



'Creativity is the New Literacy':

The Benefits of Libraries for Communities & the Role of Music

'Creativity is the New Literacy'¹: The Benefits of Libraries for Communities & The Role of Music.

'One definition of a community is a group of people living within the same story. We don't all follow the same plots but we occupy the same world, whether we realize it or not. The [...] Library is a vital institution because it gives us a material space to live our story together and it makes this story readable. Here we all are, because this is where we go when we need to read a newspaper, use a computer, find a book, meet a friend, copy something, apply for something, occupy the kids, sit down for a bit. From moment to moment in our separate lives we don't know how much we share, but our library makes our shared existence palpable. You and I, we've never met but we may have held the same book in our hands, for hours. It belonged to both of us just as we belong to each other. The library knows this.' — Eugenia Zuroski.²

Introduction

The social impact of public libraries on communities can be difficult to quantify. Yet, researchers across various fields and disciplines have, for the last two decades, begun to explore the ways in which these spaces function as essential meeting and learning environments and studied the positive effects of their existence on communities.³ This white paper aims to collate some of this existing research, consider any trends that are perceptibly emerging from it, and think about the added possibilities and benefits that might be afforded through the involvement of outdoor musical play in these shared community learning spaces. Firstly, we will unpack the seemingly obvious question: 'what is a library?', in order to map out the ways in which a library as public space or place operates in multiple ways within a city or community. Secondly, we will engage the research to examine the role of libraries in the production of social wellbeing and in building a sense of community. Next, we will consider the educational, cultural, and economic roles of public libraries and their measurable impact and value in these areas. Finally, we will conclude by exploring and mapping out the existing and possible ways in which music — and especially hands-on musical play — can play a significant role in all of this.

What is a Library?

On the surface, the definition of a library seems relatively straightforward. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary cites a library as 'a place in which literary, musical, artistic, or reference materials (such as books, manuscripts, recordings, or films) are kept for use but not for sale'.⁴ Yet, as research consistently shows, the role of libraries — and especially public libraries, on which this white paper will primarily focus — extends far beyond that of the storage of musical, literary, artistic and reference materials.^{5,6} Many researchers and practitioners in the public library field

¹ Sandlian-Smith, Pam. 'The Future of Public Libraries—Anything is Possible.' *Public Library Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2016. pp. 311-317.

² Zuroski, Eugenia. 'A Lost Book Found, and the Relevance of Our Libraries.' *The Hamilton Spectator*, 1 March 2020, <https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/2017/02/04/opinion-a-lost-book-found-and-the-relevance-of-our-libraries.html>

³ C. Stenstrom, N. Cole, R. Hanson. 'A review exploring the facets of the value of public libraries.' *Library Management*, vol. 40, 2019. pp. 354-367.

⁴ "Library." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/library>. Accessed 10 Sep. 2022.

⁵ Appleton, Leo et al. 'UK Public Library Roles and Value: A Focus Group Analysis.' *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, vol. 50, no. 3, 275-283.

⁶ Sørensen, Kristian Møhler. 'Where's the value? The Worth of Public Libraries: A Systematic Review of Findings, Methods and Research Gaps.'

have noted the significant role of libraries as a place for meeting, social inclusion, and intergenerational community building.⁷⁸⁹ In a 2007 study in Seattle, Fisher and colleagues found that the library was considered to be a social and community-oriented space by many of the study's participants. Whilst only around 25% of respondents came to the library in the company of others or with the explicit intention to meet others during the period of data collection, more than 50% of respondents stressed the importance of the library as a place for meeting and stated that they do utilize the library for social and community-based purposes as well as educational.¹⁰ Yet, as another study has shown, even when explicit intentions to meet others are not present, the public library still acts as a space for community building, meeting, and social integration. As Goulding describes in his 2005 paper on UK public libraries as meeting places: 'Although a user may not actually talk to anybody during their visit to the library, the feeling of community can still be strong, encouraging a sense of belonging and solidarity'.¹¹ The library boasts many unique features and impacts: across areas such as education, arts, culture, local economy, intergenerational community development, integration, social mobility, and more.

Social Wellbeing, Community and the Library

As the previously cited studies by Goulding and by Fisher and colleagues have gone some way to demonstrating, one of the most vital roles played by a library outside of its capacity as a storage space for literary, artistic, archival materials and IT facilities, is that of the impact that these spaces have on social wellbeing and community building. One study, conducted in 2010 by Svanhild Aabø, Ragnar Audunson and Andreas Vårheim has demonstrated through qualitative research that even in the age of globalization and digitization, and even given the complexities and fragmentations that happen in communities as a result of these phenomena, public libraries still function as community hubs and essential meeting places for people across a wide variety of ages and social demographics. Crucially, Aabø and colleagues particularly note the correlations between low-income and low-education communities and high uses of libraries as a space for meeting together. As a vessel for social inclusion, library spaces are fundamental. As Aabø and colleagues describe it, 'the library as a meeting place plays a substantial role in equalizing the possibilities of being an active citizen across social differences'.¹² Hodgetts and colleagues confirm this view, arguing that socialization and interaction with other library users and staff can enable homeless and unhoused people to rebuild a sense of belonging and identity.¹³ Therefore, the research suggests, the library plays a vital role in communities in terms of providing crucial access to information, arts and culture, internet access, warmth and safety, educational activities, and connection to others across various social demographics.

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⁷ Fisher K.E., Saxton M.L., Edwards P.M., Mai J.-E. 'Seattle Public Library as Place: Reconceptualizing Space, Community, and Information at the Central Library.' J. Buschman, G.J. Leckie (Eds.), *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture*, Libraries Unlimited, 2007. pp. 135-160.

⁸ Goulding, A. 'A community forum: UK public libraries as meeting places.' M. Langeland, et al. (Eds.), *Librarianship in the information age: Proceedings from the 13th BOBCATSSS-symposium*, 2005. pp. 349-358.

⁹ McCabe, R.B. *Civic librarianship: Renewing the social mission of the public library*, Scarecrow Press, 2001.

¹⁰ Fisher K.E., Saxton M.L., Edwards P.M., Mai J.-E. 'Seattle Public Library as Place: Reconceptualizing Space, Community, and Information at the Central Library.' J. Buschman, G.J. Leckie (Eds.), *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture*, Libraries Unlimited, 2007. pp. 135-160.

¹¹ Goulding, A. 'A community forum: UK public libraries as meeting places.' M. Langeland, et al. (Eds.), *Librarianship in the information age: Proceedings from the 13th BOBCATSSS-symposium*, 2005. pp. 349-358.

¹² Aabø, Svanhild, Ragnar Audunson and Andreas Vårheim. 'How Do Public Libraries Function as Meeting Places?' *Library & Information Science Research*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2010. pp. 16-26.

¹³ Hodgetts, D. et al. 'A trip to the library: Homelessness and social inclusion.' *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 9, 2008. pp. 933-953.

What's it Worth?: The Library and Education

But is it possible to quantify and measure this value? The inherent 'worth' or 'value' of libraries seems to be clear to communities themselves. However, as one study conducted by Kristian Møhler Sørensen explains,¹⁴ in order to secure funding and prove this 'value' to governments, councils, charities and individual funders, further empirical research on the impact of libraries is required.¹⁵ Sørensen states the need for studies of public libraries that can inform policies and practices in decision making by local and state councils and governments, as well as the charities and individual funding bodies that provide grants to these cultural institutions. One way of conceptualizing this value is through thinking about the educational impact of libraries on communities. Libraries are essential spaces for educational purposes: hosting reading groups, educational events, book launches and author readings, interviews, lectures, school trips, and more. Many libraries also host inter-school reading contests and goal-oriented library programs including IT training, which encourage children to accelerate through enjoyment their pace of learning and literacy. Studies show that these programs enable users to 'meet and interact across social backgrounds',¹⁶ thus contributing to the production of social capital and the building of more equal, sustainable and flourishing communities and societies.¹⁷

What's it Worth?: Culture and Economy

In addition, libraries serve a direct, extremely important and generative purpose in the arts and culture sector and are a key asset for maintaining healthy local economy.¹⁸¹⁹ Many researchers over the last couple of decades have studied the economic impact of various libraries on their local economy.²⁰²¹²² One particularly compelling study, conducted by Svanhild Aabø explicitly looks at the direct economic impact of libraries on their local economy. Aabø's meta-analysis of this data, which uses 38 return-on-investment (ROI) and cost-benefit studies of public libraries, makes the economic value of libraries immediately perceptible. The study found that for every US dollar invested in public libraries, the mean average return on this investment was 4.5 dollars. Therefore, in place of an

¹⁴ Sørensen, Kristian Møhler. 'Where's the value? The Worth of Public Libraries: A Systematic Review of Findings, Methods and Research Gaps.' *Library and Information Science Research*, vol. 43, 2021.

¹⁵ See also: Audunson, Ragnar. 'How Do Politicians and Central Decision-Makers View Public Libraries? The Case of Norway.' *IFLA Journal*, vol 31, no. 2, 2005.

¹⁶ Baron, L.F. and R. Gomez. 'Social network analysis of public access computing: Relationships as a critical benefit of libraries, telecenters and cybercafés in developing countries.' *Proceedings of the 2012 iConference*, 2012. pp. 377-383.

¹⁷ See: M.L. Ruiu, M. Ragnedda. 'Between digital inclusion and social equality: The role of public libraries in Newcastle upon Tyne.' *Library & Information Research*, vol. 40, 2016. pp. 69-87.

¹⁸ Missingham, R. 'Understanding information needs of Australian business organisations.' *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 65, 2016. pp. 3-16.

¹⁹ Janicki, Megan, and Amelia Bryne. 'Libraries Build Business: A Playbook of Promising Strategies, Models, and Inspiration.' *Public Library Quarterly*, 2022. doi: 10.1080/01616846.2022.2117951

²⁰ Hider, P. 'Using the contingent valuation method for dollar valuations of library services.' *Library Quarterly*, Vol. 78 No. 4, 2008. pp. 437 - 58.

²¹ Indiana Business Research Center (2007), "The economic impact of libraries in Indiana." *IN Context*, vol. 8, no. 12, 2007. Available at: www.incontext.indiana.edu/2007/december/6.asp

²² Janicki, Megan, and Amelia Bryne. 'Libraries Build Business: A Playbook of Promising Strategies, Models, and Inspiration.' *Public Library Quarterly*, 2022. doi: 10.1080/01616846.2022.2117951

all-too-common misconception that despite the inherent value of libraries to communities and consumers, these cultural institutions do not make money and therefore are not financially viable areas for government, charitable or private investment, Aabø's study, especially when placed in conversation with the others cited here, makes clear the economic potential and financial value of public libraries in communities.

Future Libraries: The Role of Music

As has been shown to be true by the above, modern libraries serve many diverse purposes and these extend far beyond the holding and circulation of information via books, journals, technology, and archival materials. The library is a space for creativity, learning, socialization, communication, play, and more. In today's society, perhaps more than ever before, libraries are updating and altering their services as they respond to the fast altering contexts of technological development and innovation, education and its purposes, the economy, and the world of work. As library researcher Pam Sandlian Smith has phrased it, 'the flexibility of the public library provides an environment that is more adept to change and indeed, is philosophically aligned with the 21st-century skills: communication, collaboration, and creativity. These skills are sometimes associated with culture and the arts, but they are becoming essential for a successful life in any endeavor'.²³ Sandlian-Smith specifically cites incorporating musical play into these spaces as a way to step into new generations of the public library. Various libraries across both the US and the world have begun to bring musical gardens into the outdoor spaces in their public libraries and are seeing the benefits of these investments. Due to the profound and proven impact of musical play—and especially outdoor musical play—on mental health,^{24,25} creativity, language and literacy, developing intelligence,²⁶ as a tool for intergenerational connection,²⁷ and more, the incorporation of music and designated musical spaces in libraries is, and continues to be, a hugely significant venture in the pursuit of inclusivity, creativity, and innovation in these essential public institutions.

The Power of Percussion Play

The outdoor musical instruments manufactured here at Percussion Play are the ideal addition to the outdoor spaces attached to your local library. Check out our various Case Studies exploring the ways in which Percussion Play instruments have been incorporated into and had an impact on library spaces and the communities that use them. The North Mankato Taylor Library in North Mankato, Minnesota, for example, using the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, has extended its range of interactive programs to include outdoor musical sessions for local children.²⁸ The Sherman Public Library in Texas has also joined the trend of libraries experimenting with music

²³ Sandlian-Smith, Pam. 'The Future of Public Libraries—Anything is Possible.' *Public Library Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2016. pp. 311-317.

²⁴ Pfeifer, Eric. 'Music-Nature-Therapy: Outdoor Music Therapy and Other Nature-Related Approaches in Music Therapy.' *Environmental Expressive Therapies: Nature Assisted Theories and Practice*, edited by Alexander Kopytin and Madeline Rugh, Routledge, 2017.

²⁵ Percussion Play. 'Hitting the High Notes: The Benefits of Music for Mental Health.' *Percussion Play: White Papers*, 2021. Available at: <https://www.percussionplay.com/hitting-the-high-notes/>

²⁶ Percussion Play. 'Music Matters: The Importance of Music Education.' *Percussion Play: White Papers*, 2021. Available at: <https://www.percussionplay.com/music-matters/>

²⁷ Percussion Play. 'Play, Percussion and 'Post-Age' Pedagogy: The Positive Effects of Intergenerational Music Making.' *Percussion Play: White Papers*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.percussionplay.com/play-percussion-post-age-pedagogy/>

²⁸ Percussion Play. 'North Mankato Taylor Library uses Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund to Create Music Garden.' *Percussion Play*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.percussionplay.com/north-mankato-taylor-library-music-garden/>

and finding new ways to draw people in through music by installing a set of Percussion Play instruments and running outdoor musical programs for community members. Internationally renowned percussionist Cara Wildman played at their opening of the park and is quoted to have said: 'I think the outdoor musical instruments from Percussion Play are amazing and I'm so happy the library added them to the park! I think this will be a great community space and I hope that many people will use the instruments and let free their creative spirit that adults often suppress. I've really enjoyed the instruments myself!'.²⁹ Clearly, the value added to public library spaces by these instruments is easily perceptible by communities and professionals everywhere. By creating space for communities to gather together to learn, play, and innovate, outdoor musical instruments can be used in the library sector to build community, connection, solidarity, and networks of creativity and collaboration.

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²⁹ Percussion Play. 'Sherman Public Library joins a host of libraries experimenting with music and finding new ways to draw people in and engage the public.' *Percussion Play*, 2021. Available at: <https://www.percussionplay.com/sherman-public-library/>

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