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Ten Years of YA Spaces of Your Dreams: What Have We Learned?

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Anthony Bernier

About ten years ago, the first purpose-built YA space came to life at the Los Angeles Public Library. In the intervening years our explorations and innovations have increasingly and successfully argued for spatial equity for our young people. **VOYA's** *YA Spaces of Your Dreams* column, in every issue since June 1999, has published a profile of a new YA space. Because library buildings, like all public spaces, represent ideals about who counts and what activities matter, this effort helps libraries continue to reach for their own ideals of open access for all.

While we have a decade of exploration, we do not have a decade of data-driven analysis about our YA space innovations. As part of an IMLS National Leadership grant, I was awarded the opportunity to examine ten small pioneering libraries that enhanced their YA spaces. I studied small library YA spaces, in particular, because they are far more prevalent than the marquee YA spaces of larger institutions, and because it is more likely how a larger number of libraries would begin experimenting. The study found that while libraries over the past ten years have increased the variety and access to resources and invite more youth participation than was evident in the past, they still dedicate a proportionately small amount of space to teens and demonstrate the need for establishing more sophisticated methodological practices in executing, measuring, and evaluating these spaces in order to move beyond merely institutionally-defined preferences. In other words, we still need evidence-based "best practice."

While it is true that ten years has passed since the first national model arrived, it is also true that the development of purpose-built YA library space is still quite new to the field. We can learn a great deal from these early YA space explorers in small libraries. The data reported here were gleaned from **VOYA's**, *YA Spaces of Your Dreams* column between 2001-2008, with a follow-up supplementary survey of each of the subject libraries. The findings report the categories, patterns, and analysis emerging from these documented profiles.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Some insights and early patterns are clearly discernible from examining even a small sample of libraries:

- 1. Spatial Proportionality:* The average YA spaces represent an average of only 2.2 percent of their hosting library's total square footage. The largest occupies less than 4 percent. Larger facilities did not necessarily assign or reassign a larger proportion of space to young adults. The average square footage of small library YA spaces was 495 total square feet.
- 2. Resource Dedication:* Subject libraries reported dedicating both new material and new operating resources to YA spaces. Collection size varied greatly, though all libraries reported offering a variety of materials. Many small libraries reported not having either computers, video monitors, or televisions dedicated to young adults, and the number of dedicated computer workstations varied widely. There was also a large range of dedicated staffing and hours of operation.
- 3. Youth Friendly Features:* Libraries reported conscious efforts to appeal to the visual interests of young adults, including displays and art exhibits in YA spaces and, in two cases, consistent thematic designs throughout the space. Narrative descriptions indicated that libraries attempted to build, offer, and make accessible library collections based on young adult preferences. YA materials, for instance, can be found both within the YA space and in the library's larger holdings.
- 4. Youth Participation:* All subject libraries reported being sensitive to the need for youth participation in the design of YA space, from individual input to YA focus groups.

5. Seating Options: Most subject libraries furnished traditional table-chair seating and reported relatively little variety in available seating options.

6. Impact and Evaluation: While the majority of libraries reported being aware that their efforts to reassign space to young adult users should be evaluated, there is little consensus about appropriate assessment tools, practices, metrics, methods or even consistent term definition.

NEW QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The data presented within the scope of this inaugural attempt to collect and assess new library practices generated at least three sets of new questions and concerns to which we should now turn our attention. First, greater precision and consistency is needed in the measures used to evaluate new YA spaces; second, a broad range of daily and practical issues deserves identification and further study; and third, research methodologies require more precise specification and consistent execution.

1. Imprecise Metrics. We need to better identify, define, and consistently measure library use and evaluation metrics for YA spaces. What we might call "spatial metrics" currently suffer from tremendous variance and imprecision. What does "hours of operation" actually mean? Are "materials circulation" statistics or patron head counts sufficient or adequate? What are the best "benchmark" statistics from which to compare and contrast new YA spaces with previous YA spaces or lack thereof? How can libraries define the best comparative performance measures with comparator YA spaces? What post-occupancy measures tell libraries what they need to know after a space has been created or re-designed? Similar ambiguity is evident with respect to assessing YA space staffing patterns. Nor do we learn from current data how a new YA space impacts the services, development, and responsibilities of staff serving young adults.

Imprecision is likewise apparent with respect to how library materials are displayed, exhibited, or merchandised. These practices can range from permanently posting commercial images (such as advertising posters) through more elaborate and constantly changing youth-produced artworks and exhibits. Merchandising can mean everything from a 1950s hard wood book "trough" through more sophisticated shelving and display practices.

Further, how do we evaluate the procedures by which YA-space media (in its constantly changing modes) are selected/not selected? How do libraries determine the extent to which youth are involved in establishing and executing designs of their YA spaces? In terms of youth art, how were exhibited items selected? How long do exhibits last? How were exhibits evaluated? Similar questions could be asked of libraries reporting that they designed their YA spaces with themes. Knowing specifically what libraries mean when they discuss displays and merchandising techniques, art exhibitions, and themed designs can help identify both best practices as well as potential areas for future training and staff development.

On the topic of the need for more definitional precision, this study reveals the need for better definitions of "youth participation" in the process of YA space design. The broader term "engagement" has been used to encompass a variety of options. Currently, "youth participation" can range from one-time opportunities for individual "input" to substantially more intensive collaborations involving multiple interactions with professional library staff, administrators, outside funders, library support organizations, and design professionals.

2. Practical Issues. The second broad arena of new questions lies in helping libraries respond to practical issues as they move toward more spatial equity in young adult services. We do not learn from these data, for instance, about the motivations that originally lead libraries to reassign or newly designate space for young adult services. We do not learn about the obstacles libraries face or how they overcome them in terms of staff development, training, financial resources, and professional preparation. What informational resources do libraries call upon for assistance, insight, and guidance? What specific training do library staff require in preparing to develop new YA spaces?

Further, since YA courses in library schools conventionally concentrate on collections, few students would have likely encountered instruction on the importance of space equity, how to enact it, or how to build influence toward advocacy. If libraries are to continue recognizing that young adults are entitled to meaningful and equitable spatial allocations, then engaging the complex topic of space and its connections to services, programs, building relationships

with young adults, and evaluation measures would require more systematic concentration than is in evidence today.

3. *Research Methodologies.* While the YA space profiles appearing in every issue of **VOYA** do often provide brief affirmative statements from YA library users, there is still a need for the systematic collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from library staff, administration, and young people themselves. Issues in this regard encompass the changing meanings of library space for young adults, library staff, and the broader public. It also begs historical questions of meaning as well. If young adults now are being considered library users entitled to a more equitable share of library space, how were libraries perceived by young people, library staff, and the broader public before this view developed? Finally, as there is growing evidence that libraries outside of the United States also are experimenting with purpose-built library spaces for young adults, we can also begin to ask what informs those designs and evaluations as well.

CONCLUSION

This first systematic research on library YA spaces documents the growing acceptance of the proposition that young adults deserve an equitable share of library space. After a detailed examination of ten relatively small early explorations it is clear that more and more leading libraries are developing the capacity and aspiring to higher degrees of spatial equity for young adults. Indeed, few new major library building projects entirely ignore YA spatial needs. That is a dramatic difference from only ten years ago!

The questions engaged here, however, attempt to excavate what we can learn from these early spatial pioneers and to promote future discussion based on the analysis of empirical data. These findings suggest that libraries with fairly modest spaces have focused primarily on increasing YA access to printed materials (offering sizable collections and improving service hours) and incorporating a higher degree of youth participation (through a variety of mechanisms). While these efforts represent clear advances from historic practice, this study also points out a pattern of preference for continuing institutionally-determined aesthetics (particularly with respect to seating options), a pattern of dedicating a proportionately small amount space to young adults (an average of 2.2 percent), and the considerable methodological challenges that remain with respect to measuring performance, techniques, and evaluative procedures before we are better able to articulate "best practices" rooted in evidence-based analysis.

LIBRARY YA SPACES EXAMINED

Blue Island Public Library. Blue Island, IL. <http://www.blueislandlibrary.org/> ^[1]

Humboldt County Public Library. Fortuna, CA.
<http://co.humboldt.ca.us/library/branches/fortuna/> ^[2]

Leominster Public Library. Leominster, MA. <http://www.leominsterlibrary.org/> ^[3]

Orrville Public Library. Orrville, OH. <http://www.orrville.lib.oh.us/> ^[4]

Pinellas Public Library Cooperative. Pinellas Park, FL. <http://www.pplc.us/> ^[5]

Rawson Memorial District Library. Cass City, MI. <http://www2.rawson.lib.mi.us/> ^[6]

Schaumburg Township District Library. Schaumburg, IL. <http://www.stdlib.org/> ^[7]

Scott County Public Library. Georgetown, KY. <http://www.scottpublib.org/> ^[8]

Swampscott Public Library. Swampscott, MA. <http://www.noblenet.org/swampscott/> ^[9]

Wayzata Library. Wayzata, MN. <http://www.hclib.org/AgenciesAction.cfm?agency=Wa> ^[10]

[Author's Note: a more thorough and detailed version of this study was published as Bernier, A. "A space for myself to go:" *Early patterns in Small YA spaces*. **Public Libraries** 48, no. 5. (September/October 2009) 33-47.

[11]



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[1] <http://www.blueislandlibrary.org/>: <http://www.blueislandlibrary.org/>

[2] <http://co.humboldt.ca.us/library/branches/fortuna/>:

<http://co.humboldt.ca.us/library/branches/fortuna/>

[3] <http://www.leominsterlibrary.org/>: <http://www.leominsterlibrary.org/>

[4] <http://www.orrville.lib.oh.us/>: <http://www.orrville.lib.oh.us/>

[5] <http://www.pplc.us/>: <http://www.pplc.us/>

[6] <http://www2.rawson.lib.mi.us/>: <http://www2.rawson.lib.mi.us/>

[7] <http://www.stdl.org/>: <http://www.stdl.org/>

[8] <http://www.scottpublib.org/>: <http://www.scottpublib.org/>

[9] <http://www.noblenet.org/swampscott/>: <http://www.noblenet.org/swampscott/>

[10] <http://www.hclib.org/AgenciesAction.cfm?agency=Wa:>

<http://www.hclib.org/AgenciesAction.cfm?agency=Wa>

[11] Image: http://www.voya.com/?attachment_id=1334

[12] Image: http://www.addtoany.com/share_save

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