



## Some reflections on space in libraries

**Marielle de Miribel**  
Université Paris X  
Paris, France

**Meeting:**

**91 Library Theory and Research**

**Simultaneous Interpretation:** English-French and French-English only

---

**WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL**

10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada  
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

---

Architects, sociologists, marketing, and communication researchers professionally use concepts in their field work that are often not well known by library professionals. Some of these ideas make better use of space and improve the quality of human interaction in libraries. I wish to present here some of these concepts, which I effectively use in the workshops I organize, to provide a more welcoming environment to library users.

### **Libraries as showrooms**

Not long ago, multimedia centers or traditional libraries were not visible from the outside or, if they were, only a few dusty books, forgotten and faded by the sun, were likely to be displayed. After all, librarians are seldom trained in the art of window-dressing. Large libraries now have storefronts, revealing to passers-by, through their vast display windows, both sides of this real but invisible border, allowing them to see without being seen, and to be seen without seeing. What do people actually see from the street? What is there to be seen behind those windows? And does that interior view attract, or put off, the viewers ?

### **Stacks of books**

If the library shows range upon range of books, each more or less full, what kind of impression does it give ? Does this sight encourage the viewer to push open the door and enter the building ? Quite often, these stacks suggest order, archives, and the fear of being lost in the middle of an archaic, arbitrary arrangement with a complex and unfamiliar logic. Unless this passer-by loves digging and bargain-hunting, a row of stacks may scare the person away.

### **Reading tables**

If the passer-by catches sight of tables surrounded with people engrossed in reading, he or she may think that they are busy working. His or her reaction may be one of respect or

intimidation, and the person is likely to feel inclined to join the readers only if planning to read or study. If this is not the case, he or she may reason that this place is not where they belong, although they find the place warm with human contact.

### **Various approaches and attitudes towards reading**

If the view of the library indicates various circulation patterns, with people sitting and, standing, solitary individuals busy with various tasks or reading, searching, leafing through materials or chatting... and if the majority of these people appear to be enjoying what they are doing, whether readers, users or staff members; our passer-by may have the impression that this is an inviting place, and that there is the possibility of remaining without having to play a specific role, whether real or imagined. Maybe, with some luck, he or she will be welcomed into this environment without taking any unnecessary risks, or making a blunder, or losing face ; better still, this place could actually prove interesting, even though he or she has no special plans or requests, and could simply enter, observe other people, and feel at home. What is it that encourages someone to actually push open that library door ?

### **The laws of circulation**

Once inside, the reader is either at ease or lost, given the particular constraints of the building and that of the library culture itself.

### **Hot and cold zones.**

Any building that receives customers is roughly divided into two zones: the hot zone and the cold zone.

The hot zone is the common use area—used by everyone without a specific reason: the entrance way, the area of high demand items, such as new book tables, and the adjacent display shelves.

The cold zone is made up of less frequently visited areas : visiting them requires a particular reason or purpose. Because of this, superstores put less necessary items (beauty products, jewelry) in the hot zone and needed consumer products such as milk products, drinks, etc. in the cold zone. This forces the consumer to walk though the entire store, which encourages them to make impulse purchases. In bookstores, pocket books are found at the back of the store or in the basement, and the art books and new books are in the hot zone, near the entrance.

In a library it is easy to pinpoint the cold zones : they are the teenagers' favorite haunts—where they hope to remain hidden, left alone to themselves.

What sections are located in the cold zones ? Unless there is a particular study about the layout of book collections, which could reverse the process, as they do in superstores, they are the least frequented areas. And it is a regular paradox that book collections are traditionally shelved in their linear library classification patterns, 100s, 200s, 300s...without taking into account this the evidence to the contrary.

### **Strategic crossroads**

Even though librarians feel at home there, a library is a complex place, often difficult to navigate. What is it that helps people to find their way around a big city ? There you will

find a few signposts, always located at strategic crossroads, to help the stranger, or the navigationally-challenged person, orient themselves. In Paris, for instance, some carefully chosen strategic places such as Bastille, Chatelet, Republique, Montparnasse, or Etoile, are designated with directional arrows at various secondary crossroads, and these are used as landmarks throughout the city. In a library, in order to help readers find their way around, some strategic traffic areas need to indicate important landmarks: the new books stand, the place for employment applications, the newspaper rack, the cafeteria, the reference, children's and young adult departments, etc.

### **The layout of the signage and information desks**

Signage is the art of explaining how to find one's way in a place while remaining discrete though efficient: it is almost impossible.

In order to facilitate a subliminal reading, the signs must be set so as to be perceived almost unconsciously. They only momentarily catch the eye of the reader, who passes by them without stopping. In order to do this, the signs must be set within the reader's sightline, otherwise he does not notice them at all and they are totally useless.

People look to the right when they enter a new place. It is, therefore, useless to put signs, or an information desk, on the left side [of their line of sight] because people will pass by without seeing them.

Every day, for instance, I consciously look to the left side to say "hello" to greet the person sitting at the information desk, located in a place that people notice only when they leave!

What can be said in favor of these trendy information desks in the shape of a space ship and located in the middle of the reference department ? The staff members sit there on the left hand side of those entering the room; so people do not immediately look at them, and on the left hand side of those leaving, where they are not noticed either...

### **The library as symbolic space**

Inside the library, the space is organized into a hierarchy in accordance with more or less conscious criteria. In the mind of most people, a library is still similar to a temple of culture, on the same level as a basilica, or an ancient temple, even to its inner circle; and depending on the placement of its meeting places, and the interaction between the staff and readers, the tone of the exchanges will differ.

### **Near the entrance, the Guardian of the temple**

In fairy tales, mythological dragons at the gate of sacred gardens play a double role : they defend the mythical place against intruders and, at the same time, they protect the treasures and the people inside. Located at the gate of a temple or a church, the "baptismal font" allows admission to the sacred place. Once the sacrament is performed, the newly "christened" person is permitted to enter. "Non readers" think that, in order to be allowed to enter a library, you need a safe-conduct pass, a membership card, a sacred ceremony: the filling out of an application form. This "guardian" in attendance at the entrance has such a high symbolic value that in many libraries, as soon as discipline or incivility problems occur, the information desk in this location is reinstated in this

position, allowing personal contact between readers and the librarian, the protector of the premises.

People who are unfamiliar with the rules of the library are not afraid of speaking to this guard: the questions put to him are basic ones, in keeping with the fundamental needs in Maslow's pyramid:

- Structural needs: *"What are the hours?", "At what time does the library close?, Where is this or that department?"*
- Physiological needs: *"Where is the bathroom?"*
- Belonging or inclusionary needs: *"Will this place suit me?" "Who is allowed to go there?" "Are my friends already there?"*

### **In the center, the high priest**

The center of the basilica, itself similar to the center of the body, is the navel of the site: the omphalos. This privileged position is the one often chosen by Anglo-Saxon libraries, and their reference department is located here. In the manner of high priests, trained and competent in documentary skills and procedures, librarians play their role, keeping a vigilant and benevolent eye on all the readers docilely sitting around tables, which symmetrically line the two sides of the room. The readers who choose to do so can easily go to the "information desk" by a central aisle. This is provided that you can walk alone down the aisle facing the competent people who stare at you when you as you approach.

At this central place, the readers' questions change. They ask members of the staff questions about the collections: "Have you received this or that book?", "Where can I find Mr. Smith's book?", "Do you have books about this or that subject?"

Once they have been permitted to enter and are identified as members of the community [of readers], the need that is expressed here is a need for a meaning, related to the personal desire of learning, discovering, comparing...

The person who is in charge of the information desk at this central place is immediately considered by readers as "competent", and they often believe, deep down, that this person has memorized the pith and marrow of the books on the stacks.

### **In the deep recesses, a divine presence**

If staff members at the information desk at the center of the library are regarded as universally competent, what about the person who is sitting in the innermost sanctum?! It is there that, as in temples, after a series of rooms and porticoes, the statue of God himself can be found. In a library, in order to reach the "person in charge", you may have to go through one, or several reading rooms, and the reference department, to catch a glimpse of the almighty person in charge of bibliographic searches, accommodated on a stand as if it were a throne.

If you dare to disturb such an awesome person, you must be particularly self-confident, have good credentials, be extremely familiar with the premises, have an elaborate research subject, and a dash of self-conceit. The questions asked, in order to demonstrate extensive culture and knowledge, must be of a very high caliber and well-prepared in advance: "In the great book by Professor X, there is a reference, in the 1977 edition, p.36, to an apocryphal work by professor Z. Do you have the reference of this book?" Waiting for answers to such sophisticated questions, the reader hopes for an answer which will fill

his need for recognition : the acknowledgement that he or she is also an important person and entitled to be treated as an equal by a learned person.

### **The laws of proxemics**

The term “proxemics” is a coined word based on the noun “proximity”. It is a law of unconscious interpersonal communication, discovered by Edward T. Hall, according to which the physical distance between people indicates the relational distance and vice-versa : the relational distance between persons dictates the physical distance between them. He differentiates 4 levels of distance: intimate, personal, social and public.

#### **Intimate distance**

In “intimate distance”, the other person is close : a friend, a member of the family, a spouse, a lover... At this distance, very close to my own body, the other person can feel the warmth of my body, my breathing, without being uncomfortable. The person can touch me without my discomfort. From this distance, time is spent in intimacy or psychological games: people confide secrets to one another, including those of the most intimate realm, and they are not afraid to reveal themselves to each other.

This kind of distance is rather rare in a library, and rare between readers and members of the staff. As a matter of fact, if a person who is unfamiliar to us gets very close, we feel violated and our reflex action is to cringe.

Some manipulative persons use this [unspoken] law of communication to exert a power on others in a subtle manner: by getting too uncomfortably close to the other person, or by touching him or her, they hinder the normal function of the other person’s brain, which cannot handle the stress. The feeling of surprise or of embarrassment caused by this aggression results in loss of train of thought as normal brain functioning becomes blocked. In the subway, where non-permitted intimate distance is common practice, crowding is endurable only if people become withdrawn and avoid all eye contact with others.

#### **Personal distance**

“Personal distance” is to be found between two persons familiar with each other. It is generally based on the length of the outstretched arm, but is basically a cultural one : For those in the same level of relationship, a European generally stands farther apart than a person from the Maghreb and closer than an Asian. For instance, Moroccans and Vietnamese in the same department, may spend their time going backward or forward during their verbal communications, without necessarily being aware of it, in order to adjust distances to their own cultural perceptions. In doing so, the other person, also having to readjust, may quickly back off, or even avoid the other person, the one saying to him or herself: “why does he or she stick to me ?” while the other one wonders: “Do I smell of garlic or what ?”

In personal distance, conversation centers on pastimes: people talk about harmless topics which allow for an easy communication: books, movies, automobiles, sports, manual activities, cooking, fashion...

In a library, this is the favored stance to communicate with readers: once the librarian accompanies the readers to the stacks, the relationship changes and communication becomes easier.

### **Social distance**

In a library “social distance” is characterized by some concrete barrier between the two persons: a table, a counter, a desk. In this instance, the other person is recognized as an individual or a stranger with whom I need to relate to for a momentary transaction: I come to get train tickets, a parcel, a checkbook, I return or borrow books from the library...

The conversation is strictly limited to rituals, which are stereotyped ways of interacting with an individual. “Good morning”, “Good evening”, “How are you doing?”, a kiss, two kisses, three kisses, a handshake, a bow, a kiss on the hand, a pat on the back, on the arm, on both arms... the list is wide-ranging and subject to cultural rules.

Thus, the librarian, during the time spent at the information or circulation desk, is perceived simply as an anonymous human being to the reader, forgotten once the transaction is completed.

In Sweden’s Malmö library, the rules of proxemics have been adopted and implemented in the main lobby: it is equipped with two high, narrow counters set in a semicircle, located rather far from each other, indicating that staff and readers are not separate entities, but share a common space. The librarians are mobile and easily recognizable thanks to a badge. Here it is the reader who chooses the relational distance. Admittedly, libraries in Sweden really care for other cultures, insomuch that the size of their foreign collections is proportional with that of the population in the local community.

### **Political or Public distance**

In “ public” distance, the one farthest apart, the other person is but a symbol, and his speech and role matter more than his actual identity. In this category can be found press conferences, lectures, political meetings, videoconferences, etc. People seldom come across this distance in libraries, except when training [groups of] students in research and information retrieval techniques.

At this distance, the relationship is informal and many students, in this situation, tend to adopt an attitude of withdrawal and are physically present but mentally elsewhere: for instance, “*Flora and Greg come for dinner tonight...If I have a lecture until 7 p.m. do I have time for shopping...Do I cook a gratin... or spaghetti bolognaise?...*”

Each of these [discussed] distances induces a special relationship: the closer the persons are, the more the relation tends to intimacy, to a person-to-person relationship. The greater the distance, the more the emphasis is put on the role or the position, at the expense of the individual.

In order for any type of exchange to take place, two persons must be facing each other. Practically speaking, the layout of furniture, tables, computers... facilitates or hinders this exchange. For instance, in the regional public library of Orléans, public access computers are set in a circle around the inner stairwell, thus enabling readers to assist one another in their searches.

On the other hand, if this exchange is not facilitated, people will focus on their individual work: so study carrels or tables without a view, such as writing ledges, just allow for a possible exchange with one's neighbor. In the Malmö library (Sweden), the space reserved for the daily press is made up of a network of wooden chairs decorated with arabesques, fixed in the floor every meter and a half, thus giving each reader enough room to unfold his paper without disturbing his neighbors. Each person is immersed in his or her individual reading. Nobody speaks.

### **Conclusion**

Depending on the constraints and priorities of the library, whether encouraging interaction, or encouraging readers to study independently, the staff can design places to favor one process or the other.

Encouraging interaction and group study? That means enabling people to face each other and thus interact with one another. Creating silence? That implies creating an environment in which people can withdraw into their own world, to concentrate, study and be alone.