



Evidence Summary

New, Old, Indifferent: The United Kingdom's Preferences Regarding the Architecture and Design of Public Libraries

A Review of:

Black, A. (2011). 'We don't do public libraries like we used to': Attitudes to public library buildings in the UK at the start of the 21st century. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 43(1), 30-45.

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Abstract

Objective – Analysis and discussion of attitudes of U.K. citizens toward the architecture and design of the country's public libraries.

Design – Content analysis of essays submitted to the U.K. Mass Observation Archive (MOA).

Setting – Citizens of the United Kingdom.

Subjects – 180 respondents from a panel of 500 Mass Observation Archive (MOA) volunteers.

Methods – The MOA originated in the 1930s as a way to gather qualitative evidence

regarding everyday life of the British public. Most of the data gathered takes the form of variable length essays written by a panel of 500 anonymous volunteers. The volunteers respond to specific directives, and in this article, Black summarized responses to a directive he originally posed to the 500 volunteers in 2005: 'Public Library Buildings'. Black issued this particular directive to the panel of volunteers in the autumn of 2005 and results were made available to the public by mid-2006. The MOA received a total of 180 responses, of which 121 were from women and 59 were from men. Both users of libraries and non-users were included in the sample. The respondents were not a representative sample of the British public because men, ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic

groups, and those living outside of the South of England were underrepresented.

The author analyzed the content of the 180 submitted essays to gain insight on attitudes regarding public library design and architecture. Respondents were asked about public library location, environmental fit, architectural style, sensory aspects of the building, and whether or not the building resembled other types of public buildings. Although he posed several questions, Black focused on answers to three questions: what do you think about the design of modern library buildings? Do you prefer them to older style buildings? Have you seen older libraries renovated into more modern libraries, and what do you think of them? Black then analyzed the responses and grouped them into four major attitudes toward the architecture and design of public libraries. The author chose not to code any of the responses and instead chose to analyze the 'discourse' in and not necessarily the 'content' of the essays. After analyzing the discourse, Black contextualized the evidence he discovered. He then discussed political and cultural issues with relation to the four major attitudes and how these issues affected the current landscape of libraries.

Main Results – The four major categories derived from the essays that Black analyzed included: preference for the new; preference for the old; preference for a mixing of the old and the new; architectural indifference, the library as 'place' and the concept of 'libraryness.' Those with a preference for the new preferred the newer, more modern building because it fit better within the world of information technology. These respondents also felt that the older buildings were too intimidating and cold. Those who preferred the older architecture and design felt that the buildings allowed them to access a piece of the past, and they thought an older library to be more impressive, historic, and generally have more elaborate and interesting architecture. These respondents pointed out the fewer places to hide in new libraries, and indicated that new architecture is boring and stolid. The

third group of respondents preferred an older exterior, but an up-to-date interior with a more modern infrastructure. They enjoyed the large impressive buildings but liked the interior to contain comfortable, modern furniture, good lighting, as well as updated technological tools. Finally, the remaining group of respondents did not place importance on the physical space of a library, but more so the services and collections within the physical space.

Conclusion – The discourse derived from the MOA and analyzed in Black's article summarizes the attitudes and preferences that citizens of the UK have regarding public library architecture. Among the 180 responses to the 'Public Library Buildings' directive, there is a clear tension in these attitudes and preferences. The information gathered in the MOA directive on public libraries could also provide political and cultural leaders with evidence of a need for renewal or rethinking of the country's public libraries.

Commentary

Overall, this article is an interesting commentary on preferences for space and design regarding the United Kingdom's public libraries. The author analyzed the data available via the essay responses and came away with four opinions on library space. He not only addressed preferences but contextualized preferences by providing examples of libraries exhibiting the new, old, and a mix of new and old. The author has clearly done extensive research on public libraries as physical spaces in the United Kingdom.

The author recognizes methodological issues with the MOA, and in a previous article (Black, 2002) he describes the issues in greater detail. The lack of wide gender, ethnic, and geographic representation is a definite methodology problem in the MOA. Sample size was also relatively small with a pool of 500 potential participants and only 180 respondents to this particular directive.

The article lacked quantitative evidence, as the author did not include percentage of responses which fell into each attitude category. Providing such statistical data could be useful to those who may decide to refurbish or redesign a public library in the UK or to those interested in researching public library usage and architectural preferences.

While the qualitative data gathered via the MOA implies certain themes, the research does not lead to a traditional qualitative assessment of public library usage. Surveys of library users and non-users throughout the

UK intended to explore attitudes, expectations and preferences with regard to the public library would be more useful to government officials or those researching economic feasibility of redesigning space.

References

Black, A., & Crann, M. (2002). In the public eye: A mass observation of the public library. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 34(145), 145-157.