

Handling Replacement: Tending to a Local Library and Repair Center

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Towards the back of the community library, a retired engineer works as a volunteer and is sorting through the bags and piles of used household electrical and electronic devices. Between the used DVD players, toasters, kettles and laptops, he is at his desk where he carefully cleans, repairs and restores the donated items. Those items he cannot save are stored “out the back” to be recycled, after he has carefully salvaged useful parts for re-use in future repairs. The refurbished household items are sold cheaply to those who would have no or limited access to them: a computer for a father who could otherwise not communicate with his sons abroad; a family with disabled children who wanted a TV. Any money raised from sales goes directly towards the running costs of the library, such as space heating. Teas and coffees, sold from the hatch in the wall opposite, are also affordable, which along with sales of second hand books, other “entrepreneurial” initiatives and all the volunteers’ time and energies are what keeps this important, freely accessible, civic space open to the public.

The scene in this vignette offers a perspective on the intersecting realities of scarcity and austerity in the UK today. It is the site of two infrastructures: the first, an existing public library now transferred to a social enterprise and the second, an infrastructure for the processing of used household goods. These infrastructures, while currently unusual together, are each separately increasing in number. The first with the rise of “community libraries” in the UK and the second in the emerging context of the “circular economy” based on repair, re-use and recycling. In what follows, we depart from the vignette of the Crofton Park Community Library to explore how libraries and community repair each are latent with possibilities of new social forms, yet also risk reproducing neoliberal relations and subjectivities.

Libraries as Spaces of Care

Libraries are known for their commitment to providing universal free access to knowledge, vital in a democracy, as well as being one of last vestiges of public space that are warm and freely, universally accessible. Media scholar Shannon Mattern aptly named libraries as a form of “social infrastructure,”ⁱ to highlight their important social role in localities. From offering help with homework to children whose parents are at work after school, clubs, activities for preschoolers, English lessons, study areas, book clubs, or providing access to the internet (particularly important for those needing to access government services, such as welfare payments or making job applications),ⁱⁱ libraries provide multiple aspects of welfare and care to their local populations, hosting a number of functions linked to social reproduction.

Libraries’ composite cultural and social offer evolves in relation to the specific communities who use them. Their programs are not generic, which often makes their loss from a neighborhood more felt. As Graeme Evans argued, many studies on cultural engagement miss this vital

connection between “place and participation,”ⁱⁱⁱ and yet, cultural provisions that are specifically tied to their own locales “offer the cultural content and progression [...] that other forms of cultural exchange rely upon.”^{iv} In this sense then, libraries are infrastructural in the way that they provide the core access that encourages and sustains other forms of civic activities. They act and sustain in relations of proximity that are all the more important for less mobile constituencies, such as lower income populations and young people.

Recently, libraries have been the target of a number of restructurings and funding cuts that risk undermining their primary function of granting universal and free access to knowledge. The proliferation of other activities, services and initiatives now squeezed into library buildings are those which are progressively losing their own legitimate spaces in the contemporary city. It is not unusual, therefore, to see part of a library building repurposed to host a crèche, a point of contact for social services or a makerspace. The pressure of hosting additional services, coupled with reduced funding, coincides with the call to become “entrepreneurial” entities, which risks undermining or side-lining libraries’ core mission.

In the UK context, the neglect and devaluing of this crucial democratic institution is observable when considering the number of libraries that have been closed down in recent years. While library closures and funding pressures in the UK predate austerity,^v in 2012 alone 200 libraries were reported lost,^{vi} and according to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy a further 105 libraries were lost during 2016/17.^{vii}

In this climate, volunteers now represent a core component of library staff and a strategy for councils and constituencies that wish to keep their libraries open.^{viii} A number of libraries that would have been otherwise lost with the cuts have been saved by local campaigns and now run as “community libraries.” While the government’s “Library Task Force” does not openly advocate volunteer-only solutions,^{ix} the number of “community libraries”^x making varying use of volunteer labor has risen to 500 since 2010.^{xi} “Community libraries” are often the result of negotiations with local councils, who rent the building back to social enterprises, in a push to outsource the economic burden. It is in one of such community libraries, run by the social enterprise “Eco Communities,” that we found the presence of a community repair initiative, also run voluntarily after an earlier attempt to turn this activity into a business proved unviable.

Community Repair and Libraries: Tending to Brokenness

The phenomenon of community repair has also been gaining momentum in the UK in recent years. Manifesting as a mobilization against the growing problem of waste and countering throw-away cultures, initiatives such as repair cafés, community fix-it clinics and others have been providing a meeting space for skilled repairers and owners of broken items. Several similarities can be observed between the ethos of community repair events and the more traditional one of public libraries. Both offer a site of cultural activities that work with relations of

proximity, engaging neighborhoods or similar smaller constituencies in their area. By doing this, they contribute to creating and sustaining a specifically convivial value of an urban area.

Moreover, they both engage in different kinds of citizen-led pedagogy. In the case of community repair, this is made explicit by the mission statements and online communication of some of the main organizations behind such initiatives, who emphasize the relevance of the knowledge exchange between volunteers who teach participants how to fix their own items whenever possible.^{xii}

Both libraries and community repair initiatives are aiming to protect the idea of free and universal access to knowledge as a cornerstone value of a democratic society. The growing repair movement is fast becoming a crucial actor campaigning for the “right to repair,”^{xiii} allowing owners to open up and tinker with their devices, an increasingly important permission in the age of the so-called Internet of Things, which will see many everyday objects being fit with proprietary software.

Despite the genuine similarities between the two, the reasons for their co-presence in the space, in this case, has more to do with the ongoing devaluation of maintenance and care labor. The government’s “Library Task Force” is actively committed to extend partnership projects,^{xiv} stating that libraries should “continue to provide core services free for users, but develop and use commercial skills to generate income so they can offer new services while maintaining neutrality.”^{xv} Makerspaces and “innovation centers” are described by the Task Force as opportunities for entrepreneurship and business in libraries.^{xvi}

Spaces of Care and Volunteer Labor: The Return of an Old Problem?

The choice of locating community repair activities in a library can be an opportunity that, by taking advantage of proximity, can nurture the ethos of social care present in both types of infrastructures. Yet, in their current re-organization we see a potential social and political drawback that could debilitate, rather than invigorate, the transformative traction of both free access to books and collaborative mending activities.

The “old” infrastructure of the library, its building, furnishings, stock is now “handled” by volunteers, as is the newly emerging community infrastructure for repair and re-use. Their reliance on free labor problematizes the vision of a smooth transition towards circular economies and “post-work” futures.

Since the first EU report on the issue in 1976,^{xvii} one of the key claims of advocates of circular economies is that the repair, re-use and recycling of goods will create (local) jobs.^{xviii} Yet even the title of this report, “The potential for substituting manpower for energy,” underlines a crucial yet taken-for-granted relation of energy and labor: namely, cheap (fossil) energy and cheap

materials have until now been substituted for labor.^{xix} To replace “cheap nature,” to borrow Jason Moore’s expression,^{xx} capitalism will need cheap labor.

In this sense, the case of Crofton Park is symptomatic, as the reliance on volunteers testifies to the passion and commitment that both anti-waste and pro-library movements can generate. Yet, their co-presence and similarities also raise a number of questions in relation to the sustainability of these spaces and their position vis-à-vis the rising weight of capital extraction from urban life.

One of such questions remains whether the shift towards volunteering and, more problematically, mandated free labor such as workfare placement programs represents a significant devaluation of skills. The forms of organization that can rely on free labor tend to be organized around tasks that are created to be as simplified as possible, to accommodate turnover and low degrees of expertise. In doing this, spaces such as community repair centers and community libraries risk replicating the management structures of the Fordist era, rather than moving towards different ecologies of practice and of knowledge transmission. Tending to the brokenness of our infrastructures means to rethink the relations of power that they entail, including the regimes of property and the contractual agreements that sustain them. This kind of progressive capacity for society to learn and make positive change is the promise and the commitment underpinning the very idea of a public library—useful knowledge to empower democratic self-determination, a horizon that stands in contradiction with the separation between being given responsibility or being given power, as criticized by many feminist critics of care labor. Similarly, collective repair practices hold the potential to re-shape the economy towards a different relation with both the means of production and the objects of everyday use. However, in order to do so, these practices must at the same time tend to the brokenness of the political conditions in which they are enmeshed.

References

BBC News, 2018. ‘Library cuts to hit benefit claimants’ 20th April 2018. Available: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-43839975> (accessed 16.10.2018).

ⁱ Shannon Mattern, "Library as Infrastructure," *Places Journal* (June 2014), https://placesjournal.org/article/library-as-infrastructure/?gclid=Cj0KEQjw0fOoBRDn88Pol8bqhN0BEiQARGVJKhzZvTd1MCh5HrD0gp6ebJZX4ySF_FCft_y5XeCUrr4waAiBo8P8HAQ.

ⁱⁱ This is a significant contribution when an increasing number of government services are all moving online. Estimates from a 2011 report from the Office of National Statistics showed that 23% of the adult population in the UK did not have access to the internet at home (ONS, 2011). "Internet Access - Households and Individuals, 2011," The Office for National Statistics (ONS), accessed October 16, 2018, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160106221558/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2011/stb-internet-access-2011.html#tab-Household-Internet-Access>. For some of the ways in which cuts to libraries are effecting benefits claimants, please also see Chris Lindsay, "Library cuts to hit benefit claimants," *BBC News*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-43839975>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Graeme Evans, "Participation and provision in arts & culture – bridging the divide," *Cultural Trends* 25, No. 1 (2016): 2.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 4.

^v Cf. John Harris, "Our libraries are at risk - just when we need them most," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/apr/02/libraries-closures-recession>.

^{vi} Alison Flood, "UK lost more than 200 libraries in 2012," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/10/uk-lost-200-libraries-2012>.

^{vii} "Spending on public libraries falls by £66m in a year," 2017 Press Releases, Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA), accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/archived-press-releases/2017-press-releases/spending-on-public-libraries-falls-by-£66m-in-a-year>.

^{viii} In March 2016, after a series of information requests, the BBC made a dataset following its research into changes to public libraries since 2010. It showed that almost 8,000 library staff have lost their jobs: In 2016 there were 31,403 unpaid volunteers working in libraries (up from 15,861 in 2010), while the number of paid employees fell from 31,977, to 24,044 in the same period. Their dataset is publicly available here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HlnlL66ycQChlgl-exXXG6Yb10NylLX89VcIR-9pL8o/edit#gid=0>.

^{ix} "Community managed libraries: good practice toolkit," Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DDCMS), accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-libraries-good-practice-toolkit>.

^x The UK Government recognizes three different forms of community managed library provision: "Community supported: Council-led and funded libraries usually have paid professional staff but are given significant support by volunteers. These libraries are part of the public library network and included in the statutory service; Community managed: Community-led and largely community-delivered libraries rarely have paid staff (but may have access to some form of ongoing council support including professional staff); Independent: These libraries are not part of the public library network nor part of the statutory library service. Usually the community has taken on the management of the library in the face of potential closure. The council still has a legal duty to provide a full and comprehensive library service to the residents of those communities." See "Community managed libraries: good practice toolkit: Annex A: types of community library," DDCMS, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-libraries-good-practice-toolkit/community-libraries-good-practice-toolkit#annex-a>.

^{xi} In July 2017, Public Libraries News (an independent blog by a qualified librarian), estimated that in addition to closures, there were 500 libraries "now staffed, if not entirely run, by volunteers." See Public Libraries News, "500," *Public Libraries News*, July 18, 2017, <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2017/07/500.html>.

^{xii} At Repair Cafés for instance, the events are seen as an opportunity for skill-sharing and learning where "valuable practical knowledge is getting passed on." See "About Repair Café," Repair Café, accessed October 22, 2018, <https://repaircafe.org/en/about/>. The Restart Project's "Restarter Parties" are similar events "where people teach each other how to repair their broken and slow devices." See "About," The Restart Project, accessed October 22, 2018, <https://therestartproject.org/about/>.

^{xiii} "The Right to Repair" or Fair Repair, is a political campaign by the Repair Association in the USA, lobbying for the rights of independent repair workers, consumers, hobbyists and DIY repairers to repair everyday items, an activity that is increasingly being enclosed by manufacturers as a site of profit, for instance by

withholding information or parts, or preventing repairs via the presence of embedded “proprietary” software. See “The Repair Association,” Repair Association, accessed October 22, 2018, <https://repair.org>.

^{xiv} The Library Task Force is “committed to support the extension of partnership projects such as [...] makerspaces,” and has so far provided funding to 24 libraries across the UK to host makerspaces. See “Libraries and Makerspaces,” DDCMS, accessed October 16, 2018,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-and-makerspaces/libraries-and-makerspaces>.

^{xv} “Corporate Report. Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021,” DDCMS, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021>.

^{xvi} For example, the FabLab in Exeter Library, Devon is seen as an opportunity “or businesses to access resource and support to enable them to develop new products and services in a cost effective manner, which may lead to reduced lead or manufacturing times and increase their national and global edge” (See “Case study Fab Lab Devon: Widening awareness of digital making techniques and changing digital consumers into digital makers,” DDCMS, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/fab-lab-devon>). The “Glass Box” makerspace in a Somerset Library is described by the Task Force as “a town centre focal point and unique space for knowledge sharing and digital skills for business start-ups.” See Tabitha Witherick, “Glass Box - Enterprise and innovation in Somerset Libraries,” *Libraries Taskforce*, November 25, 2016, <https://librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/2016/11/25/glassbox-enterprise-and-innovation-in-somerset-libraries/>.

^{xvii} Walter Stahel and Geneviève Reday-Mulvey, *The Potential for Substituting Manpower for Energy*, Report to the Commission of the European Communities (Geneva: Battelle, Geneva Research Centre, 1976).

^{xviii} “In 2015, WRAP published data predicting that an expansion of the circular economy could generate as many 3 million new jobs and reduce unemployment by 520,000 across the EU by 2030.” Duncan Baker-Brown, *The Re-Use Atlas: A Designer's Guide Towards a Circular Economy* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2017), 11.

^{xix} “As Jamie Lawrence, Senior Sustainability Advisor Forest and Timber at Kingfisher, points out, access to virgin wood and fibre has been so easy in the past that reusing fibre was never on the industry’s agenda. In fact, the biggest economic efficiency gains have resulted from using more resources, especially energy, to reduce labour costs. Such a system had few difficulties delivering lower costs as long as the fiscal regimes and accounting rules that govern it allowed many indirect costs to remain unaccounted for—the externalities.” See The Ellen McArthur Foundation, *Towards the Circular Economy Vol. 2: Opportunities for the consumer goods sector* (Coves: The Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2013), 16-17.

^{xx} Jason W. Moore, “The End of Cheap Nature, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying about ‘the’ Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism,” in *Structures of the World Political Economy and the Future of Global Conflict and Cooperation*, eds. Christian Suter and Christopher Chase-Dunn (Berlin: LIT, 2014).