Public library as a safe place: principles and experiences of Brazilian Park Libraries in Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract:

This paper initially takes into account some institutional and theoretical approaches that give emphasis to the notion of the public library as a "place" and "safe place". The discussion presented emphasizes the importance of directives of IFLA and UNESCO and of the social capital theory applied to public libraries as major inspiring sources of this idea. It is also pointed out here that this perspective is very appropriate for adoption in developing country contexts, notably in violent poor communities of metropolitan areas. The Park library experiences, in Colombia and Brazil, are good examples of a public library model that could be considered as taking into account similar ideals. After a brief presentation of the Colombian initiatives, the focus of the paper is on the Park libraries of Rio de Janeiro. Their general characteristics suggest these libraries are very well equipped and welcoming to underprivileged groups. A study focusing on one Park library, located in a very poor and violent region of the city is presented. The study revealed that this experience values community development and social capital formation of its users. Data obtained pointed to several positive characteristics of this library experience: a room for the community use was provided, library access and use by local young boys and girls was encouraged, community conviviality was emphasized, stimulus for creative activity with locals and the study of community history was promoted.

Unfortunately, the Park libraries of Rio de Janeiro face now a serious crisis, and some are still closed or functioning partially.

Introduction

The theme proposed for this session of the 84th IFLA Congress – public library as a safe place- although utilized in developed country environments (Cox, 2000 & Hillenbrand, 2004, 2005), it is an inspiring term for underdeveloped contexts, like Brazil. Besides, it seems to be in accordance with relatively recent propositions and experiences that characterize some Brazilian public libraries.

In this paper, we initially take into account some international theoretical approaches that give emphasis to the notion of the public library as a "physical place" and "safe place". After this initial discussion, we briefly present some public library experiences, which seem to contribute to this idea, notably the Park libraries of the Latin American countries, of Brazil and Colombia, a model of public libraries proposed as a public policy to face high levels of violence in large poor communities. We also bring about some evidences obtained from a study applied to key actors and users of one of the Park libraries of Rio de Janeiro.

Theoretical inspirations of the idea of public libraries as a safe place

It is difficult to deny that the digital era poses many challenges to the public library in general. The increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT), in all spheres of life, tends to diminish of the role of the public library as a place for book reading and information provision. To some analysts this pervasive use of ICT necessarily implies decay and loss of identity of the public library. And in fact, this perspective has already given support to the idea of public life crises, as well as to the closure of public libraries, even in developed countries (Svendsen, 2013).

On the other hand, what could be considered a reaction to the above negative point of view, we identify more positive and different approaches to the contemporary public library. To some analysts, in view of the ICT explosion, the institution is led to search for new roles and to look at it from new and interesting perspectives, as the integration of virtual and local information sources, and the promotion of information literacy (Waller & McShane, 2008). Going in that direction, we observe institutional policies, academic work and intervention projects emphasizing the importance of the institution as a 'physical place' and as a 'safe place' with multiple functions, offering access to culture and to ICT, besides basic traditional services, to local individuals and local communities. These new approaches to the public library, seem promising, despite facing criticism.

We could begin mentioning, as outstanding efforts in the direction of valuing the public library as a safe place, the work developed by the two international institutions: IFLA and UNESCO (IFLA, 2006 & UNESCO, 2006). Their institutional position, expressed in their manifestos and directives, clearly detach the democratic compromise of public libraries, repeatedly reinforcing its universal character and its basic role in citizenship building. With its policy of openness to all types of users - with no restriction related to social and political

positions, to ethnic, age or gender groups, as well as assuming responsibility towards groups with especial needs, including socially underprivileged communities - IFLA and UNESCO are explicitly indicating that the public library should be open to diversity and that it should focus on groups and individuals in the greatest needs. In other words, a safe place for all!

Considering academic literature contributing to the idea of a safe place, we start mentioning a study trying to detect, from public library users of an Italian library, what they consider as the ideal public library. Different points of view were found, but all indicated a common aspect – a welcoming place or space, rather than service provision:

> From the very first findings, it became immediately obvious that the participants in the research were referring constantly to an ideal library, using the terms "place" and "space" rather than "service" giving the impression that the structural aspect of the library was predominant over the services offered. (Faggiolani, 2011, pp. 21-22).

The information science literature, and related initiatives, bringing to the public library the social capital idea, form a group of strong contributions to the emphasis on the public library as a physical and safe place. This perspective proposes that the public library should act as promoters of interaction between individuals and community groups, using the library space for that purpose. One of the projects using this approach, and congregating professionals of different academic areas – called the PLACE –, tried to analyse how libraries are in being able to be receptive to encounters between individuals and groups from the community (Varheim, 2007, Aabo, Audunson & Varheim, 2010 & Svendsen, 2013). The emphasis on the social capital perspective is on bringing to the library groups with different interests but seeking to solve common problems.

To be able to act in this direction, according to this literature, public library is seen as a physical (and not virtual) place, a "safe place" for the community as a whole, especially for minority groups or socially disadvantaged groups such as immigrants. Some of the very interesting work done with this perspective focus on immigrant groups, who receive incentives to use the public library as a place that contribute to their integration and welcome feeling in a new social environment. The works by Cox (2004) and Hillenbrand (2004, 2005) also bring about evidence of library users' perception of the public library as a safe place for everyone, and also point out that the provision of services that contribute to the development of community social capital, as community meetings, does not conflict with the importance given to the provision traditional services, as book lending.

Considering the Latin American context, the outstanding environment, suggesting the emphasis on public libraries as a safe place, and social capital building through library policies, are poor and violent neighbourhoods in large metropolitan areas. Some initiatives that are being made in these countries suggest that these ideals are being, explicitly or implicitly, considered. In the next sections we describe the principles and experiences of the Park Libraries.

The Park Libraries
At the beginning of the XXI century outstanding public library projects were developed in two Latin American countries: Chile and Colombia. The imposing library of Santiago served as a model for a successful Brazilian project: the public library of the State of São Paulo. Another Latin American experience – the Colombian Park libraries – had a strong influence

in the creation of the more recent Park libraries of Rio de Janeiro. In this article, we focus on this latter experience, which took into account, in its conception, the intention to face high violence rates occurring in poor neighbourhoods in the cities of Medellin and Cali, as well as in Rio de Janeiro.

Access to culture was the emphasis of the mega-libraries of Bogotá and Medellin, the latter called Park Library. They offered, besides reading material, theatre, cinema, educational activities and workshops, and were very well accepted by the population, especially by youngsters. This had a very strong impact in its surrounding environment, reducing homicide rates by 79% in Bogotá and 90% in Medellin. (Dimenstein, 2006)

Mariana Garcés, Minister of Culture of Colombia, in a visit to Brazil, in 2013, reaffirmed the importance of public libraries in the its role of fighting violence. She considered that the Park Libraries are able to be a dialogic space and a place that values and promotes local stories and tradition. In her opinion, the Park Libraries are:

> … neutral spaces, where freedom of opinion is present e where conflicts end through dialog, respectful criticism, and not through violence. … the social impact (of these libraries) has to do with the change in the auto-image of these populations, with the possibility that they begin to be able to tell their own stories and to preserve their language[1] (Colombia, 2013, p. 1).

We can infer from this brief statement that the communities served by the Park libraries are being able to dialog for problem solving – which contribute to the increase of their social capital – and also to the use the library space to bring about personal experiences and community issues.

The Rio de Janeiro Park Libraries
The conception and implementation of Rio de Janeiro Park Libraries were preceded by missions from Colombian technicians in 2007, to receive contributions from their experiences. In the same year the project was initiated. The fight against drug trafficking in the favela regions was one of the objects of an integrated a major public policy program from the Federal Government, the Program for Accelerating Growth (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento -PAC), involving other social actions, as well as the participation of Federal and State governments. This program facilitated the adoption of the Colombian Park Libraries model, according to the former Vice Secretary of Culture of The State of Rio de Janeiro, and now Vice-president of the Brazilian National Library:

> The opportunity offered by actions and resources of the referred program (PAC), generated a fertile soil for the appropriation, by the State Government, of the successful experiences of Bogotá and Medellin, in Colombia, cities that had an analogous experience of the Favelas in Rio de Janeiro. It was from observations of the Colombian model that the Park Libraries of Rio de Janeiro were born. (Zugliani, 2017, p.17).

The state of Rio de Janeiro, through its Secretary of Culture, with support from the Ministry of Culture, created a network of four public libraries. Two traditional libraries were restored, with their internal spaces and services aimed following the principle of community

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[1] Translation by the authors.

involvement: the Niteroi and the Rio de Janeiro State Library. And two new Park Libraries were built in two very poor and violent areas of the city: Manguinhos and Rocinha.

The two traditional libraries are located in the central regions of these two neighbouring cities. Although not considered as poor or marginal regions, their location facilitates access by poor people in their way from work to home, as well as for the unemployed and other people in need.

The Park State Library resulted from a remodelling of the traditional State Library, created in 1873. The new library, was conceived as central institution for all the network of Park libraries. It reopened in 2014, is situated in a central area of the city, close to a popular commercial region – the SAARA -, and is well served by trains, subway and buses. Modern spaces, furniture and services characterizes this library, occupying an area of 15 thousand square meters, with two buildings and an internal patio. It has an auditorium, a theatre, a sound studio, laboratory rooms, cafeteria and a parking for bicycles. The spaces were planned for plain inclusiveness, being accessible by people with all types of special needs. The library possesses 200 thousand items, including books on several themes, children literature, magazine, newspaper, and films. It also possesses multimedia platforms, and several different artistic activities were planned for its users.

The Park Library of Niteroi is situated in a neighbour municipality. Like the Park State library, it is a traditional institution, created in the beginning of the 20th Century. Its building, occupying 1,812 square meters, and is considered an architectonic landmark in the central region of the city. Its building and internal spaces were remodelled to offer the diverse facilities and services in conformity with the park library's conception, similar those offered by the State library described above.

The two other Park libraries described below were situated at the core of very poor and violent neighbourhoods.

Rocinha is the biggest Brazilian favela, where 70 thousand people live, according to the Brazilian Census (Prates, 2016). The size of this population makes the 'Favela da Rocinha' bigger that 92% of Brazilian municipalities. It does not count, however, with cultural and other governmental institutions and services to meet the needs of its population. The Park library in Rocinha became, therefore, an outstanding public space in the community. According to Pinto (2017, p.12), its Park Library "counted with several partners, as well as cultural and social groups attending the local community with activities aimed at different social and age groups. A substantial part of these groups is formed by local residents[2]".

This same Brazilian census indicated that more than 35 thousand people inhabit the Manguinhos favela complex, which is divided in 14 communities (Fernandes, 2013, p. 128). These communities are usually controlled by different gangs involved in traffic, which makes the region particularly violent. The library is one of the institutions forming what is called a Civic Centre, inaugurated in 2009, occupying 35,5 thousand square meters in the Manguinhos favela. Besides the library, also belong to this complex: an aquatic park, a reference centre for the youth, a centre for juridical assistance, a centre for income generation, a health centre, a middle school and a centre for attendance to women.

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[2] Translated by the authors.

The 2,3 thousand square metres occupied by the Manguinhos library houses a collection of 27 thousand book titles, journals, newspapers and DVDs which can be taken home at no cost. There are in the library ample separate rooms or spaces for reading, for children and for computer usage; there are smaller rooms for courses, multimedia, besides spaces for computer access. Special mention should be given to the room called "My neighbourhood" exclusively dedicated for community reunions. The activities offered by the Manguinhos library included laboratories dedicated to language development and text production, as well as other cultural activities, focusing on accessibility, interaction and exchange of ideas. A document produced by the Secretary of Culture of the State of Rio de Janeiro suggests that the Park library model guided this experience. According to this document, the Manguinhos library is:

> … based on the idea that the library does not have to be just silent spaces for reading, but places that resemble cultural centres with ample accessibility. Possibility of exchange of knowledge and experiences, the Manguinhos Park Library has cultural activities and activities for the promotion of reading in different supports aiming at stimulating (local) production, as well as enjoyment and diffusion of artistic production, and, particularly, promoting access to culture. (Secretaria, [201-], p. 2)

The Rio de Janeiro State Government opted for a library funding and management system, which involves partnership with the private sector (Organização Social). However, with the Brazilian economic crisis since 2015, the financials transfers from the government to the project were not maintained and the Park Libraries of the city were closed. Only in 2017 the library in Niteroi reopened, but now administered by the municipality. The libraries of Manquinhos and Rocinha resumed activities in the beginning of 2018 and the State library will probably reopen before the end of the year.

Studying the Manguinhos library experience
In 2012, the Manguinhos Park Library was focused on a study, with qualitative and quantitative approaches (Silva, 2012, Silva & Olinto, 2015, Silva & Olinto, 2016). The objective of the study was to get a deeper understanding of the two years' experience of this new model of public library: how it was evaluated by important actors, how it was being used, and how these users felt the library impact in its surrounding community.

Observation, interviews with some key actors and questionnaires were applied to users. Some interesting aspects stood out in the observation period, indicating that several approaches, from characteristics of the space design to management decisions, in fact contributed to the development of library-community relations and increase of the community social capital. The community room – 'My Neighbourhood Room' –, well equipped with Datashow, had a door opening to the outside of the library, in order to allow for meetings promoted by local groups when the library was closed; and evidences were collected indicating substantial use of this room aimed at dealing with community issues. Another interesting evidence from the Observation period was the positive, welcoming and comfortable climate for the library users. Rules at the entrance desk did not use negative sentences; users did not have to register to enter; they could enter with their belongings; and books could be picked up from the shelves and left anywhere. Well-lit rooms, comfortable, colourful sofas and puffs characterized the library furniture and layout. It was also possible to observe a study group about the local history, and a laboratory focused on the promotion of local authors.

From the interviews with the Superintendent of the Secretary of Culture and the Library Director it became clear their emphasis on minimum restriction in library access and use. An interesting argument was given for not controlling user's entrance: it prevented any kind of suspicion of police traffic control through library's registers. The interviews also revealed a multidisciplinary focus on team formation, and in team training. The conception of the library as a space for conviviality was emphasized by the library Director: "this is a space for coexistence, more than a space for research". Librarians, also interviewed, demonstrated a strong respect for the users, but also revealed that their more frequent task was to instill civilized behaviour, as well as to control the time of computer use, among the most frequent young users.

Questionnaires were applied to library users during a month, at different periods of the day. Questions formulated asked their opinions about the library, their use patterns and preferences, as well as their sociodemographic characteristics. The 81 respondents revealed that they were very young students (almost 60% below 19), 60% were male, and 80% of them declared themselves as afro-descendants (blacks or mixed race). Their major interest to go to the library was to use one of the 40 computers available, although around 50% said that they had computers at home. When asked about the contribution of the library to the community, the most frequent responses were related to the prevention of criminality. To them, the library: "prevents them from staying on the streets", "keeps them away from criminality", "occupies them". The results also revealed some gender differences in library use. As expected, the girls read more in the library than boys and use less the computer. Other interesting gender differences are that boys use it more frequently and by themselves. An interpretation for this difference might be that girls do not feel as safe, or are not allowed, to go to the library by themselves due to its violent environment. Therefore, although a welcoming and secure place to all, the library may be more beneficial to boys.

Concluding remarks

The public libraries in contemporaneity are increasingly valuing its physical space, with a welcoming environment, notably for the underprivileged or the marginalized sectors of the population. Theoretical approaches and research, based on the social capital idea, seem to contribute to this tendency. The Park library model adopted in Bogotá, Medellin and Rio de Janeiro, situated in poor and violent neighbourhoods of great metropolitan areas, constitute examples of successful experiences in that direction, contributing to a stronger and more fruitful relation between the public library and its community, as well as to the reduction of violence in its surrounding areas. The study presented, focusing on the Manguinhos Park library, suggested that good quality spaces and services, including a room for exclusive use by the community, and encouragement of local cultural expression, generated a sense of belonging and the feeling that the public library is a 'safe place' for the community. This experience was unfortunately interrupted, and only in 2018 new efforts and promises of full return are being made.

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