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ON MY MIND: YOUNG ADULT SPACES

By Anthony Bernier

PUBLIC LIBRARIES GIVE MORE SPACE TO RESTROOMS than to young adults. I don't remember where I ran into that observation. But after 10 years of visiting public libraries, it remains true: Restrooms, toney cafes, and biblio-boutiques all get more space now than young people who constitute nearly 25% of today's library patrons.

Organizations reveal what and who they value through spatial design. Thus, despite skyrocketing teen demographics pushing near 32 million by 2010, library spaces speak volumes about how they care for youth. Unlike adults and children, young adults lack the requisite political and social resources to successfully advocate for spatial equity. Teachers don't advocate for teen spaces in libraries. Nor do parents, spiritual leaders, politicians, or PTAs. And librarians, as a rule, don't either. I guess we'll wait for police departments and parole officers to do it. Can you imagine the ensuing outrage were an architect to present a new building design to your board without a children's area?

Familiar laments

"We just don't know how to get teens into the branch; after elementary school, we just lose them." How many times have you heard that song? Or worse, "We're just swamped with teens after school. It's pandemonium!" When young people audaciously use space in their own ways or in the ways teachers of the modern era have taught them to study, such as meeting in groups, we wrongly charge them with misbehavior. According to historian Abigail Van Slyke, though, space and young people have been "a problem" in libraries since the turn of the century. Thus, adults have for some time complained about too few, or too many, teens, but never about the blueprints and floor plans designed to ignore them.

We might lay the blame for such long-standing spatial inequity at the feet of library space planners and architects. Indeed, designing space for young people drives planners to distraction. School administrators, city planners, urban designers, and architects, not just librarians, all find youth-inspired questions of design far easier to ignore than to confront.

The result, however, marginalizes youth and designs them out of physical space. "No running," "no bike riding," "no loud music," "no baggy clothes," "no sitting two-to-a-chair," "no loitering," "no cruising," and "no baseball caps on campus." In my neighborhood, one angry teen is taking the entire community to court for branding him a skateboard outlaw—on his own block! Another told me he was stopped by police for a violation the kids call, "MWY," or "Moving While Young."

Their bodies increasingly inhabit a geography of "no." Some of them are beginning to ask out loud, "Then, where *can* I go? Where *can* I be?" They shouldn't have to ask these questions in their own libraries. If you ever attended a Parents' Night or Open House and tried to sit at your child's desk, you glimpsed what being designed out of space means. Add this to being criminalized for acting

out against poorly designed space and you begin to realize what teens endure every day.

Our professional rhetoric refers to libraries as creative places for exploration, education, enrichment, and entertainment. For youth, they often mean transcending stale and confining school categories by welcoming C-minus and A-minus students alike, as well as those "off-track" or on vacation. In crowded cities, libraries offer youth otherwise-unavailable, well-lit work surfaces in quiet, uncluttered, and safe settings.

Libraries don't require identification cards, credit checks, or even minimum purchases. Neither do libraries lay in surveillance cameras or advertising billboards around every corner. In other words, during this past quarter-century of radically reduced public resources devoted to youth, libraries represent an unparalleled spatial resource for young people.

We should begin rectifying the problem. Librarians and space designers should, in the earliest planning stages, take clues from youth themselves. We could ask this question: "What would an ideal youth-scaped library look like?"

The geography of "yes"

Let's examine the only space young people even nominally control—their bedrooms. If you doubt their control, try walking into one unannounced! Close observation of teen bedrooms tells us how they sit, study, relax, what recreations they like, what they read. Bedrooms, too, spatially represent young people's liminal status in society: they illuminate youth's cultural and transitional betweenness. They are not children, but neither are they adults. Libraries ignore the spatial implications of this liminal status at the risk of being grossly unfair.

Libraries cannot program service space like a bedroom. But bedrooms do suggest clues. They tell us, for instance, that young bodies don't always fit into chairs. So let's design spaces with a variety of seating options: chairs designed to tilt back without tipping over as well as spaces for sitting on the floor. Other design features of bedrooms should also inform libraries such as special wall, ceiling, floor, and display treatments. Let's borrow, too, from their teachers and design spaces where study groups can meet without causing "pandemonium."

Because designing such spaces for young people remains rather uncharted territory, even for planning experts, we can expect to clunk along at first. Clearly the matter requires much more study. But as our design vocabulary evolves, libraries just might discover something to teach other institutions about designing equitable and attractive spaces for young people. We owe them more than restrooms.

ANTHONY BERNIER serves as young adult librarian in the Los Angeles Public Library and has contributed to two successful space designs for youth: "Teen 'Scape" (with colleague Ann Hoffman) for LAPL's Central Library, and another for LAPL's Echo Park Branch.