

**In the Words of the Users: The Role of the Urban Public Library as Place**

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## In the Words of the Users: The Role of the Urban Public Library as Place

Many people know the old story about the elephant and the blind men, each of whom, feeling a different part of the elephant, give an accurate but very different description of what an elephant is. So too, when you ask library users about what role the library as place plays in their lives and in community, you will receive many different answers. Public libraries play a multitude of roles in communities including supporting the intellectual, social, cultural and community needs of the local citizenry. Because of these multiple roles, relationships between libraries and community are complex.

The results of studies of public libraries as physical places share a common theme in that they demonstrate that these spaces mean different things to different people. In such studies patrons have described public libraries as a place for reading and studying, as a place for information retrieval, a place to use computers and as a place to encourage literacy (OCLC, 2005). It has been found that public libraries function as spaces that support and facilitate the integration of immigrants into community (Picco, 2008). One study has even found the library being used for the conflicting purposes of being a place to commit a crime and as a place to prove character (Burke & Martin, 2004). These studies have been effective in identifying both the expected and unexpected roles that public libraries play in community. Studying libraries as place, therefore, may also be seen as an effective method of identifying new facets to the roles of public libraries.

Studying libraries as place also provides a way of beginning to clarify the intricacies of public libraries' relationships to their communities. Historically the success of public libraries in Canada and North America has, at least in part, stemmed from their dedication to public access and the common cultural good (Lamonde, McNally, & Rotundo, 2004). Examining the roles of public libraries as physical places generates information that can be used to preserve and strengthen these historical qualities of public libraries by generating a multifaceted view of what the library is, and should or could be in the community.

This study examines user perceptions of the physical place of the urban public library with the goal of revealing and examining, at least to some extent, the web of relationships that libraries have with their communities. This study asks two questions. How do users describe their experiences of the urban public libraries as a physical place? What does this tell us about the role of these spaces in the community? Libraries seek to provide services needed by the communities they serve. This research provides an indication of the extent to which libraries are successfully fulfilling their various community roles, of opportunities for improvement and for adaptation of services to the needs of users, and of suggestions for further avenues of research.

### **Methods**

A multiple case study design was used to examine users' reflections on their use and experience of three urban public libraries in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. This information was analysed to determine what roles the library as place play in users lives and in the community. This methodological approach allows for the development of detailed accounts of users' experiences while still facilitating theoretical development.

Users were asked to fill out questionnaires concerning their use and experience of the public library, 217 completed questionnaires were collected. The data analysed here

represent a subset of the data collected originally collected (those results are available in May, 2007 & May & Black, in progress). The long answer questions from the questionnaire make the primary basis of what is analysed here. Long answer responses were reviewed and divided into categories. Among others, questions covered details about users library visits, services accessed, use of electronic resources, opinions about the physical features of the library, and main purpose of the library. Out of this analysis theories describing the role of the urban public library as place are developed.

### **The Study Libraries**

This study examines the use of three urban public libraries in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The three study libraries were selected based on their diversity in terms of location in the city, population served, and the buildings in which they were located. Halifax North Memorial Public Library (HN) is a newly renovated urban public library located in a low-income inner-city neighborhood north of the Halifax city centre. Keshen Goodman Public Library (KG), at the time of this study, was one of the newer branches in the Halifax Public Library system. Located in a rapidly expanding suburban area of the city, it is built on an open concept system with high ceilings, a café and 50 computers (Halifax Regional Library, 2006). Spring Garden Road Memorial Library (SG) is a central library located in Halifax's city centre. In many ways this library has outgrown its building, and the building of a new central branch is the number one planning and facilities priority for the Halifax Public Libraries system (Halifax Public Libraries, 2004).

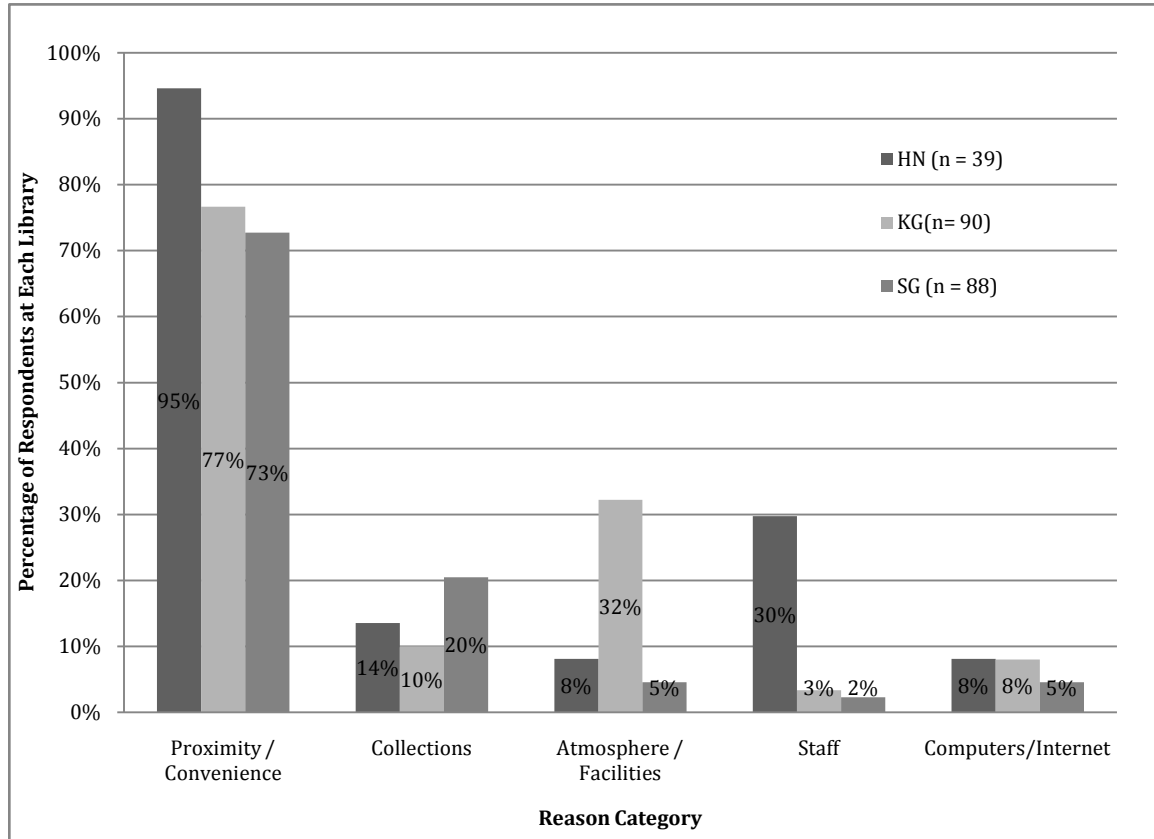
### ***Users Describe their Experiences of the Urban Public Library***

#### **Choosing a library to visit**

Convenience is of paramount importance to users when choosing which library to use. An average of 81% of questionnaire respondents reported the reason they chose to visit the library they were in at the time they were filling out the questionnaire was due to its convenient location (Fig. 1). These results confirm earlier research on the subject (see for example Palmer, 1981; Sone, 1988). Indeed, the majority of questionnaire respondents had less than 15 minutes to travel to get to the library by their usual mode of transportation. The strength of this trend varied by library, with 85% of respondents falling into this category at HN, 66% at KG and 43% at SG. The larger space and more comprehensive collections at KG and SG may be the reason that library users are willing to travel longer distances to get to these libraries.

Reflecting the unique qualities and characteristics of each library, the second most common reason for choosing to visit that particular library were different at each location. At HN, the smallest library in this study, users indicated that it was the staff. At KG, a newer library with a very modern design, it was the atmosphere / building. While at SG, a central branch that focuses on developing a collection to serve the entire city as well as its local community, it was the collection. Convenience, then, is the most influential factor in a library user's decision about which library to visit, but the particular qualities and features of a library also play a role in this decision-making.

Figure 1. Reasons for choosing this library over other libraries.



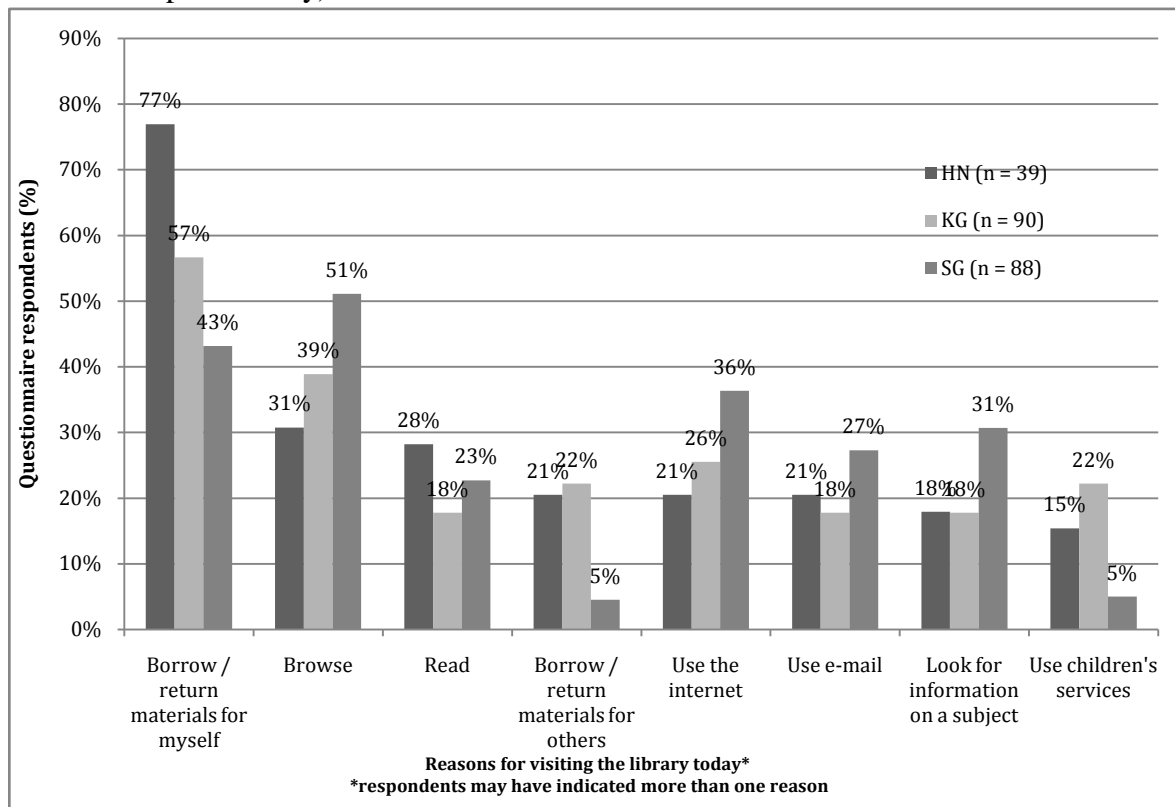
### Reasons for visiting the library

Questionnaire respondents mentioned many reasons for visiting the library on the day they filled out the questionnaire and many respondents had several reasons for visiting. The most commonly mentioned was to borrow materials for themselves (just over half of respondents), followed closely by browsing (just under half of respondents), and using the internet (about a third of respondents). All of these numbers are higher than those reported by Leckie and Hopkins (2002) in their 1999 study of two central Canadian libraries. In that study 40% of questionnaire respondents were visiting the library to borrow materials, 14-25% to browse and 16-21% to use the Internet.

Although the top activities that patrons came to the library to do were the same at all three libraries, the percentage of patrons intending to do the activities showed some variation. At SG 51% of respondents came to the library with the intention of browsing, and 31% to look for information on a subject (Fig. 2). These numbers are much higher than the respective 31% and 18% at HN and 39% and 18% at KG. On the other hand at KG, a library with a very popular and well-equipped children's area, 22% of patrons claimed to be visiting to use children's services or borrow for others (these numbers may be high as the questionnaire was distributed on a day offering a large children's program). For SG, located in the downtown in a catchment area where the majority of residents are not married (2001 Canadian census statistics as cited in Halifax Public Libraries Planning and Development Department, 2006), only 5% of patrons came to the

library to engage in either of those activities. At HN, a library that serves a population with quite a few children but with a much smaller and less well equipped children's area the numbers are split, with only 15% claiming to visit to use children's services, but 21% of respondents reporting coming to the library to borrow for others. A common trend emerges when library users are asked about their reasons for visiting the library, but within that trend each library exhibits different emphases. This similarity and variation reflects the common service role that public libraries play communities and the unique qualities of both the communities being served and the physical spaces and collections at each library.

Figure 2. Reasons for visiting the library on the day of the questionnaire (most frequently indicated responses only)



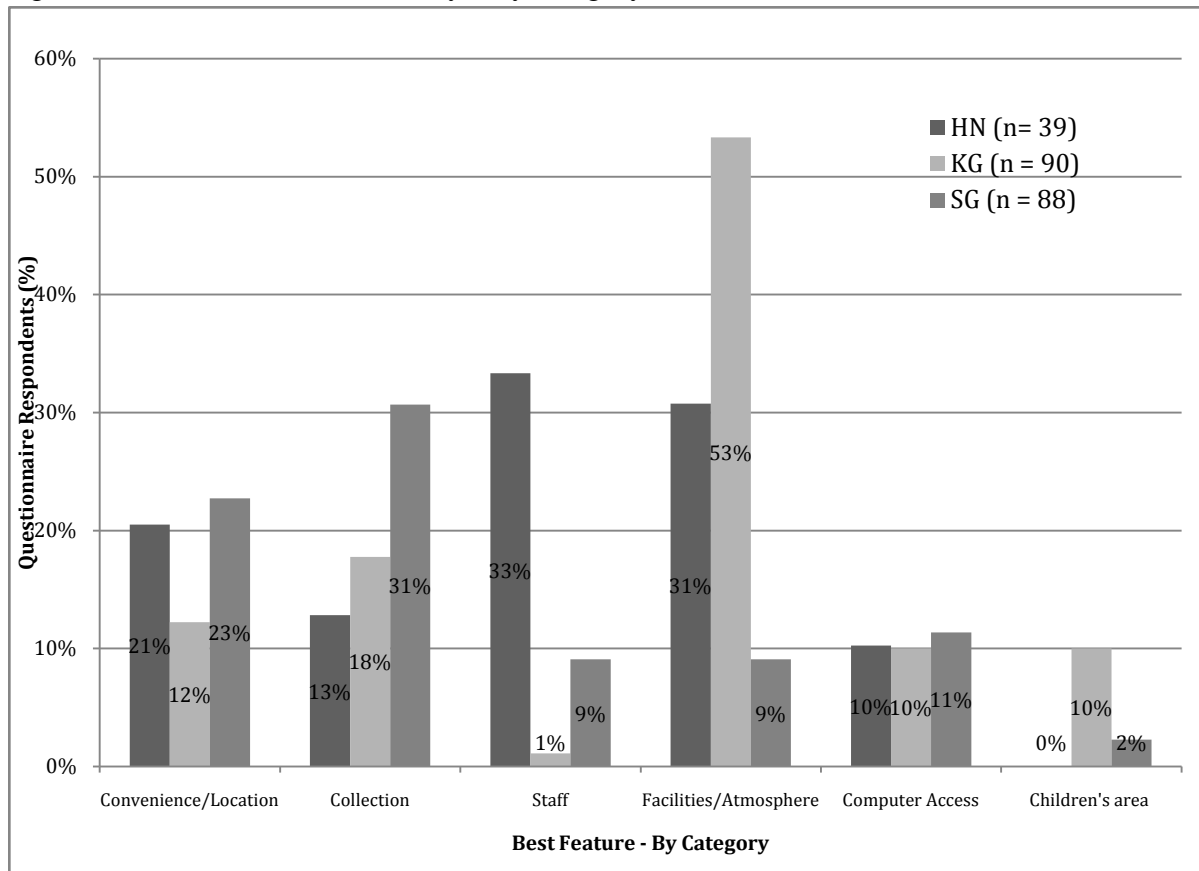
### Talking to library staff

Questionnaire respondents at all libraries reported engaging in conversation with library staff. Respondents at HN were more likely to report doing so (85% of respondents) than respondents at KG (71%) or SG (58%). Those who reported talking to staff at HN were also much more likely to report engaging in talk beyond requesting assistance using the library or accessing collections. The percentage of HN respondents who reported engaging in small talk with library staff was 36% and those that reported talking about personal matters was 13%. These numbers are much higher than those at KG (8% and 0) and SG (5% and 0). The higher degree of interaction between library patrons and staff at HN may be due to the smaller size of this library or it may be due to the strong role this library plays as a community-gathering place (MacIntyre, 2008).

Liking, disliking, and suggesting improvements to the public library

Library users have a clear idea about what they like and what they don't like about their public library, and these opinions vary greatly between libraries. At HN patrons place a very high value on the staff, with just over one third of respondents citing the staff as the best feature of the library. Patrons at KG appreciate the newer and well-designed library space, with just over half of questionnaire respondents pointing to some aspect of the physical space or the atmosphere of the library as its best feature. SG, as the central branch in the Halifax Public Library system, is recognized by patrons for its large collection, just over one third of respondents referring to the collection as this library's best feature. Further indicating their appreciation of the library as a physical space, just under three quarters of library questionnaire respondents had a favourite place in the library. Favourite places mentioned varied greatly between patrons and between libraries, some respondents preferred soft seating, some seating by windows and others enjoyed being in the stacks, in the children's areas, or at the staff desks.

Figure 3. Best feature of this library – by category.



Respondents were also willing to point out features of the library that they did not like or that they thought could be improved, with noise being the most common complaint. At HN, a library where many local children spend time after school, respondents point to noise at this library's worst feature (18% of respondents), followed closely by its collection (15%). It is interesting that the best feature cited is also the worst feature at KG, at this library 17% of respondents indicated that some part of the facilities

as the worst feature. Many of these complaints centred on the confusing design of the parking lot or the busy street that had to be crossed to access the building. In second place, respondents at KG also complained about the noise (14% of respondents). Patrons at SG are strongly aware of the fact that this library is much in need of a new building, 43% of respondents commented on some aspect of the facilities or atmosphere of the building as this library's worst feature.

Respondents at the three libraries are divided in their responses when asked about what services or resources they would most like to see introduced at their library. Patrons at HN are strongly in favour of more programming (28% of respondents), at KG it is the collections that patrons would like to see improved (12% of respondents), while at SG it is the facilities (15%). In their willingness both to describe features they like and dislike, as well as changes they would like to see implemented at these libraries, respondents reveal their attachment to these spaces. These responses indicate that, to some degree, respondents feel a sense of ownership and investment in these libraries.

#### Using and valuing the library's electronic resources

Examining questionnaire respondents' answers to questions about the library's electronic resources (including the internet, library catalog, and electronic databases) is interesting. When asked how important these resources were 76% of respondents ranked these resources as vital, very important or important (Table 1). However, when asked how frequently they used the library's electronic resources respondents can be roughly grouped into two equal parts, those who always or usually use the resources (47% of respondents) and those who sometimes, rarely or never use them (50% of respondents). Respondents recognize the importance of having these resources available to the community even if they themselves do not make frequent use of them. When compared to a similar study conducted in 1999 (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002) this shows a marked increase in the value that library users place on electronic resources and on the number of users that usually or always use these resources when they visit the library.

#### ***The role of the public library as a community space***

##### Describing the main purpose of the library

Questionnaire respondents see the library as having a number of main purposes, including being a source of books and other materials to borrow (32% of respondents), providing access to information (21%), supporting learning and education (21%), supporting reading and literacy (14%), providing a physical space for the community (16%), providing access to computers / technology (11%), and being a resource for leisure activities / entertainment (7%) (Figure 4). Although a direct comparison to the results of a similar question presented in the OCLC Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources (2005) is not possible, these results do show a similar emphasis by library users on the role of the library as a provider of information and books. The results presented here however, show a more frequent mention of the purpose the library plays as a physical space, in the OCLC study only 3% of respondents from Canada mentioned the building (environment) of the library as a main purpose of the library. This may be a result of the fact that questionnaire respondents in the OCLC study included frequent, non-frequent and non-users of the library, while the majority of respondents in this study

were frequent library users (visiting once a week or more). It is possible that frequent library users are more likely to have a stronger appreciation for the library as a physical space in community.

Table 1. Use of Electronic Resources.

	Percentage of Questionnaire Respondents			
	Urban Libraries			Total (n = 217)
	HN (n = 39)	KG (n = 90)	SG (n = 88)	
<b>How often do you use electronic resources when you visit this library?:</b>				
Always	10	23	28	21
Usually	31	29	19	26
Sometimes	10	20	16	15
Rarely	23	16	23	20
Never	23	9	14	15
No response	3	3	0	2
<b>Rank the importance to you of the electronic resources in this library:</b>				
Vital	23	26	26	25
Very Important	28	31	26	28
Important	21	23	24	23
Unimportant	15	14	16	15
Very Unimportant	5	1	2	3
Other	5	0	3	3
No response	3	4	2	3

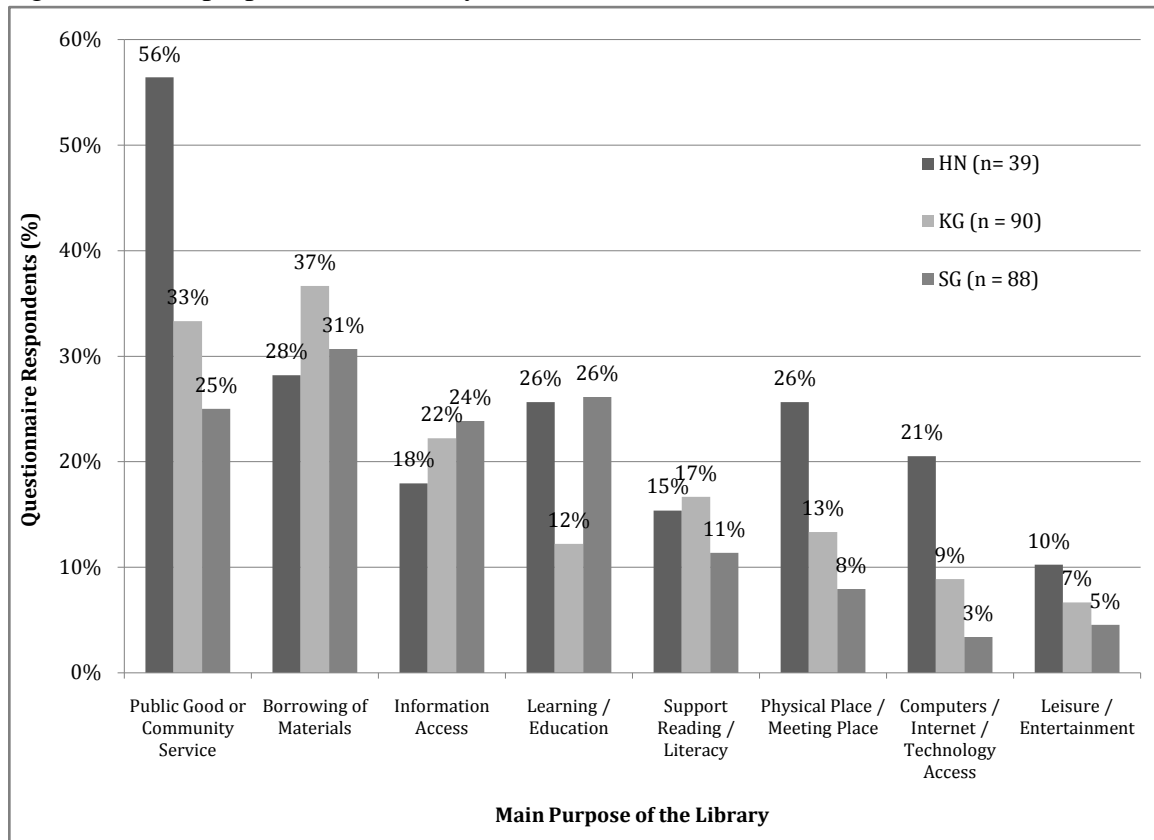
HN = Halifax North Memorial Public Library  
 KG = Keshen Goodman Public Library  
 SG = Spring Garden Memorial Public Library

Respondents show evidence that they recognize the role of public libraries as a public good in community, with 38% of questionnaire respondents mentioning the public good or community service role of public libraries as part of the main purpose of these institutions. These results lend strength to the argument that community members assign a high social interest or public good value to the public libraries. It has been found that up to 40% of the value that citizens place on public libraries stems from the value of this institution as a public good available to the community (Aabo & Strand, 2004). Library users at HN were more likely to mention this role of public libraries (56% of respondents) reflecting, perhaps, the greater need for such a community resource in this community.

#### The lifestyle fit of public libraries

The public library fits a variety of user lifestyles. Leckie & Hopkins (2002), in their 1999 study of two central Canadian libraries, found that library users could roughly be divided into two groups, those who visited frequently and stayed for longer periods of time, and those who visit for shorter periods and used the library more as a space to quickly and conveniently access materials. The results presented here indicate that this trend holds true for the central and two branch libraries surveyed, although, to these two categories this study adds a third, users who use the library primarily as a place to access technology.

Figure 4. Main purpose of the library.



Questionnaire responses, in a number of categories, reveal that, for a certain subset of public library users, technology access is a vital role of the public library. Some questionnaire respondents (13-25%) indicated that, for them, access to technology was the library's most important library service (these results are presented in May & Black, in progress). A number of respondents even reported this as the library's main purpose (particularly at HN where 21% of respondents mentioned this), others reported the computers at their favourite place in the library. About 10% of respondents at all three libraries indicated access to computers or related technology to be the best feature of the library. Finally, for 7% of questionnaire respondents, using the Internet or email is the only activity that brought them to the library on the day they filled out the questionnaire. For these respondents the key role of the public library is to provide them with access to computers and the Internet. Reflecting the needs of the community, respondents at HN are most likely to see this as the primary role of the public library.

Questionnaire responses support the claim that for some respondents the physical library building is primarily a convenient place to access materials for borrowing. Such respondents from HN describe the main purpose of the library as "to lend materials for use at home" or, simply, for "borrowing". At KG, one such respondent described the library as a place to "provide reading materials at no cost", while someone from SG sees the library as "a resource for hard copy books". Some patrons use the online library catalog to order their items, for them the physical library is simply "a place to pick up holds". Some of these respondents describe the library as a quick place to stop, visiting the physical library only long enough to pick out materials for borrowing. Others from

this group may visit the library longer, even engaging in activities beyond selecting and borrowing materials, nevertheless their idea of what a library is, remains fixed on this one role of public libraries.

Confirming the analysis provided by Leckie and Hopkins (2002), the library appears to function, to some extent, as an external branch of their living room for some questionnaire respondents. These individuals report staying in the library for extended periods of an hour or longer, and engaging in many activities including browsing and borrowing materials, looking for information on a subject, reading, studying and using a computer or using children's services. Like in one's own living room, many respondents report feeling comfortable and relaxed in the library space and value library as a space to relax while engaging in various activities. At SG one patron described the library as "a place to be out of the weather and left in peace", while another as a place to "look at the newspaper (read)". At KG some respondents described the main purpose of the library to be a place "for people to read and enjoy their time" or to "help people read in a better place". One patron at HN described the library's purpose as "to be a comfortable friendly spot for people to borrow reading materials, to browse, use the computers, and to read, talk to friends, learn new skills" and another as "a gathering place, a place to study, a place to rest", and finally as "a great place for kids to hang out". The high number of respondents reporting talking to library staff at HN, both polite chitchat and on matters of a personal nature, seems to indicate that patrons at HN feel especially at home in the library. One respondent commented that the library staff were "like family" while another reported talking to staff about "personal relationships".

The flexibility, the range of services offered, and the convenient access for many to their physical spaces, mean that public libraries fit the lifestyles of many different members of the community, whether users need quick access to materials, a place to engage in activities or access to technology. Indeed, the findings of the OCLC (2005) report indicate that just under half of respondents in that study feel that the library is a good to perfect fit with their lifestyle.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis of library users' descriptions of public libraries reveals trends and variations in the way these spaces are both described and used. Putting these descriptions back together again, looking at the elephant as a whole, gives us a complex and varied picture of what a public library is to its users and to its community. The results of this study also indicate opportunities for libraries to improve services to communities. The reoccurring emphasis, for example, by patrons of HN on the importance of access to technology, is an indicator that public libraries located in low-income communities need to place an emphasis on developing their information technology resources. Although results here show that library users make use of a variety of library services there were some library services, such as the library databases, that were mentioned by very few respondents. Though libraries are well-used spaces, there remains a need to advertise under-utilized services and resources.

The results of this study leave some questions unanswered. There is some indication that more frequent library users may have more appreciation for the library as a physical space in community, is this indeed the case? How do the qualities of the library, including its physical space and collections, affect the willingness of library users

to travel longer distances to the library? How do the needs of different communities affect what services those communities need or expect from their public libraries?

In summary, this study reveals that though libraries have basic roles that they play providing information, reading materials, and technology to communities, they also provide services related to the library as a physical place. They have the ability to be flexible and to respond to community needs by emphasizing the services are most needed. Perhaps one of the most interesting results of this study is that these public libraries be different things to different people. The fact that these libraries succeed in this is a testament to the success of public libraries.

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