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. [...] His main qualification is that he is public, that he talks to lots of different people. In this way, news travels that is of sidewalk interest. [...] All other public characters of city sidewalks depend on them – if only indirectly because of the presence of sidewalk routes to such enterprises and their proprietors (Jacobs, 1993, pp.88–89).

Jennifer, who volunteers on NXL’s management committee and provides support from a local umbrella neighbourhood charity, describes a way in which Kathy and Gill can be

understood as public characters through their connective urban practices. She reflects on how the public space and infrastructure of NXL is constituted through a crucial mechanism of ‘social brokering’:

There isn't a town square, or a natural place for people to hang out together, but there's this and this has an important role to play. And because it's a library where people are allowed to speak then more of that can happen, and introductions are made. I was brought up a Catholic, and the people I really admired were the parish priests - the people who played that social broker role, because they knew what the matches [between people and resources] were. x So that role they play here is so valuable [...] We need new mechanisms – society as a whole needs new mechanisms – to make those connections work. (Jennifer, 04/14 interview)

In their daily practices of matching the mixed skills and competences of a diverse range of volunteers to the needs and interests of an equally diverse range of library users and local publics, Kathy and Gill facilitate a web of social connectivity to ensure these needs are met with the human and material resources available. ‘You never know who’s gonna walk through them doors’, Kathy says, when reflecting on what is interesting and rewarding about her work (07/14 interview), but whoever does enter can be guaranteed to be connected with something or someone else at hand.

Volunteer Emma adds another layer of insight to this theme, citing how her experience at NXL has grounded her in a recognisable set of urban social relations and practices.

... because of how many hours I spent sitting there, people would come in and talk about things that they wanted to do, and I would see how things link up and think ‘oh well you need to talk to this person’ or ‘that sounds like what this guy is doing’ – it's a way of *learning your community* isn't it – you start to recognise it. You learn what's important about people and what they need from the area. (Emma, 05/14 interview, my emphasis)

Emma’s way of describing how she learns her community through the everyday practice of staffing the library help desk and making connections between local people and practices, or of ‘playing that social broker role’ as Jennifer put it, is a telling example of how space gets produced through interactions. Community at NXL is

constituted by what people *do* through the spaces that bring them into zones of contact and recognition. Understanding community as performative in this way, as opposed to through abstract or imagined lenses of belonging or identity, is an approach emphasised by Benson and Jackson who argue that ‘places are made through repeated everyday interactions and interventions that work on the neighbourhood and the individual’ (2013, p. 794).

As a space that is relatively autonomous from state control, yet at the same time woven in with public provisioning through infrastructural relations with the council, NXL facilitates zones of social contact and intimate connections that dispel neat binaries of public and private life. As Blokland argues, ‘everyday practices of fluid encounters and durable engagements may constitute a performance of community that is neither public nor private, neither intimate nor anonymous, but that covers a broad range of possibilities in between’ (Blokland, 2017, p. 131). Read in this light, community libraries like NXL can be methodologically understood as urban ‘viewfinders’ that frame ‘social scenes’ (Blum, 2001; Puwar, 2007) of localised collective productions of space. Jennifer and Emma’s accounts of the connective social threads that NXL generates tell spatial stories about how community is an urban practice that can only be learned through experience.

### **Open source practices: ‘thinking, feeling and building’ openness at NXL**

In my exploration of the library building’s public interface in the previous chapter, we saw NXL volunteer manager Mary discuss how during her shifts she always keeps the front doors propped open, to indicate to passers-by that ‘this is an open space’ (05/14 interview). This practice of openness can be read in conjunction with the contents of the first volume of NXL’s public comments book, in which the word “open” appears on almost every page in the first months of the library’s re-opening as a People’s Library. Visitors record their relief and delight at the fact that the library is now open, expressing gratitude for the service provided by the volunteers and articulating a range of reasons why it is so important for them to be able to continue to access and use the

library. While these instances of “open” can be read in a purely functional sense, meaning the library doors are not closed (as they would have been without the activists’ fight to save it); they can also be understood in a psychological or affective sense suggested by Mary in her attempts to physically indicate a sense of invitation and inclusion. Thinking these two senses of openness – a literal, material dimension on the one hand and a metaphorical or psychological one on the other – together, textures an understanding of how architectures of sociability and publicness produce the practiced place of NXL.

When I asked NXL users and practitioners what the ‘publicness’ of the space meant to them, they often incorporated the concept of ‘openness’ into their answers. They did not conceive of publicness in terms of ownership or funding, but rather through senses of how the space feels and how it is used. David talked in terms of the kind of sociability NXL affords, which for him is better than the pub, ‘where you’re going to be influenced by other things’, or the park, ‘which is too open – anything can happen’ – the library is just right: open, but not too open (05/14 interview). Fellow library user Alain stated that ‘publicness means being used by the public’, and ‘you need input from the public to make it feel open and relevant’, suggesting that the volunteers running the space are part of that public and hence it is more publicly meaningful (ibid).

Lewisham council’s library officers employed to liaise with NXL add further perspectives on this theme.

I think it helps that it’s all one open space. I’m sure it has its challenges because there are still people who want to come in and want peace and quiet to study. But what it does, is the building represents what this is. This is a space for everybody. Where everybody has an equal right to the space, and I really like that. (Jane, 05/14 interview)

This comment underlines the practice-based nature of publicness – manifesting in ‘what it does’, as Jane puts it. The fact that the building’s layout is an open-plan one helps its medium of publicness, but the real meaning is in the doing. Implicit in Jane’s reflection is a suggestion that NXL affords a *more* democratic and open space than council-managed and regulated libraries, insofar as the people managing the space and the people using it are on an equal footing in terms of their spatial rights and practices.



Her colleague Sally adds to this, noting that although she has been a professional librarian in the borough for over thirty years and four generations of her family have used Lewisham's libraries,

seeing what the scope is for changing how library services might be delivered in order to protect that facility for local people has been really really eye opening. (Sally, 05/14 interview)

To have one's eyes opened in this way is another dimension of the openness afforded by NXL, exposing new angles on what kinds of social change are possible.

Jackson articulates his understanding of NXL's openness in emancipatory terms:

You can feel that you're in an open space. Wide open. Embracing. Free. Wide open. I think it's more open than your average library because psychologically you feel like it's less restrictive. That's why this library's more open than others. When it's open it's really open. (Jackson, 05/14 interview)

I was particularly struck by the sense of such a stretched out and liberating horizon perceived by Jackson – an affective landscape which could at first glance be considered as at odds with the material reality of the cramped, prosaic building. The open space described by Jackson is a spatiality aspired to by architects of big new library buildings (as seen in Chapter Three), yet here it has been achieved in a relatively small, re-purposed building run by volunteers without any core funding. What is it about the production of space at NXL that creates such a response in Jackson? Volunteer strategic adviser Jennifer suggests that the answer lies in the values and practices of openness that underpin NXL as an organisation.

I think being open minded is important. If somebody suggests something we've never considered before, we think about it - would it work, how could it work? And I think what Gill and Kathy are really good at is open-heartedness as well – that generosity with their time, their attention, their consideration of people. And maybe also something along the lines of open-sourcing, that people who use it are part of what it is, part of the process of evolving.

The organisational values and practices of open-mindedness and open-heartedness will be explored in the next chapter which examines the different kinds of material and

emotional labour that enables NXL to function and develop in meeting people's needs. Here, however, I am more interested in the 'open-sourcing' part of Jennifer's reflections on openness, and her qualification that the library users are key constituents in its open-source mode of production.

'Open source' is a term that belongs to the lexicon of computer software development, denoting code that can be 'freely accessed, used, changed, and shared (in modified or unmodified form) by anyone' (Open Source Initiative, no date). Thinking of the library in these terms makes sense: much like a computer programme, the social and material architectures of NXL are freely open for all to access, use and reconfigure for different purposes. Sassen argues that cities are open insofar as they are always incomplete. This ongoing state of development is ripe for 'open-source urbanism': an agile way in which the city and its citizens can interface, or 'talk back' to each other through

a myriad of interventions and little changes from the ground up. Each of these multiple small interventions may not look like much, but together they give added meaning to the notion of the incompleteness of cities and that this incompleteness gives cities their long lives, thereby outlasting other more powerful entities (2011, n.p.).

For Jackson, the codes of spatial practice at NXL are valuable and emancipatory precisely because they are free of the constraining conceptions and orderings of 'official' spaces governed and encoded by the local authority. NXL volunteers share a horizontal relationality with users, sharing informal codes of practice that make and modify the space to suit their needs, planning the space and service from the bottom-up. The "wide open" and liberating feeling Jackson describes is built not from bricks, mortar, books and transactions, but rather through people's processual actions and interactions, the atmosphere created by these processes and the sense of possibility this atmosphere affords.

What also comes with such open-ended territory, however, is more room for conflict about how the 'commons' should work. When everyone has an equal right to owning and practising the space, different people bring different life experiences, attitudes, expectations and imaginations to bear on it. A telling example of these

tensions arose when a conflict erupted between members of the weekly Poetry Workshop group and volunteers managing the space.

Kathy and Gill describe relations with the self-organised Poetry Workshop group as gradually breaking down after some occasions of having to reprimand loud and disturbing behaviour from one of its members (who they believed to be intoxicated), which prompted an aggressive response from her and other members of the group. Kathy also became concerned about certain members of the Poetry group being affiliated with another self-organised local group called 'The New Cross Commoners' (NXC), a left-wing collective of artists, students and precarious workers who challenge the increasing privatisation of public space, the neoliberalisation of services and create interventions and projects to liberate local spaces and resources for collective praxis.

Kathy was suspicious of this group and felt it jeopardised the negotiations they had made with the council to secure the lease on the library. The Poetry Workshop's involvement with NXC led Kathy to claim 'that's why they thought they owned this space. That this space was theirs cos they'd "commoned it" so they could do what they liked' (06/14 interview). A further conflict erupted after the group displayed a long Beat-style poem in the window facing the street at child-level which contained expletives. This took place while Kathy and Gill were away, and when they returned they received complaints from other library users who were offended by the poem. After seeking advice from professional library staff at the council the volunteer managers removed the poem and suspended Poetry Workshop and other self-organised group activities from the public programme while the volunteer management committee reviewed its policies and procedures.

This decision prompted outrage by some of the Poetry Workshop group's members, who chided volunteers for pandering to 'managerialism' and began planning an 'Occupy the library with Poetry!' event with a group of allies from rebel-rousing activist circles. Having discovered the antagonistic tone of this event being planned via Facebook, Kathy and Gill felt fearful for the trouble that could ensue, since as a volunteer-run library they do not have recourse to council security guards and did not want to close the library early that day. They sought advice from the borough Safer Neighbourhoods community police team, who sent an officer to be present in the space

that evening. The performative ‘occupation’ event passed without any serious conflict but with an intimidating atmosphere at odds with the inclusive spirit of the library. ‘They did all go at closing time, thank God, but at one point more and more of them kept coming and glaring at us. Where had they got these people from? Who had never been in this library before?’ (Kathy). After this event the Poetry Workshop group did not return to the library for their weekly meetings, and eventually found an alternative space in a nearby café. Reflecting on the story of this conflict NXL volunteer Emma (also a member of the Commoners collective) concluded:

It’s all about territory. There are so many factions. Everything around here – all these different groups – there’s so much in-fighting. This is the problem of the Left - nobody can be united. It comes together in the library. The library is like this microcosm of all of that. (05/14 interview)

#### 8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how a library staying ‘open for learning’ in New Cross is a very different set of spatial practices to the ways in which Birmingham’s community libraries are marshalled into corporately rationalised ‘assets’ explored in Chapter Five. What is common to both New Cross and Birmingham’s libraries, however, are the spirited practices of resistance of volunteer campaigners striving to uphold the vital value of municipal learning spaces, particularly for marginalised publics. The tensions present in the NXL case, however, reveal a paradox whereby volunteer publics are providing statutory public infrastructures as a result of austerity localist governance practices, while at the same time convening counter-public discursive spaces to contest forms of governmental oppression and destruction of the welfare state.

As Massey (2005) argues, urban spaces are always produced through practices of conflict and negotiation, produced by our perpetual ‘throwntogetherness’ in the simultaneity of spatial ‘stories-so-far’:

...precisely because of the elements of chaos, openness and uncertainty which they both embody, space, and here specifically place, are

potentially creative crucibles of the democratic public sphere. [...] The very fact that they are necessarily negotiated, sometimes riven with antagonism, always contoured through the playing out of unequal social relations, is what renders them public (Massey, 2005, p. 153).

Through its combined public practices of structured programmes of activities, serendipitous special events and soft architectures of sociability and learning, NXL is a place where ‘the meaning and unity of the social is negotiated – at once constituted and put at risk’ (ibid). This notion of risk is an appropriate note on which to depart this chapter and move towards the next, which examines the precarious human infrastructures that keep the library going as a voluntary organisation, throwing its sustainability as an open practiced place into question.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **Infrastructures of labour, care and repair: New Cross people fighting for fairer futures**

#### **9.0 Introduction**

While the previous chapter explored NXL's social architectures through the activities and perceptions of library users; this chapter focuses on how those phenomena happen through the efforts of library workers. This chapter looks at what happens when one form of infrastructural supply is in effect 'switched off' or withdrawn, and another form replaces it through improvised and collaborative forms of provisioning. The questions this chapter addresses are: what do NXL practitioners *do* to keep both themselves, and those who use and rely on the service and the space, moving and surviving; and how are these *doings* constituted infrastructurally? Furthermore, how do these infrastructural practices challenge understandings of what differentiates work, volunteering and activism, and what is the role of *care* in connecting these domains? To answer these questions, in this chapter I adopt Simone's (2004) frame of *people as infrastructure*.

[P]eople as infrastructure describes a tentative and often precarious process of remaking the inner city, especially now that the policies and economies that once moored it to the surrounding city have mostly worn away. In many respects, the inner city has been "let go" and forced to reweave its connections with the larger world by making the most of its limited means (Simone, 2004, p. 411).

Viewing the working practices of NXL through a 'people as infrastructure' lens opens up new ways of reading the social, economic and ethical infrastructures that are scaffolded and conjoined within the material and human resources of NXL: a community-run library sourcing and providing new mechanisms for urban survival amid the 'strange death of municipal England' (Crewe, 2016).

As a volunteer-run library, despite being linked to a network of libraries serving the borough through Lewisham council's statutory public library service framework, NXL's local part in the larger 'whole' of a national public library infrastructure is significantly diminished, due an unequal distribution of resources and capacities. As Tonkiss (2015a, p. 384) puts it, '[i]n their capacity to make things relatable, infrastructures have a connective and collective potential which is only patchily realized in actual systems of provision and regulation.' Such issues of 'distributional justice' (Star, 1999) are navigated by NXL practitioners both in their everyday survival strategies and in their efforts to fight for public interests through municipal values. As Brian Larkin avers, the 'peculiar ontology' of infrastructures 'lies in the fact that they are things and also the relation between things' (2013, p. 329). Tonkiss furthers this point by showing how infrastructural forms and practices 'are especially good to think with given the ways in which they mediate certain 'recurrent binaries' in critical thought – macro and micro, object and agent, human and non-human' (2015a, p. 329).

Given this chapter's focus on the labour of people who conjoin to form precarious infrastructures of municipal provisioning, some additional notable 'recurrent binaries' that extend Tonkiss' list include those interrogated by Rebecca Taylor (2004, 2005, 2015) who reveals the hidden practices of voluntary work that mediate and unsettle established boundaries between public and private, paid and unpaid, formal and informal labour. By thinking the urban sociology of infrastructure together with the sociologies of both work and activism, this chapter shows how the *relationality between* these analytical domains (too often studied separately) can be illuminated through attending to the radical caring practices of NXL volunteers.

This chapter is structured in two halves. The first half explores the ways in which NXL shapes and drives itself as an organisation through alternative exchange practices: agile and inventive modes of provisioning in the absence of funded services or waged labour. The second half makes visible the moral, affective and political economies of care that underpin NXL's people as infrastructure. An ethic of care is not only what sparked the volunteer-run library into production through the activist practices of reclaiming it for the public, but it is also that which keeps it going as the

needs of the space and its users are carefully attended to both within and without the building. Together these sections demonstrate how the survival strategies that constitute NXL's people as infrastructure paradoxically both challenge and reproduce the unequal power relations enforced by neoliberalism and austerity.

### 9.1 Making ends meet: economies of brokerage, sharing and exchange

As Anthony Ince and Sarah Marie Hall aver in a discussion on contemporary sharing economies, 'getting by in times of crisis often requires connectedness and inter-relationality; support that includes but commonly transcends purely financial transactions' (2017, p. 2). I use the term 'brokering' as a shorthand for the practices by which NXL's infrastructure is assembled through leveraging and mediating a range of socio-material and economic practices and relations. In this way I am following Silvia Gherardi's definition of brokering as 'knowledgeable collective action that forges relations and connections amongst all the resources available and all the constraints present' (2009, p. 117). The varying ways in which NXL practitioners generate alternative forms of exchange and subsistence in the absence of any guaranteed monetary funds, finding means to ends and making ends meet with whatever they have to hand. These adaptive infrastructural practices arise from what Simone characterises as:

a process of incessant convertibility—turning commodities, found objects, resources, and bodies into uses previously unimaginable or constrained. Producer-residents become more adept at operating within these conjunctions as they deploy a greater diversity of abilities and efforts (2004, p. 410).

Tonkiss builds on Simone's foundational analysis in her discussion of austerity urbanism, where '[m]akeshift strategies of everyday provision and retooling further subvert infrastructural norms in substituting technical systems with *embodied* infrastructure': self-sufficient systems of supply which are 'at least as resilient and



usually more adaptive than official and technical networks, and often barely more visible' (2015, p. 388). This first section of the chapter makes visible how these adaptive capacities happen at NXL. Firstly I describe how the work of NXL involves improvised forms of income generation; secondly how divisions of labour are organised and practiced through putting volunteers to work, throwing into question the very meaning of voluntary work; and thirdly through the way in which these combined infrastructural practices are valued in the absence of financial remuneration, throwing into relief the values that underpin the work to keep the library going.

In the absence of any core funding to run the building and their organisation, NXL volunteers cultivate practices of sharing, exchanging and bartering with a range of local individuals, businesses and organisations. One of their most pressing infrastructural challenges is how to pay costly monthly bills for water, electricity, heating, rent and rates. One of the ways in which NXL meet these costs is through an annual 'Grand Auction' of goods and services donated by local residents and businesses. This is a convivial community event with a raffle, entertainment and refreshments. A more regular fundraising activity is the selling of large quantities of donated second-hand books. Donated books cannot be assimilated into the lending collection due to technical and infrastructural barriers posed by council-owned collection management systems. NXL volunteers turn this barrier into an opportunity by harnessing the donated book stock as a vital trade resource, selling them online through an online market place called We Buy Books. NXL receives a steady income of around £50-60 per week from this arrangement, which covers their utility bills. Books that are rejected by the We Buy Books platform deemed very low in worth, are put in a separate pile to be sold for between 20 pence and £1 in the library's in-house second-hand bookshop area. Bibliographic donations to NXL also include antique and collectable books and journals, which are sold at special vintage book sales.

In Chapter Six's discussion of the frozen book fund in Birmingham, librarian Claire talked about books being the 'bread and butter' of the library service, as it is through borrowing statistics that the success of the library is measured, and books are the primary reason for most users accessing the service. At NXL, however, books become as quite literally as a means to an end: a way of keeping a warm and functioning

roof over their heads with enough money in the kitty to buy tea and sandwiches for volunteers and pay for the electricity that powers the kettle and the computers. Books become a necessary utility for the utilities.

Another critical ongoing challenge for the library is developing an efficient IT infrastructure to serve both the communication and information needs of those running the organisation, as well as those of the library users who rely on the public computing facilities as often their only way of connecting with the digital and online world. When the building was initially re-claimed by the volunteers, the council had disconnected the public computing network, which was never going to be part of the service agreement between the two parties, due to the complexities of outsourced IT contracts and unaffordable infrastructural costs involved. A few dilapidated and outdated PCs remained in the building but were not fit for purpose. With the aid of a small grant obtained by NXL's umbrella charity, Kathy and Gill were able to purchase five new computers but lacked the knowledge or skills to network them for public use with the relevant software and protection devices. I volunteered alongside a specialist IT volunteer called Vincent in 2013-14 and observed him triple the size of the public PC network with hardware and software resourced through exchange networks and favours from local businesses and IT practitioners. This infrastructural practice is 'open' both in terms of shared computer codes<sup>58</sup> and in the sense of sharing skills, knowledge and materials.

Vincent donated his skilled labour to this infrastructural practice on the one hand as a charitable act, based on his belief that everyone regardless of income should have access to IT facilities, but on the other hand he was using it as a career development opportunity, since he was building up a portfolio of experience to market himself as a professional freelance IT consultant (02/14 fieldnotes). He had heard about NXL through word of mouth and decided it would be an ideal place to test out and develop his skills and network, while contributing to a worthy cause, thereby meeting

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<sup>58</sup> Vincent built four of the new computers using an open source operating system called Linux, and loaded them with the Libre Office programmes. He would have liked to create all the machines using in this free and open source digital infrastructure, but due to the needs of users with low digital literacy, the standard Microsoft packages were needed to help them learn the mainstream forms of digital engagement that could work towards accredited training.

his own survival needs as well as the library's (02/14 fieldnotes). Gill describes Vincent walking in to the library to volunteer his skills just at the moment they needed them as a 'gift', suggesting that such serendipitous human currencies are constructive ways in which the human and technical infrastructures of the library service develop.

### **Putting volunteers to work: heterogenous, precarious and ephemeral practices**

Most volunteers find their way into working at NXL through word of mouth or chance circumstances. One day in Spring 2013, Emma, an unemployed graduate new to the area, dropped in to NXL to enquire about the 'Language Exchange' workshop she saw advertised in the window, which interested her due to being bilingual in English and Spanish. Impressed by the convivial space she encountered, Emma left having completed an application form to volunteer. She returned the following week for Language Exchange, which she ended up leading herself since the previous volunteer who facilitated it had dropped out. This immediate immersion into the working infrastructural practices of the organisation confirmed to both Emma and Kathy and Gill that a role for Emma was worth formalising. References and criminal record checks were administered, and Emma became a regular member of the team for the next year.

The first couple of days, they were so welcoming and so full of ideas, they were like 'oh we could get you doing this - oh you're an artist - cool! - we can get you to do that' – that's what Kathy's like, you know she'll *put you to work*. So that was really nice, because obviously when you're unemployed it's really depressing and you've got the job centre breathing down your neck (Emma, 05/14 interview, my emphasis).

Emma's sense of being enfolded into an informal community of practice where her skills and interests are intrinsically valued, as opposed to where they are judged for their extrinsic or commodified worth, shows how human infrastructure of NXL is softer, warmer and more pliable than that of the cold, hard bureaucracy of the Department of Work and Pensions. This extract provides a flavour of how recruitment

and work practices happen at NXL: mainly through serendipitous and organic processes of self-selection, mutual benefit and delegation. Kathy takes a brokering role here, thinking on her feet to match people to tasks as and when opportunities present themselves and with the materials available. This spontaneity and autonomy is reflected in NXL's daily staffing rhythms too.

The core NXL volunteers always present during public opening hours are Kathy and Gill (Co-Chairs of the management committee) on week days, and Mary (secretary of the management committee) on Saturdays. During my time volunteering at NXL, sometimes I would be the only member of staff (in addition to one of these volunteer managers) present on my shift, particularly in the mornings, which were unpopular times to volunteer; other times there would be between around one and four other volunteers working alongside me throughout the day. While some volunteers usually came to work at roughly the same times each week, others were much more sporadic and unpredictable in their attendance.

Without a formal process for managing or coordinating volunteers, staffing the library mainly works on a social basis. Tasks are allocated on an ad hoc and needs-led basis depending on who turns up each day and what kind of skills and attributes comes with them. Kathy told me she had tried to establish a volunteer rota, but it was never possible to get people to stick to it, nor to communicate changes effectively. Many volunteers juggle library volunteering with family and caring responsibilities, other forms of work, studies, or health issues. The turnover of incoming and outgoing volunteers is high, and with staff staying at the library anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of years, the average being around six months.

Volunteers also vary significantly in terms of their backgrounds, competencies and skillsets. The diverse range of volunteers I encountered during my fieldwork between October 2013 July 2014 included a professional librarian who volunteered one or two evenings per week after work at her day job at Goldsmiths Library; a undergraduate Goldsmiths student who lived in the halls of residence situated above the NXL building; a single father and anti-austerity activist who created a section of the library collection called 'books to change the world with'; a single mother who was seeking experience and social contact following a period of mental ill health; a former

chemical analyst developing administration skills while looking to change career; a former postman wanting to give back to the library his children had used; several creative and literary arts practitioners (two of whom also struggled with chronic mental illness); a middle-aged man with Downs Syndrome; an Italian intern learning English; a homeless Syrian refugee; young offenders serving community sentences; local school children and young people on work experience and volunteering placements, and private sector employees on corporate charitable day release placements. The heterogenous range of people volunteering their time and effort to the work of the library defies any neat definition or social imaginary of what it means to be a volunteer.

As Taylor points out (2005, p. 119), '[t]here is an enduring stereotype of the volunteer as a middle-class 'lady' juggling church jumble sales and charity lunches'. This image is rooted in the history of middle-class philanthropy, which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of formal voluntary associations that formed a new sphere of civic and professional power. 'The term 'volunteer' applied to a distinct category of unpaid worker in these organizations [...which] were also inherently gendered', due to the Victorian Evangelical doctrine of women being the guardians of the domestic sphere, which extended to the civic sphere through philanthropic acts of setting an example to those lower down in the social order (p. 124). Although the volunteer managers of NXL happen to be women in their late 50s/early60s, the majority of volunteers who contribute to the service are far removed from this stereotype, which shows how the reality of 'voluntary work – unpaid work outside the home – takes a wide variety of forms in contemporary British society', and cuts across public and private, formal and informal spaces (Taylor 2005, p. 119).

Miriam Glucksmann's (1995, 2000) theory of the 'total social organisation of labour' (TSOL) argues that 'it is necessary to look at work as activities taking place in different spheres, embedded in, and defined by particular social relations, and connected to one another through the organization of social structures' (Taylor, 2004, p. 38). Glucksmann and Taylor show how sociologists of work have reduced the theory of work to the limited conceptual structure of either economic relations or gender relations, a dichotomy between public paid work (usually done by men) and private unpaid work (usually done by women). This binary is born of 'academic concerns with

industrial capital within the new discipline of sociology at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’, into which voluntary work doesn’t fit, ‘since it takes place in the public sphere but is unpaid, making it conceptually and theoretically incompatible with the existing definitions of work’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 30). Taylor creates the following visual framework to account for the embeddedness of work in different spheres, social relations and structures:

<b>PAID</b>		
<b>Formal paid employment in public, private and voluntary sector</b>	<b>Informal economic activity</b>	<b>Household/ family work</b>
e.g. paid accountant or care assistant	e.g. paid babysitting for friends or neighbours	e.g. paid babysitting within the family
<b>PUBLIC/ FORMAL</b>	<b>PUBLIC/ INFORMAL</b>	<b>PRIVATE INFORMAL</b>
e.g. unpaid accountant or care assistant	e.g. unpaid care for sick or elderly neighbour	e.g. unpaid care for sick or elderly relative
<b>Formal unpaid work in public, private and voluntary sector</b>	<b>Informal unpaid work</b>	<b>Private domestic labour</b>
<b>UNPAID</b>		

Table 9.1 ‘A framework showing the organization of labour’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 30)

The present chapter adds the dimension of how to think about voluntary workers delivering services for the public sector under austerity as diverse assemblages of ‘people as infrastructure’. As Kelemen et al. show in a recent paper on the topic, in the present UK context of Big Society government agendas and neoliberalised labour markets, we need to pay more attention to new forms of work that trouble the boundaries traditional work categories, such as ‘zero hour contracts, benefit-to-work schemes and unpaid internships’, which the authors classify as ‘voluntolding’, as a play on the notion of being *told* or forced to work for little or no compensation or stability (2017, p. 2). In light of this, Adapting Taylor’s framework to fit the work domains of NXL looks rather more complicated:

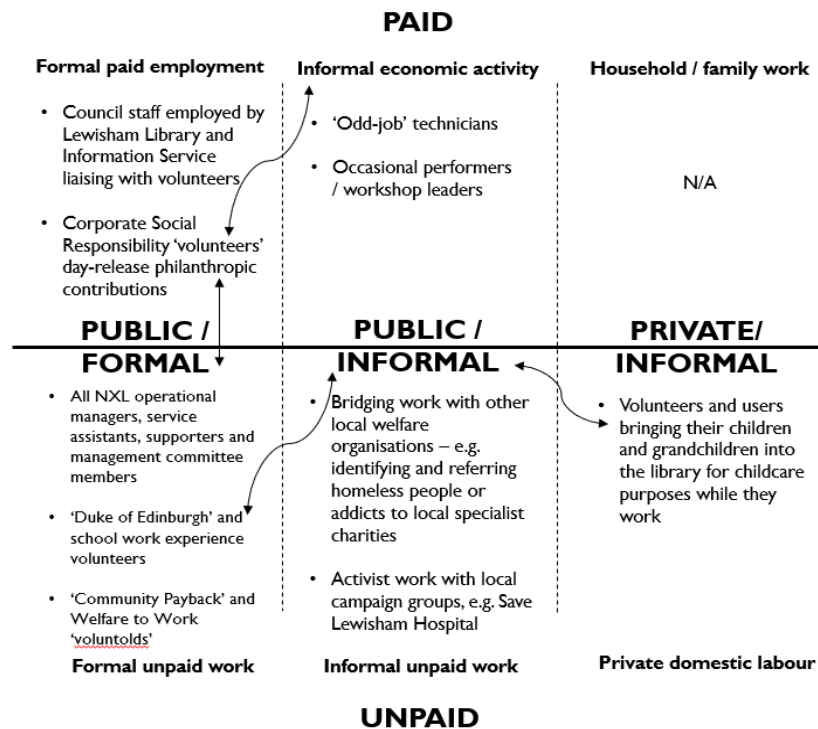


Table 9.2: Taylor's (2004) framework re-worked for NXL labour entanglements

This entangled set of labour relations defies neat boundary lines, as roles and functions move in articulated assemblages that shift with changing circumstances.

While Emma described having gained a huge amount of social value from her volunteering at NXL, after less than a year she decided to leave the role, partly because of a difficult relationship with another volunteer, but mainly on financial grounds.

I'm sick of working for free. I love the library and I'll come to events here, but I can't afford to work for free any more. Maybe it's fine for a short-term thing if you're on the dole. But you can't expect people to stay long term when they don't get paid. You can stay for a few months, but it's not really economically viable to stay longer.

The lack of financial remuneration for library staff means that most volunteers both arrive and leave their roles in the operational infrastructure with similar levels of unpredictability and contingency. This has repercussions on the library infrastructure:

every NXL volunteer requires references and a DBS check<sup>59</sup> to work at the library, which costs NXL £12 for every person, even if they are ‘only here for five minutes’, says Gill. Given the high turnover, this adds up to a considerable cost and time-consuming administration work for volunteer managers, on top of their daily operational duties.

### **Time is not money: valuing and rewarding work through social remuneration**

The variability and contingency of volunteer staff attendance and competence levels means that at least one of the unpaid co-managers must be present every day and hour that the library is open to the public, to ensure it opens and closes on time, to train, support and supervise volunteers and to mediate any problems and opportunities that present themselves. Gill and Kathy are the core volunteer managers who work every Tuesday (10am-5pm), Wednesday and Thursday (10am-7pm), while Mary covers every Saturday (10am-5pm). Kathy and Gill find it difficult to estimate how many hours they work for the library each week.

Kathy: I'd say we probably do 30 hours a week each.

Gill: Plus, *plus!* Because we do caretaking as well. And evening events.

Kathy: And fundraising.

Alice: So more like 40?

Gill: Probably up from that even. Which is why Mary doesn't allow us in on a Saturday!

Alice: So since you've been the driving forces of keeping it going, is it sometimes hard to know where to draw the

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<sup>59</sup> ‘The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) helps employers make safer recruitment decisions and prevent unsuitable people from working with vulnerable groups, including children. It replaces the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA)’. (GOV.UK, no date) Although NXL are not ‘employers’ due to being entirely volunteer run, their service agreement with the council require them to comply with these safeguarding procedures, although they are given no funds for this administration.



line - when you're working for the library and when you're not? Do you take it home with you in a way?

Gill: It does go home.

Kathy: Yeah cos you check your emails and... yeah, it does go home. And in a way, even on our days off, I'll ring Gill, she'll ring me, we probably ring each other at least half a dozen times about something to do with the library.

Gill: Have you seen this email, that email?

Kathy: Have you seen this Twitter? There's always something.

(07/14 interview)

Gill and Kathy are always in one way or another 'switched on' to the library, as without a contract of employment or institutional framework that sets their working hours and responsibilities, the boundaries between work and home, day and evening become porous as they live and work to keep the library going. This may contribute to the reasons why several interview respondents say 'the library' when they are actually referring to Kathy and Gill. Kathy and Gill's labour both within and without the building actually embodies the practice and values of the library so their individual and organisational personas are perceived by many as one and the same. As identified in the above extract, this becomes difficult to enumerate in temporal values.

A major assumption about volunteering is that it is an activity done in a person's 'free' or 'leisure' time. For Kathy and Gill, however, their 'free' time and effort is reabsorbed into keeping the library, families and wider community going. When they are not on public duty in the NXL building they are invariably attending community meetings, engaging in political organising, caring for their grandchildren (sometimes all in the same time-space).

I ask Kathy and Gill how they feel about working such long hours in the absence of financial (or temporal) remuneration, and how their work compares to paid employment. Gill was employed for many years as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator in inner-city state schools in South East London, which she 'did get a lot of reward from [...] but it was nice to leave and retire, and not have that sort of pressure'

(06/17 interview). Gill took early retirement when the pressure of monitored performance became too much: 'it's like all the time you've got to be better, even if you're outstanding'. Gill describes the reward of NXL as residing in meeting 'amazing people' and getting a 'buzz' from the appreciation she receives from helping people. 'Obviously it's not paid, so sometimes it is a bit, you know, God what am I doing this for?, but then we get so many people saying how wonderful and grateful – as you know from the comment book – so it's really great'.

Kathy also articulates her sense of reward in terms of reciprocal appreciation and gratitude between library volunteers and users.

Obviously, we must feel rewarded and appreciation from the community. If we felt that nobody respects us or what we're doing, if we didn't ever get a thank you, then maybe we'd think differently. But we have users that bring us in biscuits, cleaning things. There was one woman, who was coming in to do her CV and I helped her, and she ended up getting a really good job. I saw her in Lewisham market and she asked about how the library was going, and as I was telling her what we were doing and she kept saying how amazing this library is and saying 'I want to buy you something' and I'm going 'no, I couldn't let you!' but she insisted, and she bought me a jumper. (06/14 interview)

Receiving modest material gifts such as cleaning products, biscuits or a jumper, could be viewed merely as 'token' gestures, drops in the ocean of the material and financial resources needed to survive under the pressures of austerity, but Kathy recognises the reward value of these gifts in wider social terms of civic virtue and personal appreciation, which can't be converted in monetary value. The reciprocal human infrastructure of NXL operates like a non-financial currency exchange: one person's labour is converted into another person's labour and these labours both generate and are generated by gifts of material objects, and portions of time and senses of moral obligation and reward. This read through Titmuss' (1997) theory of altruism through the 'gift relationship' of donor practices, or Eckstein's (2001) theory of collectivist-voluntarism through 'community as gift-giving'. It is important, however, to guard against what Salamon (1993) calls 'the myth of pure virtue' which can too-easily colour

valorisations of voluntary work as altruistic cures for society's ills (Lie, Baines and Wheelock, 2009, p. 713; Taylor, 2015, p. 486).

Unlike Gill, Kathy has not had much experience in paid employment. She is originally from a poor working-class family in Yorkshire and has lived in or near New Cross for over thirty-five years. She says she did have 'a job a long time ago ... in stock control' but gave that up to have her children and has since been a full-time mother and grandmother. Over the years she has volunteered in community work such as helping with her children's classes and after-school activities, but describes the voluntary work she does at NXL as 'completely different' to this, as it entails much more responsibility and is 'much more rewarding':

Had we not achieved keeping this library, one: you wouldn't have met all these amazing volunteers, and two: you wouldn't have met the community really. All the different organisations we have got to know through this library - which I didn't know before - didn't come into contact with the people who run those organisations. (Kathy, 06/14 interview)

Kathy's sense of social reward lies in her expanded connections and horizons through the power of associational civic life, growing a web of alliances with other volunteers and local organisations that form civic infrastructures to broker and meet social needs. Although Kathy has lived in the New Cross area for several decades and been involved in civic life through circles of influence around her children's school, she had not been in a position to participate in the wider ecology of infrastructural community relations until she started working for the library.

NXL's working practices and values have organically grown and intersected with those of other local grass-roots organisations, including (but not limited to) a community garden, a radical housing collective, a refugee action group, a pensioner's network, and a black and minority ethnic network, as well as local schools, youth organisations, and creative arts networks. Articulating her sense of reward in terms of these local connections can be understood in terms of Putnam's conception of social capitals which both 'bond' within and 'bridge' across social groups and structures (2001, pp. 22–23). Reading Kathy's sense of reward through the lens of social capital, however, risks instrumentalising her experience into a discourse of volunteering as

'active citizenship', which has become the province of Third Way and neoliberal policy focused on mobilising civil society to reduce public spending and increase community cohesion (Amin, 2005; Lie, Baines and Wheelock, 2009; Hustinx, 2010; Nichols and Ralston, 2012). This frame does not do justice to how Kathy and Gill communicate and practice their senses of intrinsic social value and reward. As Antoni argues, '[e]ven in standard economic environments, people do not care about their material payoffs alone or, more in general, about the consequences of actions; they also have intrinsic reasons to act' (Antoni, 2009, p. 105). Intrinsic motivation to volunteer, by contrast, is when the practitioner 'receives no apparent reward except the activity itself' (ibid.).

Although Mary works fewer hours than Kathy and Gill at NXL, managing the library only on Saturdays, she also volunteers during the week in several other charity and community organisations. A retired teacher and mother of three grown-up children brought up as a single parent, Mary has led a busy life. She wanted to continue to be busy beyond her paid employment years, because she 'read the statistics about retired teachers and I thought - no, I'm not going to die at 63!' Mary clearly has a lot to give through volunteering her time and labour, but when I ask her what she receives in return, she is initially puzzled. 'What do I get out of it? That's an interesting one. Um, entertainment, amusement, friends, books - I get books! I get lovely books! I borrow or buy a book a week' (05/14 interview).

A revelation from Gill sheds a stark light on economy through which NXL is run. After retiring, Gill had planned to do some part time temping work and enrol on some art classes in her spare time. Life, however, did not pan out this way.

Gill: I'll tell you an interesting fact and statistic. I retired two years early, I was 58 when I retired, and it was around that time that the petitioning started for the library.

Kathy: It was after the General Election in 2010, when all the cuts came in.

Gill: And if you remember Kath, we reached a point where we had to say to each other: we must make this commitment. Because if we don't –

Kathy: It would've become a pound shop.

Gill: So we made the commitment to the library. But, I didn't get my pension til I reached 62. So my husband actually worked it out – up until that time I had to transfer £500 a month out of my savings [laughs], to live on. So he said, basically, it's cost *you* six and a half grand a year, to work in the library. Interesting. [pause]

Alice: How does that make you feel?

Gill: Oh well, [ironic tone] it makes me feel such a *martyr*! [chuckles] But it's true! I'm not saying I would have got the temporary work, but I couldn't sit still. So that, the compensation of not just letting your mind go stagnant, keeping it alert, that's the payment if you like. And it's worth it, you know. (06/17 interview)

It could be argued that Gill's use of four years of her own savings in the public interests of the library is an inequitable form of personal subsidisation of a statutory public service. However, Gill does not choose to read it this way. It is curious that she introduces her story as a piece of quantitative data for me ('an interesting fact and statistic'), which allows her to bracket off the subjective or ethical value of what she shares. Gill does note that the personal financial cost she has incurred in committing to the library project is 'interesting' but brushes aside its moral or political dimensions by ironising any implication of martyrdom. The pause in her speech followed by laughter could be read as masking a deeper symbolic violence that has brought about the value equation she makes; however what Gill wants to emphasise in this equation is that the 'compensation' of mental stimulation she receives from her voluntary commitment to the library is all the reward she needs to keep both herself and the library going and growing in the face of wider public crises. Gill could have fulfilled her post-retirement social needs by gaining temporary paid employment and paying for art classes, but the trade-off of investing in a public cause rather than engaging in transactional exchange value (further symbolised by vanquishing the threat of the pound shop) is 'worth it'.

The word remunerate does not have its roots in financial compensation, although that is now how it is most commonly used. The Latin root "munari" means to give, so conjoined with the prefix "re", "remunerate" means to give back. "Munari"

stems from “munus”: a service performed for the community through duty, gift or office, related to the duty-bound citizens of a municipium (Roman urban state province). Research studies on the rewards of individual engagement with volunteering reveal that the most commonly articulated benefits are ‘structured time; regularly shared experience outside of the context of the family; a linking to goals and purposes transcending those of the individual; a source of personal status and identity; and enforcing regular activity’ (Nichols and Ralston, 2012, p. 2978). Gill, Kathy and Mary’s narratives each include elements of these personal benefits to volunteering, however the public and political context in which they are doing their voluntary work needs to be analysed as much as the personal and individual context. NXL volunteers are not simply giving their time, labour and values to a niche civil society organisation, they are actually doing the work of a statutory local government service and hence embodying and fulfilling resolutely *municipal* laws, practices and values. What motivates people to become infrastructure in this case, then, is less about personal benefits, and more about commitments to political forms and norms of public life.

In the extract from Gill’s narrative above, she repeats the word ‘commitment’ twice, underlining that the whole enterprise of keeping the public library going hinges on that, and therefore the public *values* that constitute people as infrastructure here can’t be reduced to economic *value* (Skeggs, 2014). Gill does note that ‘we know that if a manager were employed here, which is what we do, you’re looking at 33 thousand plus a year. It’s a lot of money’. Gill is basing this on the wage of library managers employed by Lewisham to run the local authority-run libraries. This seems like a ‘lot of money’ to an unpaid volunteer, however as seen in the group discussion of Birmingham library campaign activists in Chapter Five, librarians are ‘cheap’ compared to consultants who are hired to strategically deliver public service cuts (Ann, 04/16 interview).

The other crucial point Ann raised in the Birmingham campaign group conversation, was the inestimable value of unpaid labour donated by activists who care about the welfare of their communities. Kathy adds to this point with her comment that ‘even if you had a paid manager here, they wouldn’t do half the things we do. It’s not just being a manager’ (06/17 interview). The infrastructural practices of *managing*

at NXL include not only the typical responsibilities of council-employed library manager's role, but also the gritty realism of caretaking work, from cleaning toilets, to crisis intervention, to caring for the manifold needs of vulnerable people.

The second half of this chapter explores how hidden infrastructures of *care* underpin the general operations of NXL, further highlighting how the binaries of public and private, macro and micro cease to make sense in lived spaces of survival, and that the economy of NXL is as much moral as it is political. I adopt a feminist analysis of these practices of NXL volunteers as 'citizen carers' (Lie, Baines and Wheelock, 2009): work that is 'invisible' (Daniels, 1987; Hatton, 2017) in manifold ways, due to gendered divisions of labour and social reproduction in public life.

## **9.2 Surviving and providing through caring economies: implicit and explicit activisms**

As Glucksmann highlights, 'care is both a slippery and complex concept', connoting different meanings in different languages, cultures, disciplines and sectors (2006, p. 56). Theorisations of care were pioneered by feminist scholars in the 1970s and 80s and further kinds of analysis have emerged through research in welfare state, public sector and social policy fields. Across these disciplines 'some have stressed the emotional character of care, others foreground it as a 'work' activity' (ibid.). My own research adds to Glucksmann's important point that care should be understood as a three-dimensional and intersectional concept, which 'straddles public and private boundaries [...] intersects with the state, family, education and health systems', is underpinned by both economic and normative frameworks, and is structured and often obscured by 'taken-for-granted gender divisions of labour' (2006, p. 57). The politics of gender and age that underpin caring practices at NXL will be analysed in the final section of this chapter. First, I will outline and unpack the variety of affective currencies and infrastructural practices of care that take place in, through and around the library.

During my fieldwork at NXL I witnessed and participated in countless shared expressions of joy, sorrow, affection, angst, frivolity and gravity through laughter, tears, hugs and helping hands, as library volunteers and users inter-connected to celebrate and commiserate the ups and downs of daily life, on both organisational and personal levels. These interactions create social scenes (Blum, 2001; Puwar, 2007) where little spaces of intimacy and compassion are made public. These ‘small acts’ of everyday care can be understood as forms of ‘implicit activism’ against the growing oppression of welfare reform (Horton and Kraftl, 2009b). Ordinary labour practices such as talking, listening, sharing, caring, lending, tending, cleaning, and carrying are described by Tonkiss (2015a, p. 389, citing Simone, 2004, p. 408) as

soft infrastructures – characterized at once by ‘regularity and provisionality’ – fill in for, compete with or extend incomplete, exclusionary or inadequate networks of hard infrastructure which are often more vulnerable to ... state and market failures, or more radical forms of public abandonment and private dereliction.

In the case of NXL these soft infrastructures are made of empathetic practices and relations generated by the way in which both library volunteers and library users share a similar habitus: the conditions of austerity that bring them together as fellow citizens finding ways to live in solidaristic yet precarious spaces of survival.

The general ambiance of NXL was described as ‘a big warm hug of a library’ by council-employed community liaison librarian Jane, who felt its particularly soft, nurturing character stood out from the more regulated and brittle infrastructures of local authority-run library services (04/14 interview). Jane’s librarian colleague Sally furthers this point, emphatically repeating that the atmosphere of NXL is ‘*completely different*’ to when it was run by the council.

I think here, the fact that people are engaging is because they're local people and they care about those people as well. I'm not saying that my colleagues who worked here before didn't care, but there's just not that same emotional connection to wanting to deliver a service, it's perhaps a little bit more operational – whereas here there's something in the [hesitation]- you know they're part of it. Kathy and Gill and the volunteers are part of this community. (04/14 interview, Sally’s emphasis).



Sally's distinction between 'operational' approaches and 'emotional' relations to caring for the library's public is an interesting one to make in the austerity localism context, where geographies of neglect and injustice are formed through shifting responsibilities of service provision.

Clayton et al. argue that the emotional terrain of 'those working in the related fields of 'care' in the public and third sector operate on the basis of emotional commitments' and that it is crucial to critique the ways in which emotions are operationalised and experienced in the landscape of austerity politics, in order to expose the scarcity of 'recognition, reward or value to those providing vital public services to those on the margin' (2015, p. 31). I want to steer clear of analysing NXL volunteers' affective ties of caring for their community in terms of localist or communitarian discourses, which would be an easy move to make in interpreting Sally's comments. Instead I want to focus on the ethical threads of care embodied by NXL's people as infrastructure in the nexus of activist practices that brought the volunteer-run library into being. The group of activists who cared enough to fight to save the library from closure, then converted that care for a public service into another kind of care, the embodied caring practices of providing services for people in need through voluntary labour. Without this activist ethic of care, there would be no library through which to care for and with the people of New Cross.

While NXL advisor Jennifer acknowledges that it the efforts of NXL's stalwart core volunteers Gill, Kathy and Mary that keep the library infrastructure going, she also reflects that the library's real drivers

...might well be the users. Even though they're not practically the people locking up or paying the gas bill, they're making it alive by being here, they're keeping it on mission, because it's obvious to everyone here every day why they're doing it - because you see the sorts of people coming in and the visible benefits it's delivering to them (Jennifer, 05/14 interview).

The remainder of this chapter firstly shows how 'the sorts of people coming in' to NXL are all-too-often casualties of austerity, as volunteers absorb the slack from other welfare services being squeezed by funding cuts, and caring practices become more critical than ever. Who 'comes in' and who falls 'outside' the library's physical space

are of equal importance to the kinds of care needed in this context, as NXL volunteers' infrastructural practices cross urban boundaries and fill in the missing links between municipal services.

Furthermore, by exploring the taken-for-granted caring labour of maintaining the library's material infrastructures, I make visible the way in which NXL volunteers embody and generate the social value that makes the library usable and safe for the public. I analyse these infrastructural caring practices through a feminist lens, arguing how this public work of caring for spaces, people and society is rendered invisible through neoliberal and gendered systems of value. I argue that it is through these invisible modes of social care and repair work that the infrastructural practices of NXL voluntary workers intersect with activist ones, as they connect the small struggles of everyday survival and care to the bigger political struggle of fighting for a fairer city and society.

### **Caring for people: sustaining infrastructural welfare practices**

In response to my question of how they see care taking place at NXL, Kathy replied,

well because we live around here, we know a lot of the people who come in, but also you get to know what's on your doorstep and don't turn a blind eye, so we are caring, we are concerned ... it's not just people that use the library that we can be compassionate with, it's people out on the street as well' (06/14 interview).

'Yeah, if we don't see one in a while, we are worried', Gill added (ibid). These responses can be read as part of Gill and Kathy's 'public character' (Jacobs, 1993) role in New Cross discussed in the previous chapter, as they keep their eyes and ears close to the social rhythms and needs of their neighbourhood. For example, Gill describes a lonely elderly man who comes regularly comes to the library just for someone to talk to, and she always tries to engage with him despite often having to juggle caring for her grandson in the space while serving a multitude of other library user needs at the same time. Such simultaneous caring practices are a typical scene at NXL. Volunteers may be

seen holding a baby with one arm while helping an older library user with computer access with the other.

As volunteer managers, Kathy, Gill and Mary also continually care for the needs of volunteers, many of whom are vulnerable or lacking in skills and confidence. When I interviewed Mary, she was supervising NXL's youngest volunteer, a ten-year-old boy who was re-shelving books behind us. As our conversation progressed we noticed he had stopped his task and was sitting in the corner. 'It's not that he can't do it, but he needs [pause] caring for much more than the others do, if you like. But he enjoys the kudos of being a volunteer in the library', Mary reflected. 'Do you see your role in the library as a caring one?' I asked.

Oh yeah, without question. I want the people who use the library to feel comfortable in the space. That means that I care. That means that I will behave in a way that makes them feel comfortable. ... How can you manage well if you don't care? (Mary, 05/14 interview)

The caring radar of NXL practitioners also extends beyond the library's walls to the streets around it. Kathy and Gill cross paths with numerous vagrants and peripheral urban survivors who drift and dwell around the urban corners of New Cross. Gill tells the story of coming to recognise a man who would visit the library to use the public toilet, appearing disorientated and dishevelled but always presenting with a polite and humble demeanour. With each visit, she would try to engage him in conversation, but he spoke very little English. Gradually she discovered he was from Syria and was currently homeless and living in an old car not far from the library. When she realised he was at risk of some bad influences, she offered him a role at NXL helping with caretaking of the building, and in return took care of his needs, by helping him with his language skills and connecting him with contacts in other third sector organisations, which eventually led to him getting paid work in a furniture organisation that came with accommodation (07/14 interview).

Kathy recounts similar cases of looking out for people who have fallen through the city's infrastructural cracks, such as a different homeless man who would often hung around the alley at the back of the library. Kathy got to know him during her

cigarette breaks out there, and discovered he was ‘a gas addict’, as she put it. Concerned, she contacted local homeless and substance abuse services and council officials to see if she could find him help (05/14 field notes).

If supporting people living on the streets is a form of urban outreach work, then helping people with strategies for survival *inside* the library can be thought of as a practice of urban ‘inreach’ work. Countless people come in to the library with pressing needs for information and support on matters of social and economic survival, such as how to stop their benefits being sanctioned when they don’t understand how to use online job application and welfare systems under the Government’s ‘Digital by Default’ strategy<sup>60</sup>; or how to access legal advice in the absence of a local Citizens Advice Bureau office<sup>61</sup>; or how to open a bank account without any money, credit history or stable address<sup>62</sup>.

Alain, a regular NXL user, visits the library primarily for searching and applying for jobs online. He is unemployed and does not own a computer of his own, so relies on the library to search and applies for jobs. As Gill observes, ‘that’s the primary reason for a lot of people coming in. There are a lot of people who don’t have internet access at home, who just can’t afford it’ (06/14 interview). During the time of my fieldwork 17% of UK households were without access to the internet, and only 67% of unemployed adults felt they had adequate computer skills for gaining employment (Office for National Statistics, 2013). This has led Chi Onwurah MP to argue that the government ‘is going “digital by default” simply to cut costs while forgetting about people who don’t have access to the internet or the digital skills to use it’ (Rust, 2014).

The ongoing effects of austerity, digitised forms of government and neoliberal welfare reform has significantly increased the volume of people entering the library space (both as service users and volunteers) with critical care and survival needs. This

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<sup>60</sup> Announced in Coalition Government’s 2012 Budget. stipulating the transfer of face-to-face public services to digital service platforms to make substantial efficiency savings.

<sup>61</sup> See (Kirwan, 2016) for research on the hollowing out of Citizens Advice Bureaus under austerity.

<sup>62</sup> To address this latter social problem, NXL have started a partnership with community banking cooperative Credit Union. This helps not only impoverished members of the public to economically survive, but also NXL as an organisation, since it attracts more funding and respect from local authorities and charities. At the time of writing in November 2017, plans are developing to convert the lounge corner at the front of the library into a confidential office for Credit Union to provide community banking and debt advice services to its clients.

has led NXL volunteers to take on more social ‘casework’, supporting people to mitigate benefit sanctions, navigate visa and immigration appeals, access food banks, and carry out enforced volunteering under welfare to work programmes. None of these practices of social support would be possible without maintaining an adequate and accessible space in which to administer them. The next section examines the housekeeping practices that constitute infrastructural economies of care and survival.



Figure 9.3: NXL food bank donations (source: NXL volunteer)

## Caring for space: library housework

The library building was in a poor state of repair when volunteers took over its management from the council in 2011. Through incremental processes of improvement via crowdsourced materials and voluntary labour, the dying municipal building was transformed into a vibrant living space for diverse communal activities. I brought up the issue of the building's maintenance with senior Lewisham council officer Lewis, who chose to speak about it in the localist discourse of Community Asset Transfer, rationalising the value trade-off that is made possible by devolving municipal responsibilities to volunteers.

One of the reasons why we said that we needed to transfer these buildings to other people was that the buildings were not used enough and the resources were not always as relevant as the community may have wanted. So by getting somebody else in the building, yes the council is going to save some money on the maintenance of the building in the repairs, but on the other hand the council is making an asset valuable to the local community. (Lewis, 04/14 interview)

In the value equation described by Lewis, the council is *subtracting* staff and resources from its overall infrastructure of library provision, thereby saving money on the building's facilities and maintenance, but at the same time, it is *adding* value for 'the local community' by handing them (a group of concerned local citizens) the 'asset' – i.e. the commodity of the council-owned library building – to use and generate value for their own ends.

It is true that NXL volunteers have made the space more relevant to the needs and interests of local people, but what doesn't get evaluated in this equation is the commodity of the labour power that is necessary for making the asset of the building usable, in order to do this work of making it 'relevant'. Labour is treated as an expense rather than an asset, but there would be no library without labour, and hence a library building can't be deemed a valuable asset without the human bodies, minds and emotions needed to make it a communal resource via the public practice of people as infrastructure. The logic of 'asset transfer' therefore begs the question of how the value of the 'asset' is constituted. Although the building has an exchange value in market

terms, the use value of the building is constituted by the unquantified and invisible human infrastructural practices that underpin its usability.

Practices of maintaining the building for public use can be seen in the volunteers' daily embodied rhythms of domestic work.

Do you really want to know what I do when I get here? I arrive here, buy the papers, clean the toilet, Hoover this section here, because we have Baby Bounce here on a Saturday, and I don't care whatever people have done on a Thursday night, on a Saturday I want to make very sure that this area is safe, because they're little kids, anything up to 3 or 4 years old crawling around on the floor. So I Hoover it, and then Kevin will arrive, and he will be doing things on the desk, and I will continue to Hoover the rest of the space or he will Hoover, or start cleaning things up, and it kind of rolls on like that. (Mary, 05/14 interview)

Vacuuming is an important morning and evening practice during the week too, and when arriving for my shift on a Tuesday or Thursday I would often find Kathy or Gill bent hurriedly over the wheezing Hoover to erase the debris of the previous day, and I'd offer to take over, reflecting that I would never encounter a manager (let alone one of retirement age) in a council-run library doing these domestic chores. Public-toilet cleaning is also a daily chore for volunteers, often left to Mary, Kathy and Gill who are usually the first in and last out as managers of the building. The library offers the only public toilet in the neighbourhood<sup>63</sup>, so is very well-used by a wide range of people frequenting the library (some only for that purpose), including the homeless and parents with babies, or young children. The toilet requires regular checks to make sure it is safe and clean for all. Latex gloves are a necessity for this work, as Kathy describes having had to clean all manner of bodily fluids and forms of waste in this space, as well as ensuring it does not become a site of drug-use.

Emptying bins and sorting waste for disposal and recycling is another daily task shared among different volunteers. The issue of waste is a worry for the managers since costs for waste collection are higher than they can afford, since the building is classed as a commercial property. Kathy also cites sandwich-making as a 'very important job',

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<sup>63</sup> As Crewe highlights, 'four out of five councils have reduced spending on public toilets since 2011; 1782 facilities have been closed in the last decade' (2016, n.p.).

since many of the volunteers are unable to afford their own lunch so Kathy and Gill often provide sandwiches or soup, also to attendees of regular groups, events and workshops (03/14 field notes). These mundane and unpaid housekeeping practices are crucial yet unrecognised elements of the hidden human infrastructure that keep the civic space in safe and usable public circulation, maintaining it as an attractive ‘asset’ of community value in Lewis’s terms.

NXL volunteers’ domestic and civic care practices can be understood in terms of what Nigel Thrift (2005) calls the ‘forgotten infrastructures’ of urban repair and maintenance, which constitutes ‘an urban technological unconscious’ and indicate how urban life can be more caring and kind. The upkeep of the city’s multiple infrastructures does not happen automatically, but through the ceaseless mundane restorative practices of fixing, cleaning, tending, mending, maintaining, and re-placing its constituent parts and relations. Thrift includes a long list of traditionally masculine jobs to illustrate his argument, including electricians, plumbers, janitors and security guards. The hum and flow of maintenance and repair work is so omnipresent in urban life it barely registers, but were it to stop functioning the city would unravel (Graham and Thrift, 2007). Thrift only makes passing reference to what he terms the ‘conventional macropolitics of urban care ... the often unsung work put in by the employees of various welfare systems ... [and] all manner of voluntary workers’, which he contrasts with his chosen focus on the ‘micro politics of productivity’ that occurs within ‘lighter touch’ gatherings of civility and conviviality situated in everyday local interactions (2005, p. 144). I argue that separating infrastructures of care into a binary of macro and micro politics in this way is unhelpful, and in fact conceals more of the very politics and practices of urban care and social repair that Thrift argues we should reveal and develop.

I agree with Hall and Smith’s argument that Thrift’s blind spot on social care practices ‘leaves the unsung labour of urban welfare just about as unsung as ever; it also skips an opportunity to build a bridge between the sorts of everyday kindness with which Thrift *is* concerned and more ‘conventional’ interventions’, of the sort to be found in various sorts of welfare workers making their way around the city (2015, p.11). Hall and Smith are referring to the hidden army of street cleaners and urban



social outreach workers employed by local authorities. Volunteers like Kathy and Gill, however, are stepping into the cavities of public services hollowed out by austerity. Devoid of the financial rewards and worker rights of employment structures, and without any formal monitoring or evaluation of their working practices, the caring infrastructures of NXL are triply invisible, falling under the radar of observation and accountability on several fronts. The caring infrastructural practices of NXL are less about the municipal work of keeping urban facilities maintained and ticking over, and more about administrating critical care to public services that are themselves in a constant state of emergency (Anderson, 2016). NXL's people as infrastructure, then, is less like the repairmen of Thrift's account, and more like a team of nurses providing life support for the municipal body, suturing together lacerations in the social fabric of the welfare state<sup>64</sup>.

### Gendered and aged politics of visibility and value

The significance of gender as a structuring principle in the social organisation and division of labour of *care* cannot be underestimated, argues Glucksmann (2006). While I worked alongside many male volunteers at NXL, the core volunteers responsible for managing and operationalising the space and service day-to-day are female, and within the late-50s/early-60s age group. I asked Mary what she thought about this.

Interesting. I also volunteer in a charity shop - that's 98% female. I work at the Citizen's Advice - that's 95% female and I work for another charity that's about 60% female. Is it to do with the fact that women are more able to engage in community activities and people than men? Is it to do with the way we were socialised - what we think we should do when we retire? It's a very big question. ... I just don't know. I've just always assumed that voluntary work like this is done by women.  
(05/14 interview)

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<sup>64</sup> a welfare state that was identified by Gail Lewis as already 'coming apart at the seams' in 1998 (Hughes and Lewis, 1998).

Mary felt that the reason why there were not more men doing the voluntary roles she does was ‘not because they don’t care – I know a lot of men who care’ – but rather because they are likely to have spent more of their working lives in full-time employment and had different social expectations of retirement. Her resistance to being drawn further on the subject may be due to an underlying sense that if she accounted for all the hours of labour she has performed in her life as a single parent, teacher and volunteer, she may be overwhelmed.

Taylor makes the crucial point that

[n]ot only does this dualistic model of [paid/unpaid] work lead to unfounded assumptions about the nature of men’s and women’s work, it renders invisible or marginal, substantial parts of the working lives of those who do not conform to it [...and] serves to limit understanding of people’s work identity and the practical reality of their working lives (2004, p. 34).

As Taylor notes, much academic ink has been spilt by feminist theorists who argue that so-called ‘private’ domestic work or ‘labours of love’ by women in the home must be analysed in terms of same wage relations of the labour market, since its social reproduction value contributes to the economy (Beechey, 1987; Pahl, 1988). Voluntary work in civic spaces, however, is largely absent from this literature, and where it does appear, ‘it becomes clear that by appropriating the notion of ‘unpaid labour’ to signify domestic labour in the home done by women, feminism has succeeded in reducing all unpaid work and by extension voluntary work to ‘women’s work’, thereby making the public nature and value of that work invisible (Taylor 2004, p. 33). My research adds to Taylor’s valuable contribution in addressing these gaps in the literature.

Arlene Kaplan Daniels coined the term ‘invisible work’ to describe unpaid women’s labour both in the home and civic spaces that is economically and culturally devalued (1987, 1988). Erin Hatton (2017) updates this analysis for the present era of ‘neoliberalisation’ (Peck, 2012), expanding the analytic category of invisible work to include unpaid, noneconomic and informal work that are devalued through intersecting mechanisms of (i) culture (e.g. work that is ‘naturalised’ through gendered, raced or classed mediations of the body or emotions), (ii) law (e.g. work that is excluded from

legal definitions of ‘employment’ and is therefore not monitored and regulated by the state) and (iii) space (e.g. work that is physically segregated from the socially constructed ‘workplace’) (Hatton, 2017, pp. 338–343). As explicated in this chapter, the unpaid work of NXL library volunteers is rendered invisible by all these mechanisms.

It is also important to make visible how gender intersects with age in the caring voluntary work and activism that supports public infrastructures. Age is another temporal mode through which the gravity of neoliberal futures and municipal pasts vie for the fate of the library and its public. Studies by Lie et al. (2009) and Philipson et al. (1999) build on classic mid-century community studies of urban life (Young and Willmott, 1957) by showing how

older people are still vigilant about the changing fortunes of the places in which they have invested much of their lives; older women, in particular, act as ‘neighbourhood keepers’ [...] they sustain the infrastructure of deprived neighbourhoods because of their frequent use of local services (Lie, Baines and Wheelock, 2009, p. 706).

Common social imaginaries of activists tend to be limited to youth stereotypes. As Nolas et al. point out, however, ‘genealogies of care and concern are manifest and can be mobilised in everyday life across all ages’, which calls into question why middle-aged or older adults tend not to ‘fit into the imaginary normative distribution of political participation’ (2017, p. 4). The core activist drivers and volunteers keeping NXL’s service and associated political campaigns going are older women, who articulate becoming more political as they age. Mary says the reason why she, Kathy and Gill do the work they do is

because we have time, and other people don’t. I mean certainly when I was bringing up my family, would I have had time to do this? You must be joking! That Big Society crap that David Cameron preaches - everyone can contribute - well you can’t! You don’t have time to do it! (Mary, 05/14 interview).

Gill, Kathy and Mary’s relations to their work reveal how the ‘temporal lived experiences of growing up, getting by and getting on, and of encountering public life in

time and over time, open new vistas for thinking about political activism’ (Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss, 2017, p. 6).

Both Kathy and Gill reflect that they’ve always been political in different aspects of their lives, but in their later years their political practices have deepened, since as Gill puts it, now I have the time to ‘actually fulfil socialist ideas, rather than just pontificating’ (06/17 interview). Kathy reflects how working at NXL ‘has definitely made me more of an activist’ through witnessing how the effects of austerity are only getting worse. In this way, libraries are not simply windows through which researchers like me can view social worlds; they are themselves – through the human, embodied infrastructures that constitute them – active witnesses to the changing of the world.

Kathy and Gill’s reflections on their activist positions illuminate how the suturing practices of care and repair are tied by origin and ongoing necessity to the socially deleterious effects of austerity, and therefore ‘have politics running all the way through it, like a stick of rock’, as Hall and Smith (2015, p. 13) put it. Gill makes the distinction between being ‘a do-gooder’, which she doesn’t identify with, and ‘a socialist’, which she does. Kathy agrees with this and indicates that by working for the social(ist) good, they are not ‘doing good’ in the sense of David Cameron’s vision of a Big Society where civic duty and responsibility is an ideological and pragmatic replacement for the welfare state, but rather embodying radical ethics of care and socialist municipal values.

In this sense, NXL volunteer-activist practices can be read through the theoretical lens of feminists who link ethics of care to ethics of social justice (Tronto, 1994; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Williams, 2001), challenging the rigid boundaries in political and moral philosophy that separate public and private forms of care, by arguing that care is simultaneously and necessarily both a political and moral analytical concept ‘through which we can make judgments about the public world’ (Williams, 2001, p. 477). Fiona Williams, writing in 2001 and critiquing New Labour government policy that valorised an ethic of paid work, builds on Daly and Lewis’ argument for the centrality of care in welfare state analysis, posits three conceptual dimensions to this concept:

care as labour, whether paid, unpaid, formal or informal; care as part of a normative framework of obligations and responsibilities; and care as an activity that carries financial and emotional costs that are borne, in different degrees in different welfare regimes, by individuals, families and public institutions/domains (2000, p. 469).

In the present context of a hollowed out welfare state starkly apparent in the state of its public libraries (Robertson and McMenemy, 2018), the need to attend to these conceptual nuances of care is more important than ever.

Henriksen and Svedberg (2010) argue that research on volunteering and social movement studies need to be thought together to theorise the dynamics that unfold at the intersections of unpaid work and social activism. These authors highlight the problematic discursive bifurcation of activism and volunteering into powerful agents of change on the one side, and ‘discourses of neutral altruism’ on the other, which decouples volunteering from the world of political struggle within which activism is privileged (2010, pp. 95–96).

To name an activity volunteering rather than activism makes a big difference. Volunteering is associated with helping and caring, service provision, leisure-time activity, and associations that sustain democracy, while activism is associated with change-oriented collective actions like demonstrations and maybe even riots that challenge the smooth running of society (ibid).

Constructing the research objects of volunteering and activism in such divergent ways has the epistemological and methodological outcome of overlooking the ‘many overlaps and similarities between the two types of civic engagement’ (ibid, p. 96). The work of NXL’s people as infrastructure elaborated in this chapter addresses this oversight by revealing how both implicit and explicit activist caring practices underpin the infrastructural relations of NXL, relations which are both constituted by and productive of ontological relations of care and survival.

### 9.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the labour practices and values of NXL volunteers are crucial living nodes in a social infrastructure that underpins the relationality and circulation of people and resources in public urban space. The people running and using NXL are engaged in processes and practices of creating new publics and collaborations in a context where it is increasingly incumbent upon citizens to find improvised 'Do-it-Yourself' solutions for public problems and social needs, as relations of necessity imposed by austerity become proverbial 'mothers of invention'. This raises tensions in what it means to practice both voluntary work and activism in contemporary public contexts, as these practices become caught in a double bind of both resisting and reproducing austerity agendas, thereby embodying contradictory geometries of power. I have argued that the key analytic concept for making visible these tensions is a social-justice ethic of caring practices that are at once moral and economic, personal and political, public and private.

In my follow-up interview with Kathy and Gill in June 2017, having heard their stories of how difficult it is becoming to meet the needs of everyone entering the library under the increasing burdens of austerity, I become aware of the toll it has taken on them in the years since I volunteered alongside them. They are not getting any younger, and there are fewer reliable and resourceful volunteers to rely on to support them. 'Do you ever have moments where you're really afraid for the future?' I ask Gill.

Well yes! I do, but I have to fight it. Otherwise I'm sitting on the fence. You can't spout about it and not do anything. I've got two little grandchildren and who knows how many grandchildren might be coming, and you just think, well what do I want out of life now? Well really, I want a better future for them. And I don't see the better future being what we've come through, the past seven years. It isn't – so it all ties up – I have to carry on fighting.

For Gill, the practice of running the library is part of a wider public struggle for a fairer future: the act of meeting the daily needs of users ‘ties up’ with the spaces of activism that can take place outside the daily service hours, when political groups come together to strive for new ways of organising society.

## CHAPTER TEN

### **Thinking the unthinkable: Concluding articulations towards ambivalent futures**

Now we have reached a defining moment on this, long, hard journey. Opening a new chapter in our country's economic history. Where we can look confidently to the future and set our course for where this remarkable country will go next. Because today, Mr Deputy Speaker, I can report to the British people that their hard work is paying off, and the era of austerity finally coming to an end.

– Chancellor Philip Hammond (HM Treasury, 2018)

An ending is a threshold between the known and the unknown, the sleep and the wake: the life and the death. It is the line that gives form to the shape. If our limited being *is* a critical resource (Foucault 2005), then endings orientate us towards our limits; they act as sites of exposure to that which is impossible or unthinkable. Endings are an integral part of austerity, they're found in the naming of "cuts", but are often skimmed past in analysis of everyday life. We should not repeat austerities' indifference to the ended.

(Raynor, 2018)

The aim of this research has been to provide a wider and deeper understanding of what is at stake with the recent transformation of public library services in England, by investigating threats to their foundational role and capacity as agents of social change (UNESCO, 1994; Black, 1996), and diagnosing what kind of 'crisis' they are embroiled in (Clarke, 2014). As foregrounded in Chapter Three, my original research question in the early stages of the project centred on what public libraries *are for* in the contemporary context, investigating their purpose and use value in changing times. As my interview with Lewis highlighted, however, the purpose and value of libraries can only be understood by focusing on the change-making *practices* and *interactions* that make up the social infrastructure of a library, thereby shifting the focus of my question onto



what libraries *do* and *how*, and, moreover, what is being *done to* them at the same time. Lewis described the library as a ‘mechanism for change’, a social technology that helps people to change or better themselves through access to information, literature, culture and social space; yet he also highlights how on a wider social scale ‘there has been some cranking up of the speed of change because of the economics everywhere’, referring to the rapid re-scaling and re-structuring of public library provision under austerity. This research conversation spoke directly to my central interest in the double valency of change which the public library straddles: the social change which they seek to facilitate for library users at an individual and community level, and the change that is pushed upon them by wider national political, economic and societal forces.

The present and final chapter will map and synthesise the ways in which the empirical work of the thesis sheds light on the question of what is getting lost and/or gained through the contrary forces of change that pull and push the public library into mutated forms and contorted positions. What is dying and what is able to live and grow through the cracks that emerge in the new organisational and architectural forms they are taking? Answering these questions also shows how reading ‘crisis’ at the local level through the commonalities and differences across the research sites can help us to ‘tell the time’ (Clarke, 2018) of the social and take the temperature of crisis at a national level. Through considering the lessons this thesis offers about the present state of public libraries in England, then, we can begin to trace a sense of where society might be going, thereby addressing the question posed by Williams in his 1966 libraries essay which is referenced throughout this thesis.

Before going on to summarise key findings from the research and their contributions to wider fields of knowledge, this concluding chapter will begin by turning to some final temporal reflections from my participants. These library practitioners offer some initial clues towards articulating how public libraries might develop as the present conjuncture continues to unfold, as they try to grasp the future life lines of the institutions in which they are so invested.

## 10.1 Articulating structures of library feeling in changing times

Alice: My final question is about how you see the future of libraries - both here and nationally.

Ann: We see them open 24/7 to everybody. Fully staffed and stocked.

Alice: Is that a utopian future?

Ann: Well the thing is if you ask for what you want, you're more likely to get somewhere near it, whereas if you go, well actually they're only going to be open two hours once a week... so that's why I say that. So I say what it is I want. And if the night-time economy is open - if you can go and eat, and drink, and gamble 24/7, you should be able to go and study. ... So our argument as the Friends of the Library of Birmingham is you ask for far more than you're ever gonna get. So if I was being interviewed, that is what I would say. Privately to you, I would probably say: it's really hard to know.

(Campaigner group 04/16 interview, Birmingham.)

I don't know, I feel a bit gloomy about the future. There are some people struggling to maintain enough of the infrastructure, enough of the basic service that should the opportunity arise to change things – but it's going to mean a mega change both in terms of economic change but also in terms of attitude, because let's face it libraries have never been seen as a priority. [...] It's getting harder and harder, and they're having to think the unthinkable. [...] But they've got to survive.

(Vivien, 04/16 interview, Birmingham.)

What is really interesting is what's coming. And how you can respond to what's coming. We can just forget about what we've done in the past. The real challenge lies ahead [...] people will have to think the unthinkable. Literally. [...] if I keep reducing the library service I would get to the point that there is nothing else to take out of the service – you can't take away any more. So that's not really the solution. The solution

is really to rethink the way in which public library services are delivered to people.

(Lewis, 04/14 interview, Lewisham.)

I just wonder whether we're going through a period where society is changing, government is changing in such a way that it's almost a bit like the nineteenth century but we don't want people particularly to be articulate and independent and feisty and to oppose or propose. It's fine to have everybody working, you know the gig economy, because it suits the status quo... I'm trying to talk about libraries, not about political views, but ... you can't talk about one without the other. Libraries are about a kind of society, a kind of politics, that isn't around at the moment.

(John, 06/17 interview, Birmingham.)

Who knows, maybe we'll get a new government, this is my hope. When we see a new government, or we get a new Lewisham Mayor, who knows what might happen with libraries in Lewisham. So I'm always hopeful that they might find some money to put a manager in here. I'd really like a librarian in here. That would be great. And then we can go home and do some gardening. Possibly. I don't know. I hope. You know, you just want things to change, don't you?

(Kathy, 06/17 interview, Lewisham.)

I just hope that going forward there are libraries and for our children's children, and that we do manage to protect them even if we're going through a difficult time now. [...] I think the service will change and has to change, but I still feel it can't be a service that just relies on volunteers [...] I hope it has a happy ending. I'm a librarian, so please write it with a happy ending! Certainly an opportunistic one.

(Claire, 05/16 interview, Birmingham.)

Taken together, these practitioner reflections on public library futures can be read as articulating a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977b) of the present moment, which oscillates between pessimism and optimism, hope and foreboding, hinging on an

axis of uncertainty and change. Williams defines structure of feeling as ‘a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or period’ (1977, p. 132). Williams is keen to avoid reducing such a quality to a generational shift in either ‘institutional’, ‘personal’ or ‘economic’ social formations; rather, ‘structure of feeling’ denotes an emergent or pre-emergent shared form of life that is affectively becoming present ‘*in solution*’ (p. 133). The participant voices quoted above share a sense of being stuck in a seemingly unending present where extended processes of public service retrenchment precipitate an unknowable civic landscape for the next generation.

There is room for hope and wishful thinking over this anxious horizon, such as the steadfast determination of Ann to will into existence the changes she and her campaign group are fighting for; and Kathy’s faith in a change of government that might return professionally-employed staff to the library. These activists embody an active and dynamic relation to time, refusing to accept the ‘slow cancellation of the future’ (Fisher, 2014, p. 2), instead calibrating their practices and attitudes in the present to the societal changes they want to bring about. While both Ann and Kathy reveal an underlying uncertainty about the future, but they refuse to let these private fears overtake their public actions and declarations. This can be read as a form of what Colman (2016, p. 98) calls ‘hopeful pessimism’, an ‘intensely active’ and dynamic relation to time, whereby the shifting goalposts of the present create affective currencies of constant alertness and readiness for change. The present crisis twists experiences of time out of a linear, progressive form and folds the future into the warp of the indeterminate. Ziederman et al.’s (2015) work on uncertainty as a defining feature of urban life is also helpful here, which builds on Simone’s characterisation of anticipatory urban politics as ‘the art of staying one step ahead of what might come, of being prepared to make a move’ (Simone, 2010, p. 62, cited in Ziederman et al., p. 246). The library activists’ public practices of fighting for fairer futures embodies the radical hope that another world is possible. Keeping the library doors open by whatever means necessary and holding local and national government to account for decisions on public spending also holds open the possibility for Claire’s desire for a ‘happy ending’

and Ann's vision for 'fully staffed and stocked' libraries 'open 24/7', no matter how far this may be from the 'unthinkable' realities that Vivien and Lewis' comments point to.

As Vivien points out, however, such material transformations would require a 'mega change' in economic and political systems and values. While there may be some cracks of hope for public library survival through the practices of those keeping the infrastructure on life support, her confessed 'gloominess' about the future suggests she does not see such a radical shift in redistribution on the horizon. Vivian's response chimes with Lauren Berlant's figuration of 'cruel optimism': 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (2011, p. 24). Berlant traces the contemporary condition of 'crisis ordinary', in which the post-war political desire to build the 'the good life' has subsided into a structure of feeling through which 'embodied, affective rhythms of survival' are lived out through a 'mounting sense of contingency' and collective relations of 'unpredictability', 'fragility' and 'precarity' (2011, pp. 9, 11). Vivien articulates an impasse between the 'unthinkable' future of a completely decimated public library landscape, and a similarly ungraspable one of their necessary survival. As Berlant argues, cruel optimism operates through the 'temporary housing' of the 'impasse', created by the rapidly crumbling 'infrastructures for reproducing life' (2011, p. 5). Lewis argues that the solution for the 'unthinkable' problem of 'what is coming' cannot be found by reaching back to how things have been done in the past but must lie in a 'radical re-thinking' of public service delivery: keeping the statutory ship afloat through bailed-out mechanisms of 'community asset transfer'. That which is 'unthinkable' in the public library context, then, is less about that which dare not be articulated, and more about the impossible or the un-passible. Public libraries cannot sustainably develop in a state of 'temporary housing', unstable human infrastructures teetering on foundations of debt and precariously propped up by the labours of love of ageing volunteers. Lewis' consignment of past models of public provisioning of library services to the dustbin of history can be read as an entrepreneurial 'common sense' approach to the public problem of the present: time is money; public money is scarce; volunteers are willing; opportunity can be forged from crisis.

John's reflections, on the other hand, offer a more rhythmically-attuned perspective on the present hard times for public libraries. He suggests that the contemporary moment of social and political change is moving in a recursive and dynamic way between old and new conjunctural forces. He notes echoes of nineteenth century social life in the present, alluding to an older time when England was awash with crisis, inequality, philanthropy and empire-building. As Chapter Two surveyed, the legal inauguration of British municipal libraries in 1850 was underpinned by the capitalist and imperialists agendas of Liberal government ministers and enterprising philanthropists, which Black (1996) argues has been sewn into the institutional identity and governmental function of public libraries, which gives them a role in supporting the dominant social order. The hegemonic forces of today, as John highlights, are linked to a government which forces everyone into work through precarity and the 'gig economy', and as Ann adds, a 'night time economy' which encourages round-the-clock consumerism – both forces which diminish the capacity or will for people to resist them.

John's concern that 'libraries are about a kind of society, a kind of politics, that isn't around at the moment' astutely reveals both the way in which public libraries can never be disentangled from politics, and that this entanglement at the present moment involves a desynchronisation: they have fallen out of step or out of sync with the political and infrastructural values and practices that would sustain them if they are to stay alive and grow healthily into the future. John may be referring implicitly here to the 'golden age' of public library development (also surveyed in Chapter Two), the period between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s which saw the implementation of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and a modernist programme of joining up and expanding national public library infrastructure and making access to resources more open. He may also be thinking of his professional community librarian work during the 1980s and 1990s that saw investment in programmes of providing cultural outreach work for diverse and impoverished urban populations, helping to improve information literacy and democratic engagement, which increases the chances of people being equipped to 'oppose or propose' (06/17 interview cited above, see also Dolan, 1989). However, John is careful to point out more than once in our research conversations

that he is not interested in being nostalgic: 'I don't want to keep them because of what they used to be like, I want to keep them because of what they could be like. If we get our act together' (06/17 interview).

John's contributions to the discussion of library times and tempos being out of sync can be read through Williams' (1977) theorisation of dominant, residual and emergent culture, which was articulated in terms of 'thinking, feeling, and building' pasts, presents and futures together in his 1966 libraries essay. In times of crisis, trying to reach for a desired future for libraries and society is often pulled back in dynamic tension by the undertow of dominant cultural and political forces from the past, as Chapters Two and Four demonstrate. How hegemony operates in this process is far from straightforward: 'It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own' (Williams 1977, p. 112). The tools for reading the political work of forging and recalibrating connections between shifting elements and processes of the dominant social order is developed in Hall's career-long project of conjunctural analysis, a key theoretical-methodological tool of which is 'articulation'.

The concept of conjuncture highlights the specific yet contingent social, cultural, political and economic facets and contradictions that give shape to a given historical moment, a shape which takes an 'articulated' form. Writing in 1979 on the cusp of Thatcher's election victory, Hall described the political work of articulation maintained by the Right in the face of structural changes brought about by the economic crises of the mid-70s.

If the crisis is deep - 'organic' - these efforts cannot be merely defensive. They will be formative: a new balance of forces, the emergence of new elements, the attempt to put together a new 'historical bloc', new political configurations and 'philosophies', a profound restructuring of the state and the ideological discourses which construct the crisis and represent it as it is 'lived' as a practical reality; new programmes and policies, pointing to a new result, a new sort of 'settlement' - 'within certain limits'. These do not 'emerge': they have to be constructed. Political and ideological work is required to disarticulate old formations, and to rework their elements into new configurations. The 'swing to the Right' is not a reflection of the crisis: it is itself a response to the crisis. (Hall, 1979, p. 15)

This passage is as strikingly relevant now as it was forty years ago, as the long moment of uncertainty in the wake of the 2007-8 crisis and subsequent neoliberal programme of austerity has disarticulated old social formations with renewed vigour. In 2011, then recently elected Conservative MP and Minister for Climate Change Greg Barker controversially proclaimed that ‘we are making cuts that Margaret Thatcher could only have dreamt of’ (BBC News, 2011b). At the end of 2018, UN Special Rapporteur Professor Philip Alston concluded in his report on UK poverty:

The compassion and mutual concern that has long been part of the British tradition has been outsourced. At the same time many of the public places and institutions that previously brought communities together, such as libraries, community and recreation centers, and public parks, have been steadily dismantled or undermined. In its fiscal analyses, the Treasury and the Government constantly repeat the refrain that fiscal policy must “avoid burdening the next generation.” The message is that the debt burden must be paid off now. The problem is that the next generation’s prospects are already being grievously undermined by the systematic dismantling of social protection policies since 2010. (Alston, 2018, p. 23)

What the conjunctural analytical work of articulation enables us to see is that the state we are in now is not simply determined by fiscal policy or economic forces, but an inter-connected web of hegemonic alignments that forge the historically contingent distribution of “common sense” (Hall and O’Shea, 2013). Possibilities for changing this dominant form of meaning-making comes from identifying the fault lines in the articulated structure, finding opportunities in the cracks that open through the crisis-rupture to re-articulate new formations in alternative directions.

As Clarke (2015, p. 276) helps to elucidate, the analytical tool of ‘articulation’ was a *practice* central to Hall’s work, operating as a versatile critical hinge to link ‘his approach to thinking about social formations, his orientation to culture as the site of ideological and political struggles and the problematic politics of constructing counter-hegemonic possibilities in popular politics’. Jennifer Slack (1996, p. 115) helps to clarify this further:

With and through articulation, we engage the concrete in order to change it, that is, to rearticulate it. To understand theory and method in this way shifts perspective from the acquisition or application of an



epistemology to the creative process of articulating, of thinking relations and connections as how we come to know and as creating what we know. Articulation is, then, not just a thing (not just a connection) but a process of creating connections, much in the same way that hegemony is not domination but the process of creating and maintaining consensus or of co-ordinating interests.

The work of this thesis has engaged in a sustained articulation of how public libraries are situated within such unified ruptural fusion of the present crisis conjuncture, revealing the prismatic way through which the changing form of the social can be read through the figure of the public library. In what remains of this final chapter of the story, I will demonstrate the epistemic contributions the thesis has made by tracing a series of conceptual couplings that have emerged through the research findings: articulated connections that can help to make visible how the trajectory of the state is unfolding in contradictory ways through the site of the library.

The preface of Chapter Three opened with a scene on a bridge – a moment in which the seed of the thesis began to germinate, and I began to embody the theory-method of articulation. A bridge is a form of articulation, joining one body of land, knowledge or form of experience to another. Similarly, libraries are like bridges, or constellations of bridges made up of human, material, virtual and epistemic infrastructures that facilitate pathways to knowledge and capacities for social connectivity (Mattern, 2014). Revealing the dialectical tensions that span those articulated and intersecting joints is what the work of this thesis does. The point is not to resolve contradictions, but to get under their skin to explore what holds them together or pulls them apart – how the structures that brought public libraries into being are becoming undone or redone.

## 10.2 Articulating library cracks between creation and destruction, open and closed, resistance and compliance.

Chapters Four and Seven situated the historical, civic and urban political relations and struggles in which LoB and NXL are embedded, and through which each library site has been re-designed and re-opened. In both re-openings of Birmingham and New Cross libraries, clashing rhythms of resistance were present which countered the dominant forces of neoliberal service restructuring. In Birmingham this took the form of protesters unfurling banners at the grand opening of the library of the future demanding that their library must be kept public; while in New Cross, activists fought to keep their library open and public by occupying the building overnight. In New Cross, however, these activists were not only clashing with the dominant forces of austerity, but also with each other as conflicting tactics of symbolic versus pragmatic resistance produced tensions in what it means to ‘save’ a public library. This demonstrates the complexity of local public struggles through different spatial and temporal tactics: the short sharp shock of civil disobedience, versus fighting the long fight of keeping the doors open for alternative futures.

While the re-openings of Birmingham and New Cross libraries took place within quite different municipal histories and geographic contexts, what connects these two moments of change in public library form is the destabilising national forces of capital, crisis and austerity which determine and re-shape each library’s local capacity to *stay open* in both similar and different ways. What is at stake in each of these forms of staying open is a key form of analysis for understanding this national moment that is threaded through all six empirical chapters.

In the case of Birmingham, three centuries of urban and civic restructuring have seen the library take a central role in reshaping the cultural identity of the city. The twenty-first century redesign of the library was strategic on the part of city planners: attracting new forms of capital – financial, social, cultural – to the centre of the city through imagineering the library as a public ‘destination’. It was also strategic on the part of chief librarians, who sought to reconceive the library by ‘turning it inside out’ – making it a modern ‘interface’ between the city and its knowledge collections,

between outside and inside, between individual and community. The ‘can of worms’ of political and economic troubles for the city that ensued, however, greatly compromised the reality of bringing these visions and values into practice, revealing more of an interface between creation and destruction than anything else. While a bigger, shinier, more transparent and open plan library was indeed built, it became overshadowed by the construction of a commercial ‘Paradise’ around it, while the ‘jaws of doom’ of austerity budgeting caused the spaces inside the library to become contracted – both through corporate partnerships and through diminishing public floorspace for readers, thinkers and other library-centred activities.

In New Cross, conversely, re-opening and re-designing the library was reactive and improvised: grass-roots activists re-claimed an already-existing library space (formerly a retail space) and re-fitted it to the needs of the people using and producing it using DIY and open-sourced methods. Meanwhile senior Lewisham Council officers, who were at first resistant to these tactics, took the opportunity to re-package this anomalous social formation as a ‘community partnership’ through the localist mechanism of asset transfer. Chapter Eight showed how these spatial practices and relationships engendered forms of ‘austere creativity’ (Forkert, 2016) which on the one hand is complicit with neoliberal ideology that devolves responsibility for public problem-solving onto hard-pressed individuals and communities; while on the other hand it opens up productive ‘cracks’ in austerity urbanism (Tonkiss, 2013) – interstitial spaces in which casualties of welfare reform can come together to organise alternative political practices and interventions.

Chapters Five and Eight zoomed in on the lived spaces, urban forms and public rhythms that condition and structure each library site, by walking around and dwelling within their zones of everyday practice. Ethnographically, my experience and level of engagement of each of these sites was quite different. My participant-observations in Birmingham were more ephemeral and at a surface level, based on my position of being a visitor to the city over a relatively short period of time, whereas at New Cross I was embedded in a depth of field through my multiple positions as a volunteer, local resident and student in a more longitudinal sense. In New Cross I was able to follow the micro practices and small changes that NXL participants make in their library

environments, whereas in Birmingham I was exposed to the visceral magnitude of large changes to the library and the city happening in rapid succession. Thinking through these different scales of change and crisis together has enabled me to discern how rhythms of creative destruction and disjunction unfold at both local and national levels.

The study would have perhaps benefitted from a longer period in Birmingham and more sustained observations of staff and regular users to produce a 'thicker' description of how space is practiced in the library. However, given the research aim of making visible the way in which crisis impinges on changes to the library role and position in society, the relative ephemerality of my visits to the Birmingham site curiously revealed more than an embedded, extended ethnography might have done. By going to and from the city at a time of profound structural change in its centre, I was able to connect the library with its shifting urban and civic context in ways that jolted my ethnographic senses into awareness with each visit, which functioned as a sort of time-lapse capturing of one set of symbolic values being replaced with another.

Key spatial binaries that link the two sites are formality/informality, regulation/freedom, boundedness/openness, all of which reveal interesting 'architectural' (Lefebvre, 1991) ways in which the library spaces are governed and practiced as 'interfaces'. In Birmingham my observations and conversations with users revealed a disjointed experience of library space and time, with confusing opening times and entry points that concentrated rhythms of activity into squeezed pockets and rerouting desired pathways for access. As seen in the experience of LoB user Simeon in Chapter Five, the library is increasingly losing its capacity to offer unfettered spaces for independent thinking, as the social dimensions of space become increasingly filled with noise and instrumental forms of exchange. Meanwhile in the often-noisy space of New Cross, architectures of sociability occur in both structured and unstructured, expansive and contracted ways, through both regular programmes of cultural activity as well as organic and open-minded flexibility in providing for both local users and wider publics and counter-publics, both within the walls of the library as well as out on the street.

In contrast to the spaces of LoB, which are regulated by bureaucratic council procedures, monitoring and security systems, commercial partnerships and dizzying levels of floors, doors and escalators, the single-level open plan cuboid of NXL is

relatively free from council intervention and regulation, left to its own devices to determine what can happen in the space and when. Chapter Eight argued how the spatial practices of ‘publicness’ at NXL are produced and mediated through an ambivalent form of ‘openness’ which is at once both liberating, conflictual and constricting. On the one hand, users such as Jackson, who feels oppressed by welfare reform and the capitalist city, experience the library as ‘wide open, embracing and free’ – a place where anything can happen, from serendipitous visits from Black Panther activists and socialist film makers, to spaces for thinking, dwelling, learning and creating with like-minded others. On the other hand, when things get too ‘anarchic’, such as the personal and political discord that ensued with the Poetry Workshop, volunteers have little recourse to securely regulating the space, given the absence of contracts or formal agreements with library users and volunteers and no security staff to support them. Furthermore, how to manage the space is fraught with ideological differences, as former NXL volunteer Emma concluded: the fractured politics of the Left ‘all come together in the library’.

These are just some of the ways in which the thesis demonstrates Massey’s argument that public space is always the product of conflict and negotiation, situated in wider rights-based struggles and landscapes of inequality, and it is precisely these antagonistic social relations that renders them public (2005, p. 153). My study of the contestations and tensions that play out across both research sites critically extends existing theorisations of libraries as exemplars of the public sphere surveyed in Chapter Two, by demonstrating that what constitutes the public sphere in actually-existing democracy is far from equal, and that the boundaries of ‘the state’ as distinct from private and civil society spheres is far from clear.

Chapters Six and Nine explored the human infrastructural practices and capacities that underpin each library site, showing how both LoB and NXL share multiple dimensions of invisibility. Keeping Birmingham’s libraries open with drastically reduced budgets placed senior council officers in dilemmas between quantity and quality, forcing senior librarians and council officers into calculative logic at odds with the core business of the library. While LoB is still the centrepiece of the council library offer and still may attract thousands of visitors per day as a cultural

‘destination’, behind its dazzling public interfaces lie an invisible ghost ship: empty desks and offices that once contained a thriving knowledge infrastructure, with broken connections between library professionals and enquiring publics. What became starkly clear was the evisceration of ‘neural networks’ constituted through the cauterisation of over two millennia accumulated years of specialist and collective knowledge practices through mass redundancies, leaving behind a hollowed-out service and disarticulated centre. This raises generational questions about how Birmingham’s future cultural heritage will be preserved, and the lifelong learning needs of Europe’s youngest city will be met. The ethnographic work of this thesis has both documented and borne witness to these cultural and generational losses (Robinson and Sheldon, 2018). Making audible the voices of a redundant and undervalued library workforce poses a warning to civic and policy leaders to stem the spread of ‘Alzheimer’s in the nation’s brain’.

In the NXL context, the unpaid people-as-infrastructure which constitutes precarious forms of public service provisioning is embodied and carried through gendered and aged practices and values of municipal care, repair and survival. Troubling the boundaries between public and private, paid and unpaid, formal and informal work became a key focus analytical focus here, building on the work of Taylor (2004) to show how the work of people which doesn’t fit into these dualistic frameworks is rendered invisible to public scrutiny across governmental, policy and academic fields. The voluntary labour practices that constitute NXL’s people as infrastructure do not get recognised by local and national governmental or corporate measurements of value and impact, yet the positive differences made to people’s lives are abundant. This invisibility is compounded by the already-marginalised gendered dimensions of the work done to sustain NXL, which is driven mainly by older women who contribute significant amounts of their own material resources to keeping the library open. This also raises generational concerns about future sustainability for the library, given the range of evidence that demonstrates women are the hardest hit by austerity and welfare reform (MacLeavy, 2011; Dabrowski, 2018; Reis, 2018).

At NXL, however, certain conditions of invisibility and lack of regulation are also an advantage, enabling them to develop political activities and alignments that would not be possible in a council-run library space. The political meetings and activist

practices undertaken at NXL after hours are both informed and fuelled by the voluntary caring practices that take place during the mundane acts of service provision, which are also a form of ‘emergent’ and ‘implicit activism’ immanent in the everyday practices of responding with empathy, inclusivity and pragmatic support to people facing exclusions and deprivations (Horton and Kraftl, 2009). These findings add to emerging scholarship on the materiality and political affordances and constraints of gendered work and activism in the austerity context, such as Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu’s (2017) study on the politics of survival for minority women practising resistance across public and private spaces of resistance; and Eleanor Jupp’s (2017) analysis of interstitial practices that cut across spaces of home, work and community activism as state retrenchment creates elisions between domestic and public arenas. My research accords with Jupp’s contention that a more productive approach to analysing what is traditionally conceived in terms of public and private spheres in such contexts, is to consider the seams ‘between the *visible* and the *invisible* [which] can both illuminate the nature of the politics at stake and suggest possibilities for powerful forms of action and activism’ (2017, p. 349).

Making visible the hidden and undervalued labour practices that constitute the human infrastructures of libraries in the precarious present is vital, but it is also important not to valorise the work of volunteers to the extent that it validates the dominant logic of austerity localism which incapacitates public services and responsabilises individuals. At the same time, however, it is also important not to slip into overtly pessimistic critiques of neoliberal hegemony, and to pay attention to ‘the political significance of resistance occurring *in the meantime*, in amongst the activities of local governance and third-sector agencies’ (Williams, Goodwin and Cloke, 2014, p. 2799). Neoliberalism is not a totalising force – there is always room for a ‘politics of possibility’ (ibid., p. 2805) in the interstitial political and ethical spaces prised open in the shifting alignments of the reterritorialized state. As Gibson-Graham (2006) contend, the radical spaces of the mundane can be sites of hope for imagining postcapitalist politics.

While the simultaneously complicit and subversive political practices of volunteer-activists running NXL is a very different form of organisation to the running

of LoB, common modes of infrastructural practice and value can be read each ‘site of exposure’, as Raynor (2018) puts it in the quote that opens this chapter. What can get lost in recursive patterns of creative disjunction in the storying of Birmingham’s central libraries is their foundational ethic in a fundament of municipal socialism. Activists and library workers in both Birmingham and New Cross are connected through threads of fidelity to their municipal origins, weaving centres of care through the cracks and crumbling infrastructures of the contemporary. The ‘housing’ of the present may be increasingly ‘temporary’ (Berlant, 2011), but the human imprint of the public library endures.

As a state of national crisis trundles on in the face of false endings to austerity, governing bodies need to allow spaces to listen and learn from library activists and workers (both professional and amateur, employed and redundant) who are maintaining the caring practices and values that keep libraries alive and resisting those that kill them. It is also important to consider that local authorities are not simply ‘passive victims’ of a withering state administering the unstoppable global force of neoliberal reform, they also have agency in how the dominant ideological practices and processes get distributed (Newman, 2014b, p. 3295). As the library activists in both sites demonstrate, the political work of saving libraries is about much more than simply keeping the doors open, it involves making sure that the articulated pathways within and beyond the doors are equitable, sustainable and accountable. Moreover, as the lessons of Birmingham’s redundant and retired librarians warn, the life of the library depends on embodied webs of qualified knowledge, retaining the human expertise needed to turn inert collections into connections.

...the community library must remain as “open” to thought as it is to the people who pass through its doors. When ideas cease to find sanctuary there the last refuge of liberty will have been violated and wrecked. (Jast, 1939)

The work of this thesis has met a timely need for cross-disciplinary attention to the manifold ways in which public libraries are productive sites of the social, through which can be read the changing spatial, temporal, political, economic and cultural dynamics of



the state. For public libraries to continue to survive and grow healthily into the future, there must be new ways of ‘thinking, feeling and building’ in collaboration with the people who constitute them.

As Chapter Two highlighted, the contributing factors to public libraries’ demise are not only attributable to the economic policies of government, but also to the library and information profession itself, which has lacked critical reflexivity and missed opportunities to resist neoliberal reform. Public library professional leaders and LIS scholars have failed to adequately interrogate the ways in which they have operated within dominant political and ideological structures while relying on residual cultures of the spirit of the law. This thesis addresses this need by bringing the social relations between the practices, values, concepts and infrastructures of public libraries into richly textured relief, inviting LIS scholars and practitioners, as well as thinkers from across the social sciences and humanities, to engage with public libraries on a transdisciplinary level through the prism of sociological imagination. Wright Mills argues (2000, p. 5)

It is not only information that they need – in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason they need – although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.

This ‘quality of mind’ that Mills calls ‘sociological imagination’ is much-needed in the theory and practice of professionals whose very business is information and knowledge. Likewise, the knowledge practices of sociologists need to attend to the social infrastructures of the learning resources that are right under their noses in the public library. Through the work of articulation, this thesis offers an imaginative bridge between such fields of knowledge production and practice, giving tangible form to the ‘unthinkable’ contradictions through which the library and the state are entwined.

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## Appendix A: Table of Research Sites

Date	Field site / Library type	Location	Fieldwork observational methods
October 2012 – February 2013	AHRC International Placement fellowship in Sarai: The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi. Researching Indian post-colonial public and counter-public library networks	Delhi, Kolkata, Thiruvananthapuram	Interviews with library professionals and practitioners and ethnographic visits to a range of public and counter-public sites in three different Indian cities/states.
October 2013 – June 2014	<b>New Cross Learning</b> Former council branch library now run by a voluntary community group organisation. No institutional funding.	Lewisham, South East London, inner-city area of high multiple deprivation.	October 2013 – June 2014 9 months' continuous participant-observation and auto-ethnography as a library volunteer + 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews.
September – October 2014	<b>Croydon Central Library</b>	Croydon, South London	Pilot interviews and observational visits to the central library and several branch libraries
September – October 2014	<b>The British Library</b>	St Pancras, London	Informal interviews with BL CEO and project managers, observational fieldnotes in reading rooms and public spaces
June 2015 – September 2016	<b>Rabbits Road Institute</b> (formerly Manor Park Library) Former council branch library now run by artists-in-residence and community volunteers, with support from arts charity 'Create' and Newham council. Arts-council funded.	Newham, East London, inner-city area of high multiple deprivation.	Sporadic participant-observation and action-research through x6 public events/workshops/meetings, (including x6 snapshot informal interviews) Performed a public, recorded talk about my research, including in-depth interview with project founders + audience Q&A.
March – June 2016	<b>Library of Birmingham</b> (formerly Birmingham Central Library)	Central Birmingham, serving the whole city and wider West Midlands region	Condensed ethnographic observation through 6 visits over 3 months and x16 interviews



	Council-run flagship central public library, local-authority funded.		
	<b>Manchester Central Library</b> Council-run flagship central hub library, local-authority funded.	Central Manchester, serving the whole city and Manchester region	May – June 2016 Condensed ethnographic observation through 4 visits over 2 months and x6 interviews.
May 2016 – May 2017	<b>Libraries Taskforce</b> (Department of Culture Media and Sport/Local Government Authority)	England-wide.	May 2016 – May 2017 Interviewed Chief Executive of the Taskforce in May 2016 and over the course of the next year participated in x3 taskforce workshops and events on communicating the value of libraries and strategy for their future development. This participant-engagement method works in combination with my discourse analysis of national policy documents and media communications.

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

### PhD Research on the Changing Public Forms of British Libraries Consent Form for Participants

*Please tick the appropriate boxes*

	Yes	No
<b>Taking Part</b>		
I have understood the purpose of the research & this conversation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include being interviewed and recorded (audio).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Use of the information I provide for this project:</b>		
I understand my words will be anonymised.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

So that I can use the information you provide legally, please complete the following:

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Name of participant [printed]      Signature      Date

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Researcher [printed]      Signature      Date

ALICE CORBLE

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