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Institutions of Reading

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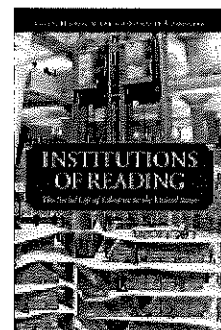
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Introduction

THOMAS AUGST

IN OCTOBER 2004 a new library that exists everywhere and nowhere opened its doors to the public. The materials circulated by Google Book Search are available on the Internet anywhere on the World Wide Web, but through digital imaging technology they exist as electronic data rather than physical objects stored on a shelf. By November 2005, the Authors' Guild and a group of publishers had filed suit against Google, arguing that the new library infringed on copyright protections of intellectual property, stealing the labor of creating and publishing texts under the pretext of promoting "fair use" of knowledge. In challenging the long-standing legal and economic status of publication and authorship, this new library also challenges basic categories that have, for hundreds of years, associated libraries with the storage, preservation, and circulation of the print medium. When accessed through Google's search engines, the many books in this library become one book, as one newspaper commentary noted: "continuous, omni-conversant, cross-referencible down to line, word, and letter."¹ In this context, authorship and publication cease to belong to the inviolable integrity of a printed volume as a whole. In the interactive multimedia environment of the online library, reading becomes less a discrete activity than an interactive, often collaborative processing of information: collecting, posting, mailing, editing, reviewing, commentating, and republishing. As they compose ideas from many sources and create ever-larger collections of documents, images, music, and videos on personal computers, flash memory cards, iPods, and other devices, readers in the twenty-first century become, more than ever, librarians.

In transforming some of our most basic forms and concepts of knowledge, the advent of the digital library invites us to think in new ways about the history of the book. As an institution, the library lends itself both to empirical

1. Mathew Battles, "Library of Babel: Google Goes in Search of the Never-Ending Book," *Boston Globe*, 26 December 2004, D4. Also see Kevin Kelly, "Scan This Book!" *New York Times Magazine*, 14 May 2006, 43-71.

study of change over time and to qualitative histories of individual readers. For this reason, it furnishes common ground to scholars whose methods and theories have often left them working at cross-purposes in the history of the book,²

With the growth of book production and the rise of literacy rates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, libraries helped to expand the size of the reading public. Pioneering scholarship such as Jesse Shera's *Foundations of the Public Library* (1949) told this history as a linear story that culminated with the tax-supported public libraries. Emerging from a larger "consensus history" that thrived during the Cold War, this story took as self-evident the importance of libraries, collapsing the expansion of public access to books and education with the onward march of democracy in the United States. To the extent that libraries had become tax-supported public agencies, they offered a potentially tidy case study of the progress of liberal ideals and institutions, freely distributing public goods in ways that supported individual freedom and equal opportunity. Self-confident and optimistic, the histories of libraries and other cultural institutions were essentially company histories, which overlooked the fact that access to cultural resources remained unequal, conditional on one's race, gender, and class. By the 1960s and 1970s, a new historiography concerned with social and popular phenomena and fed by European critical theories found supposedly beneficent and progressive institutions to be essentially conservative agents of economic rationalization and social control. In turning from official centers of American culture to its contested margins, however, scholars often flirted with what Neil Harris has called "a new Manichaeism" that, no less than the liberal story of progress, simplified the "complex relationship between the founding of our cultural institutions and the ongoing efforts to modernize national societies." As Harris argues, institutions have their own cultures, characterized by both resistance and accommodation to dominant social values. Like universities and museums, libraries were both temples of tradition and engines of progress: they represented contradictory choices and divided loyalties in a

2. For a comprehensive survey of scholarship in the history of reading, see Leah Price, "Reading: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 7 (2004): 303–20. For a comprehensive guide to scholarship in library history, see Andrew Wertheimer and Donald G. Davis, Jr., *Library History Research in America* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2000). For recent collections that reconsider the history of the library from multidisciplinary perspectives, see R. Howard Bloch and Carla Hesse, eds., *Future Libraries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Thomas Augst and Wayne Wiegand, eds., *Libraries as Agencies of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001). For an invaluable analysis of the number and kind of libraries in early America, see Haynes McMullen, *American Libraries before 1876* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000).

“struggle to govern the course of modernization and the organizational logic of the modern world.”³

In widening access to books, libraries also fostered new kinds of individual and collective experience that would become central to modern print culture. What we now call the library evolved from a dynamic relationship between the expansion of the reading public and changing definitions of intellectual and cultural achievement. Throughout most of the twentieth century, literary critics indebted to the methods of New Criticism concerned themselves with interpreting the aesthetic value of a small canon of texts, remaining relatively indifferent to the physical formats, social contexts, and institutional networks in which actual reading takes place. More recently, as literary studies explored more historical perspectives on the meaning and uses of texts, scholars came to theorize the value of reading in proto-psychological terms, as an abstract, cognitive process binding strangers in virtual kinship: the “imagined community” of the modern nation state, for example, the anonymous intimacy of “the public sphere,” the discipline of subjects, the “interpellation” into “hegemony.” While seeking to analyze the social implications of print culture, these perspectives often subordinated the material experience of reading to arguments about the implication of textual content, the values imparted to “ideal” or “implied” readers by discourse. As a result, the proliferation of print itself became a symptom of a disenchanting modernity, a medium of mass communication supplanting traditional, local forms of social membership—among family, friends, and neighbors—with impersonal and symbolic forms of identity. While dismissing an older generation’s quasi-spiritual, aesthetic, or technical regard for the autonomy of the literary text, critics and historians of the book have nevertheless accomplished an analogous alienation of reading from the spaces and practices of everyday life—the city streets, book groups, parlors, lecture halls, schoolrooms, and especially libraries in which individuals came to practice and value their experience of the printed word.⁴

In opening up the history of print culture to the institutional collection,

3. Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 98, 110, 107, 105. On the “consensus history” of the mid-twentieth century more generally, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4. Recent scholarship that analyzes reading within such spaces and practices of everyday life includes: Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Ronald Zboray and Mary Sarcino Zboray, “Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England,” *American Quarterly* 48 (1996): 587–622.

preservation, and diffusion of knowledge, we can situate reading more fully within its many physical and historical contexts, and better understand its place at the crossroads of collective behavior and individual experience. Libraries occupy a middle ground between social artifacts and linguistic effects. Whether built in physical or virtual space, libraries are places where otherwise abstract theories and historical generalizations about changes in what or why people read become entangled in the particular, immediate facts of where and how they do so. In libraries, the seemingly private and solitary nature of reading itself becomes a feature of social life. They are the kind of places where, as David Henkin puts it, “even when people use books to create a barrier between themselves and the people around them, they do so in public view.”⁵ In this volume, the institutional history of reading is in part chronological, moving from exclusive eighteenth-century spaces for the private consumption of otherwise scarce cultural goods, to state and philanthropic investments in the collection and circulation of information as a public good. Illuminating how the institution became a battleground over the purpose and form of reading in modern life, the essays in this volume also invite us to think about the methods with which scholars in different disciplines have made culture an object of inquiry. Libraries helped to build a modern audience for print by building the social life of reading: physical and virtual spaces in which to meet other readers, symbolic meanings and practical uses for reading, new technologies for remembering the past and embracing the future.

Social Spaces of Reading and Forms of Community

In a builder’s manual that was reprinted throughout the later eighteenth century, the term “library” refers to a bookcase (see figure I.1). With its measurements and its elaborate crown molding, the manual’s do-it-yourself diagram identifies the cultural power of the library in a physical form that is at once exalted and mundane: the display of books in a gentlemen’s study. With the diffusion of printed books in the early modern era, a library gave form to a newly intimate experience of reading characterized by silence and solitude. At a moment when printed books remained luxury goods, the opportunity to read in a library expressed larger privileges and power that came with owning property.⁶ In the grandiose mansions that colonial merchants built in

5. Henkin, *City Reading*, 7.

6. The English educator and philosopher John Locke, for instance, signed each book in his painstakingly catalogued personal collection, usually marking the price he had paid for a given vol-

the eighteenth century, a library afforded gentlemen a retreat, free from the obligations of profession and of domesticity. It was, as a historian has recently noted, the “most private part of the house for him,” but also the “place where he entered the widest of all publics, the international scientific and literary community—the ‘republic of letters.’”⁷ Within its walls, amongst its shelves of carefully selected and organized volumes, the library created the physical and psychological space for privacy, where an elite few gained the liberty to retire, to study, to reflect, to cultivate learning and taste. Embodying individual autonomy in the possession of books read in silence and solitude, the gentleman’s private library epitomized ideals about the purpose of books that would become central to the modern ideology of private reading. Especially as it has taken root in modern systems of secondary and higher education, that ideology argued that reading was something best done apart from the social contexts and practices in which books obtain value and use in the everyday world.⁸

The essays in this volume survey the various shapes and sizes that libraries have assumed in the United States, analyzing some of the social settings in which reading came to be located beyond the private collections of ministers and gentlemen. As James Raven points out, early American libraries were missionary projects that justified the exercise of colonial power as the advancement of learning. As such, books were emblems of a complex performance of social authority which, both inside and outside of institutions such as the Charleston Library Society, helped to define the boundaries of “civilization” in the colonial hinterlands. The pleasures of homosocial conviviality—the cultivation of “fellow feeling,” “brotherhood,” and friendship with one’s peers—were a primary benefit of membership in these private societies. As they indulged formal and informal opportunities for sociability, meetings

ume on its eleventh page. Inscribing his intimacy with his collection, Locke’s signature also expressed his possession of learning, “knowledge accumulated in the books that the eye takes in a glance,” as Roger Chartier has noted. Roger Chartier, “The Practical Impact of Writing,” in *A History of Private Life: The Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. Chartier, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 140, 135.

7. Jessica Kross, “Mansions, Men, Women, and the Creation of Multiple Publics in Eighteenth-Century British North America,” *Journal of Social History* 33 (1999): 393. As Kross notes, “Studies had long been available to ministers and larger merchants, professions which required undisturbed space—for books, ledgers, and writing paraphernalia—and undisturbed time. During the eighteenth century merchants and lawyers might have offices away from their dwelling. But the mansion opened up a male space untied to or contaminated by profession. Here, away from clients, women, children, servants, and visitors, elite men came as close as any in the eighteenth century could come to the *vita contemplativa*, life devoted to thought and the intellect.”

8. On the ideology of private reading, see chap. 5 in Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale*, and Long, *Book Clubs*.

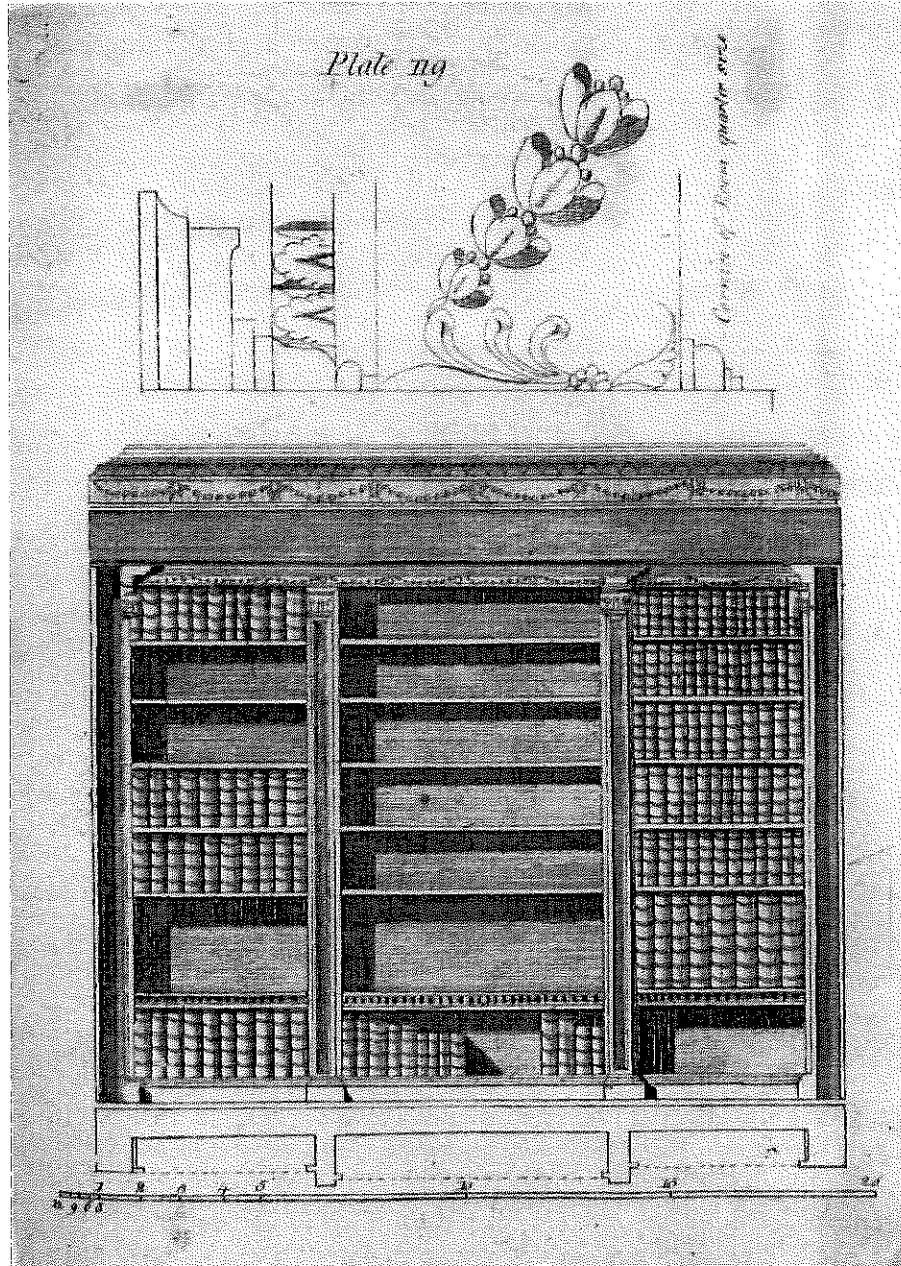


Figure I.1. Design for a library, from William Pain's *The Practical House Carpenter* (Boston, 1796). Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

might tend to drunken debauchery rather than the polite erudition members sought to project to outsiders. So too, library societies bound pleasures and prerogatives of colonial power with moral purpose. While many of these men were killing native Americans or trafficking in slaves, after all, they were expanding the reach of learning. Including works of ancient and modern classics, philosophy and natural science, while steering clear of religious controversy and “polemical divinity,” the collections built by these libraries linked scattered and isolated provincial elites to “an abstraction of community,” as Raven notes, “that reached back and forth across the English countryside, the Irish Channel, *and* the Atlantic.” Conduits of refined cosmopolitanism, eighteenth-century social libraries fostered political and cultural unity, affording members a structured pursuit of leisure in which “liberality”—license of conduct and thought—became rational exercises in rule-bound order.

The men who formed these societies were seeking not only to solidify their own aspirations and status, but to convert the personally anxious, socially fragile colonial enterprise into the permanent structure and impersonal offices of “culture.” Even before the American Revolution, however, these membership libraries were competing with another institution—the commercial circulating library—that offered different sorts of books and new ways of organizing the meaning and uses of reading in their local communities. As James Green demonstrates, in dense seaboard cities such as New York and Philadelphia, membership libraries faced competition from commercial libraries within a rapidly expanding marketplace of both readers and books. With the more timely availability of imported books, colonial booksellers “for the first time became purveyors of fashion.” While selling these books directly to the public, bookstores also operated circulating libraries that, like video rental stores of the late twentieth century, rented their wares to a wide public. By the 1760s, these circulating libraries helped to satisfy a widening demand for current novels and, by offering incentives for rapid exchange of books, fostered extensive reading practices. Although rental libraries were typically short-lived, their specialization in popular genres of entertainment, and their appeal to readers of modest means and especially women, pushed the more enduring social and subscription libraries to become more accessible and popular. In effect, they helped to commercialize reading as a form of leisure and entertainment, and lent seemingly ephemeral pleasures of the novel new social authority as objects of fashion and taste.

The large majority of libraries in early nineteenth-century America did not have separate buildings of their own, but rather operated informally out of peoples’ homes or in other spaces such as schoolhouses or churches. In some cities and towns, however, private membership or proprietary libraries

came to house their collections and activities in impressive buildings, that, as Michael Baenen argues in his essay on the Portsmouth Athenæum, straddled the categories of public and private by which scholars typically interpret both the act of reading and nineteenth-century social history more generally. The Athenæum, for example, seems to have been valued less for the opportunity to borrow books than for the chance to read newspapers and journals in a communal space. Although the library provided a clubby retreat for Portsmouth's mercantile and banking elites, its mission, rules of membership, and the content of its collection became objects of vigorous debate in the local press. In and around spaces such as the Athenæum, the public sphere in Portsmouth was not abstract and distant, but a highly personalized arena of partisan attack, which was more likely to generate vandalism and character assassination than any rational debate about central matters of civic concern. As they became a touchstone for larger class conflicts and political debates in the antebellum years, social libraries and other fraternal societies enlisted newly enfranchised white men into what de Tocqueville described as the "art of association," helping to transform American politics from an elite duty to a more egalitarian, sometimes dangerous sport of contestation.

In helping to expand the audience for print culture to new populations, library societies often challenged boundaries of class, gender, and race that had largely kept books as the expensive possession of learned elites. Excluded from other educational spaces and institutions, African Americans in the antebellum North used libraries to pursue classical ideals and objects of liberal education. As Elizabeth McHenry points out, the Phoenix Society of New York in the 1830s and similar institutions offered opportunities to acquire "a literary character," through which black Americans might combat widespread belief in their racial inferiority. As either an adjunct or the guiding purpose of these societies, libraries were primarily literary institutions, sponsoring classes and lectures as well as access to books and periodicals. There African Americans developed skills and values that derived from "exposure to texts and the rigorous critical analysis and discussions that they prompt." Rather than the solitary activities we now assume them to be, their literary practices had sociability as a primary motive and community building as its primary end. Reading in this context was a collaborative process, where people who were technically illiterate could listen and, as in the reading rooms of Portsmouth, engage in social and intellectual exchanges that, well into the nineteenth century, continued to define civic duty as a peculiarly literary enterprise. What literary societies created in space, newspapers sought to create over time: presenting miscellaneous "collections" of poetry and fiction, which would not only shepherd and elevate the tastes of the African American community, but

foster literary productions and cultural preservation by which black people might institutionalize a history of their own.

With the commercial expansion and consolidation of the print medium, social and membership libraries gave social form to the otherwise anonymous circulation of texts. "Any text creates a public by moving through multiple hands," as Michael Warner points out, and in developing spaces and strategies to facilitate and manage this movement of texts, libraries created physical communities of readers, bound not only by shared texts but by common practices of sociability, education, and amusement.⁹ Because their fortunes rose and quickly fell on their ability to attract and retain patrons and members, circulating and propriety libraries of all sorts sought to understand not only what books readers wanted, but what readers wanted from reading more generally within an expanding market for leisure and entertainment. In this sense, the social life of libraries in the United States is also the history of how new styles and motives for reading came to be institutionalized within the mass market of print. There is, after all, only so much room on the bookshelf. Whether the cosmopolitan fraternities of eighteenth-century letters, or circulating and public outfits devoted to tracking the popular taste, libraries institutionalized judgments about the value of reading by developing systems of selection and preservation: sorting the "improving" literature from "lumber," high from low, the scholarly from the popular. Balancing traditional associations of printed texts with scholarly erudition and genteel propriety with more modern uses for entertainment and status display, libraries were among the first institutions to confront the social effects of mass media.

Values of Reading and the Cultural Politics of Taste

As it created expansive, heterogeneous communities of readers, the development of a mass market for print entailed new contests over the form and value of reading. As private and commercial circulating libraries sold their services to women, for example, they came to be identified as female institutions that—by focusing on the provision of popular novels in particular—undermined the traditional moral and intellectual functions of reading itself.¹⁰ In an engraving by Endicott and Swett published in 1831, "The Circulating Library" is a woman, outfitted head to toe in books (see figure I.2). The image attests to the

9. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

10. As Jesse Shera observed some time ago, "The widespread criticism that arose in response to the circulating library was identical, both in origin and motive, with that brought to bear against the popularity of the novel." Jesse Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629–1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 152.

power of industrial production to make goods—duodecimo-sized novels no less than the calicoes and broadcloths that poured out of Manchester factories in the later eighteenth century—abundant and cheap. It also argues that, by expanding the audience for books, circulating libraries would displace the value of books from what they contained to where they moved within the changing tides of consumer fashion. The book, in short, would become just another commodity, whose promiscuous circulation among the lower or less learned classes would further unleash the irrational, feminine norms of envy and self-indulgence that moralists associated with the commercial revolution

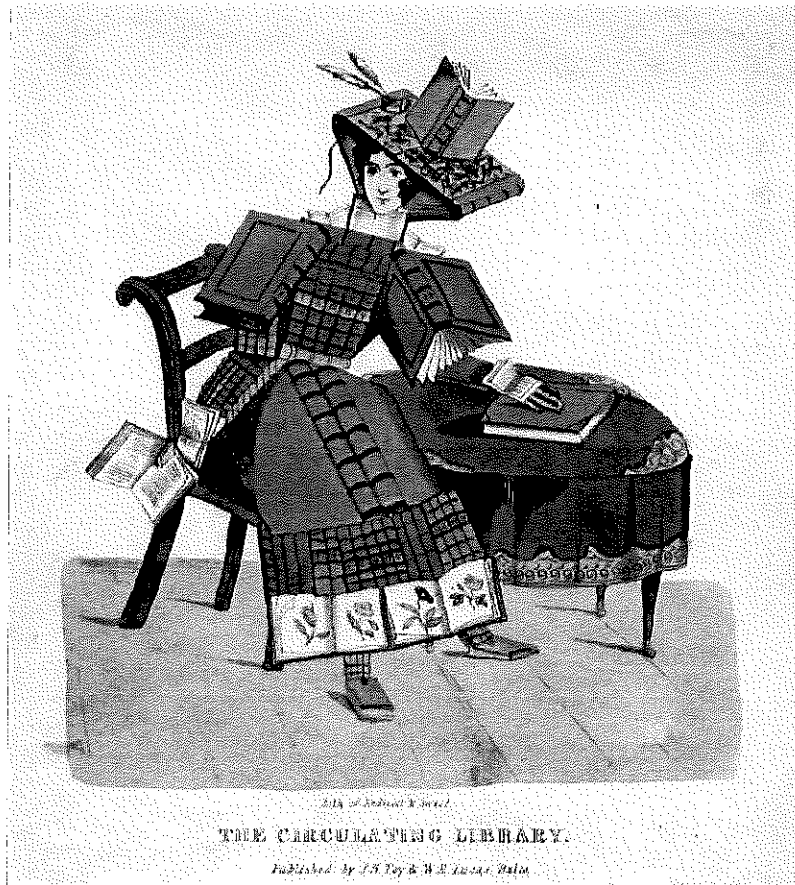


Figure 1.2. "The Circulating Library," by Endicott and Swett (1831). Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

in general. Undoing the manly virtues of thrift, prudence, and self-restraint on which the health of society depends, reading here becomes mainly another exercise in vanity, guided not by practical need but the merely ornamental, if amusing, wants of popular fashion. The reader's gaze is not raised to heaven, or lost in abstract, higher-order values of truth and wisdom, after all, but frankly and openly engaged with its anonymous audience, inviting the viewer's appraisal. Significantly, the figure depicted in the image is not actually reading, confirming a misogynist prejudice that women's mental inferiority made them unfit for intellectual exertion. A woman, in other words, would more likely wear a book than read it. Like choosing clothes and cultivating manners, reading is literally a habit one wears in public—meanings and pleasures cultivated not in the solitude of the gentleman's library, but within the mass market of goods and leisure.

As this image suggests, the history of libraries is also a history of taste: how Americans learned to navigate the material universe of mass production, to make judgments about the new practices, spaces, and communities that the widening availability of ever-cheaper printed objects brought in its wake. In my own chapter I consider the evolving symbolic meanings of public libraries, situating a Russian Jewish immigrant's experience of the Boston Public Library within larger contests for moral authority that emerged with a mass culture of print. Throughout the nineteenth century, municipal leaders embraced a variety of public spaces and institutions as instruments of social reform that would rescue Western civilization from the inequalities and materialism bred by industrial capitalism. The massive building campaigns underwritten by tax revenues and private philanthropy led to an unprecedented enlargement of social and symbolic functions of the library in American life. Centrally located in downtown business districts and new civic centers that were built as part of the City Beautiful movement, public libraries would provide convenient access for what was invariably referred to as "the masses," seeking to attract patrons to reading as an improving leisure activity, when they might otherwise go to theaters or saloons. At the same time, they sought to standardize and personalize the meaning of reading as a practice of citizenship, valuing books not as *goods*—private property that enforced educational and social distinctions—but a public good, whose benefit to community required popular circulation and use. Like the museums, concert halls, and parks built throughout the Progressive Era, public libraries became spaces of civic devotion, places where even poor immigrants might pursue the self-transformation and social mobility that continue to define the ethos of liberal individualism.

The huge buildings erected for both public and private libraries gave physi-

cal and bureaucratic permanence to elitist ideals of cultural achievement, housing collections of books and art in ostentatious monuments encrusted with tons of marble, fine glass, and mosaics. Private philanthropists provided three-quarters of the money used to construct major library buildings before 1894, wishing to be remembered for the American inheritance of Western civilization instead of their rapacious, sometimes violent pursuit of private gain.¹¹ Elizabeth Amann considers the imperial legacies and personal motives that guided the tastes of one philanthropist and collector, Archer Huntington, in founding the Hispanic Society of America—an institution without precedent, “devoted entirely to the study of a cultural other.” As Amann suggests, the Spanish manuscripts, rare books, and artifacts of folk life that Huntington acquired were in a sense spoils of the Spanish American war, which left the Spanish government too broke to prevent American plunder of its cultural patrimony. Like the collections of European arts and antiquities where J. P. Morgan, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and other plutocrats took refuge from the immigrant hordes transforming American cities, the Hispanic Society represented a trophy room for the global expansion of American empire that, following the 1898 defeat of Spain, would be military as well as financial. Unaccountable to taxpayers, or the pressure of ethnic constituencies that urban political machines brought to bear on public libraries, private research libraries like the Hispanic Society remained a sleepy, genteel preserve for students and dilettantes, “a select resort of bibliomaniacs,” as the *New York Herald* described the Lenox library in 1882, “conducted on the principle of doing the least good to the least number.”¹² Such institutions would become invaluable resources for students and scholars, but also mausoleums for Romantic ideals of culture, casting their imposing but anachronistic shadows over urban communities that were being continuously transformed by new immigrant populations.

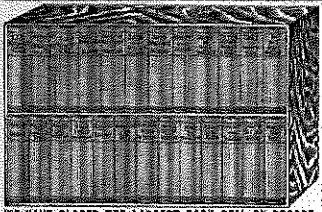
While private philanthropists borrowed from European models of connoisseurship, antiquarianism, and scholarship in amassing their collections, public libraries in the twentieth century would develop standards of literary taste that were shaped by the commercial marketplace. They would institutionalize new criteria for choosing and valuing books in ways that mirrored the agencies of what the German émigrés Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would call the modern “culture industry.” Indeed, as Janice Radway points out, we might think of Harry Scherman’s Book-of-the-Month Club as a kind of library, but one adapted to the particular exigencies of the mass

11. Donald Oehlerts, *Books and Blueprints: Building America's Public Libraries* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991), 17.

12. Cited in Phyllis Dain, *The New York Public Library* (New York Public Library, 1972), 12.

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3. The Story of the Bible	18. The Story of the Bible	33. The Story of the Bible	48. The Story of the Bible
4. The Story of the Bible	19. The Story of the Bible	34. The Story of the Bible	49. The Story of the Bible
5. The Story of the Bible	20. The Story of the Bible	35. The Story of the Bible	50. The Story of the Bible

Figure 1.3. One of several advertisements for “complete libraries” that appeared in a stationery catalogue of Sears, Roebuck, and Company (ca. 1903). Courtesy of Wilson Library, University of Minnesota.

production and distribution of consumer goods. Unlike the ready-made, off-the-shelf “libraries” marketed by publishers in the late nineteenth century and retailed on a national scale in the pages of the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue (see figure 1.3), however, the Book-of-the-Month Club sought to produce a readership through mail-order subscription in much the same way twentieth-century public libraries aimed to do by other means. Whether dispensed by the Club’s advertising of its recommendations and its judges’ personalities, or by female librarians installed at circulation desks at Carnegie libraries across the nation, personalized advice matched the offerings of the mass market of print to the personal needs and tastes of individual readers. Shaped by modern networks of professional expertise, both institutions qualified and differentiated diverse uses of reading in ways that conceived “the literary universe not as an organic, uniform, hierarchically ordered space but rather as a series of discontinuous, discrete, and noncongruent worlds.” Even in the separate white and black libraries of Durham, North Carolina, librarians increasingly turned to standards of “middlebrow” taste, creating communities of readers through institutional distribution of culture.

As they sought to develop and dignify a professional mission, modern

librarians would prescribe values for popular reading that reflected their own image of "the reader." In Door County, Wisconsin, no less than Durham, North Carolina, however, official narratives about the proper contents and purposes of reading would be negotiated at the local level. As Christine Pawley demonstrates, the introduction of bookmobiles in the 1920s had its genealogy in an ideology of public outreach that, as with selection criteria, children's reading rooms, and closed stack policies, sought to control the content of reading while popularizing its practice. But by carrying library service beyond the confines of physical space, bookmobiles also extended reading practices beyond the reach of professional ideology, where they would be shaped by the practical imperatives and personal relationships that bound otherwise anonymous, dispersed members of the "public" in actual communities. From the oral history of a driver named Bob, Pawley recovers the social networks and informal values that continue to shape the use and management of public libraries. Like more recent professional campaigns to "save librarianship" by getting rid of the library as a physical space, the provision of curbside service may have undercut the rationale for tax support of libraries as public goods.¹³ If the automobile fed suburban growth and white flight from urban centers more generally, the bookmobile made physical visits to city and town libraries unnecessary. In this sense, they contributed to larger patterns of decentralization endemic to the development of cultural institutions in the twentieth century, where cosmopolitan pleasures of leisure and entertainment that previously had been identified with the excitement of urban life came to be distributed through national systems and commercial networks of radio, movies, and television.¹⁴

13. Abigail Van Slyck, "The Librarian and the Library: Why Place Matters," *Libraries and Culture* 36 (2001): 519. On political contests waged over taxation for library service in post-World War II Wisconsin, see Christine Pawley, "Reading vs. the Red Bull: Cultural Constructions of Democracy and the Public Library in Cold War Wisconsin," *American Studies* 42 (2001): 87-103. On the private sponsorship of culture in a planned community in Celebration, Florida, see Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb, "The Celebration of Health in the Celebration Library," *ibid.*, 105-34.

14. As Neil Harris notes, new media allowed "Americans everywhere to duplicate the possibilities that only physical concentration had previously permitted." Art and culture which had once belonged exclusively to communities that could physically afford to house theaters, libraries, museums, and opera houses could, in the twentieth century, "be expended over the microphone or through the camera and sent anywhere electricity and receivers existed." As Harris notes, "One might speculate whether or not the middle classes would have fled in such numbers to suburbia without the protection of the media, the knowledge that physical removal did not mean empty leisure hours or abandonment of traditional amusements." Harris, *Cultural Excursions*, 26.

In twentieth-century America, popular images of the library as an institution would continue to be dominated by women. Where “the Circulating Library” cast the common reader as a woman, dramatizing the surrender of scholarly rectitude to the caprice of fashion, later critics ranging from Thorstein Veblen to Ann Douglass would, in similar ways, describe a feminization of culture, interpreting the styles and practices of mass consumption as a weakening of aesthetic and intellectual standards. But the image of women turning to circulating libraries for the latest novels speaks as well to the more specific gendering of the library as a modern institution. By 1933, some three-quarters of the nation’s public libraries owed their origins to the fundraising and organizational work of women’s clubs.¹⁵ As several essays in this volume demonstrate, women would fill the underpaid, lower ranks of the profession as reading room attendants and cataloguers. In the Progressive Era, as they catered to the needs of children and immigrants, women librarians would extend the separate sphere of nineteenth-century womanhood into public service, making domestic middle-class norms of spiritual nurture and maternal protection the lingua franca of community welfare. As a result, the library’s feminine cultural image would come to represent the threat of tradition, rather than change, to a modern cultural order oriented to the values of technological innovation and marketplace opportunism. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, musicals such as *The Music Man*, films such as *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Desk Set*, and novels such as *Main Street* would popularize a stereotype of spinsters enforcing silence in musty and quaint libraries, as though the printed book were itself vaguely old-fashioned—a vestige of small-town nostalgia and Victorian morality (see figure I.4).

New Media and the Organization of Knowledge

As we have seen, “library” is an amorphous term, a concept that describes a range of phenomena in the social history of reading. In its many institutional forms, the library itself is an artifact of the history of classification—both the outcome of and the engine for technological and social changes in the organization, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. The invention

15. Ann Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women’s Clubs, 1880–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 122. On the role of women and the development of children’s reading rooms in Carnegie libraries, see Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). On the rhetoric of feminization in professional discourse, see Jaclyn Eddy, “‘We Have Become Too Tender-Hearted’: The Language of Gender in the Public Library, 1880–1920,” *American Studies* 42 (2001): 135–54.

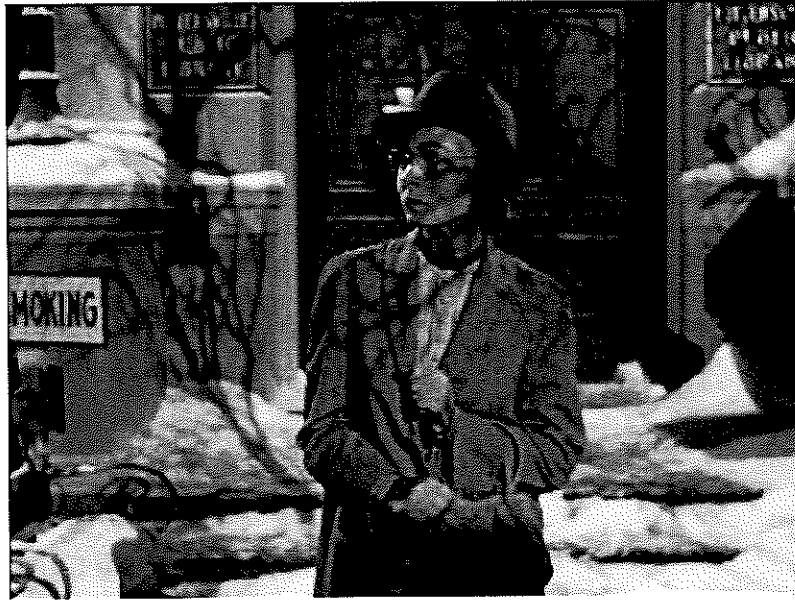


Figure 1.4. Donna Reed plays a modern stereotype of the librarian in Frank Capra's 1946 movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Because George Bailey was never born, his future wife Mary cowers before the gin joints and gambling dens of Pottersville after closing up the public library. "You're not going to like it," George's guardian angel warns. "She's a spinster!" Courtesy of Republic Pictures.

of movable type was, of course, the technical innovation for which the concept and functions of the modern library were designed. The densely "wired" quality of the digital age perhaps makes it easier to recognize the printed book as "MAJOR TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH," as a spoof press release that circulated on the Internet a few years ago suggested: a "Bio-optic organized knowledge device" that requires "no wires, no electric circuits, no batteries, nothing to be connected or switched on. It's so easy to use, even a child can operate it."¹⁶ In its compact size, portability, and durability the printed book made it easier to move and store large quantities of knowledge, while its regular type, high contrast legibility, and sequentially uniform pages eased reading and discontinuous sampling. Making the form of knowledge as indelible as ink on paper, as tangible as a volume one could move, manipulate, and mutilate, modern printing technologies made possible both the wide disper-

¹⁶. "Headline: MAJOR TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH," courtesy of Matthew Kirshenbaum.

sal of books and their accumulation and storage in central locations. If only in theory, printing and its allied technologies of distribution and collection made it feasible to gather all human knowledge in one place.

The advent of the printed book stoked fantasies of universal libraries that are as ancient as the Tower of Babel and the library at Alexandria. Throughout the early modern period, scholars and publishers compiled anthologies, catalogues, bibliographies, compendiums, and encyclopedias, both as practical tools of scholarly communication and erudition, and as thought experiments, utopian campaigns to conquer a universe of knowledge that with time only grew more unwieldy in scale and esoteric in scope. As they sought to balance Enlightenment ideals of the comprehensive unity of knowledge with practical limitations on acquiring, storing, and circulating books, American librarians would seek to design technologies for mass distribution of culture that were intellectual as well as material. In 1793, in the first American guide to collecting, the Harvard librarian Thaddeus Harris declared, "books have become so exceedingly numerous as to require uninterrupted attention, through more than the longevity of an antediluvian, to peruse them all." For anyone who was not a professional scholar, scarce leisure time was "interrupted by the necessary avocations," and contracted by the "unavoidable duties and cares of life. Since but *few* books can be perused by the generality of people, they should be those only which are *most excellent*." Harris specifically directed his advice on building a "small and cheap library" not to the learned, but "common readers," "at a distance in the country," with "few opportunities for knowing the characters even of books which have been long in use."¹⁷ Through such guides to reading, he and the librarians who followed him would seek to institutionalize literary taste for mass audiences: to transform reading from a special expertise, founded on ownership and proximity of books, to a *productive* and efficient form of leisure within what F. B. Perkins in 1876 called the "trackless, if not a howling wilderness" of the "printed records of past and present human knowledge and mental activity."¹⁸

The revolution in print unfolded with the development of modern infrastructures of knowledge: new technologies for the organization, preservation, and management of library collections. Following the example of Henri Labrousse's construction of the Sainte Geneviève (1843) and the Bibliothèque

17. Thaddeus M. Harris, "Introduction," *A Selected [sic] Catalogue of some of the most esteemed publications in the English Language. Proper to form a social library: with an Introduction upon the Choice of Books* (Boston, 1793).

18. F. B. Perkins, "On Professorships of Books and Reading," in *Public Libraries in the United States of America. Part I* (1876; rpt. Champaign: University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library Science, 1965), 235.

Nationale (1850s) in France, American libraries were among the first public buildings to use self-supporting iron skeletons, which made it possible to build huge reading rooms and multiple-level bookshelves in one fireproof location.¹⁹ Modern libraries depended on new mechanical designs for the storage of books, but also on the creation of uniform standards and processes for managing and retrieving their expanding collections: a complex infrastructure of work practices and organizational routines that would become part of the behind-the-scenes operations of bureaucratic institutions.²⁰ The card catalogue, for instance, was an innovation in information technology that, as Barbara Mitchell reminds us, was integral to the growth of library collections and their new mission of public access. In place of bound catalogues that were out of date as soon as they were printed, these new catalogues offered librarians a flexible but permanent record of acquisitions that would eventually be entrusted to the unsupervised searches of individual patrons. As Mitchell shows, the creation of the first public card catalogues in the Boston area was subsidized by the labor of educated middle-class women. Bringing their skills in writing and foreign languages to the time-intensive gathering and scripting of catalogue cards, these women enabled Harvard and other major libraries to maintain an atmosphere of genteel propriety in what had become the mass production of bibliographic information. Their low wages and confinement to largely manual skills of copying and filing helped to pave the way for the emergence of the pink-collar sector, the women secretaries and typists who by the early twentieth century would staff the lower ranks of business and government offices.

The space books occupy is cognitive as well as physical, those technologies we design to organize and manage the diversity and reach of knowledge, in both its present and future states. By the 1920s, women were finding wider opportunities for library work that went beyond the scripting of catalogue cards. Nella Larsen and Marianne Moore, who were both trained as librarians and employed in branches of the New York Public Library, also found an alternative education in the institutional aesthetics and gender politics of classification. As Karin Roffman asks, what would American modernism look like if it were identified not with the university training of male writers such as T. S. Eliot, but with the formation of female authors by public libraries? For critics like George Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks, the aggressive public

19. Ochierts, *Books and Blueprints*, 22, 23.

20. The technology of classification is constituted by "work practices, beliefs, narratives, and organizational routines." Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 319.

outreach and middlebrow values of public libraries made them emblematic of the anti-intellectual, feminizing drift of American culture more generally. As they encountered Melvil Dewey's library methods and acquired experience in the practical work of library services, however, Larsen and Moore came to see how cultural authority is produced through systems of rationality. Throughout her career, Moore would use lists, categories, and indexes to generate experiments in poetic form, while Larsen would make the resistance to status categories of race, class, and gender a primary theme in novels such as *Quicksand* and *Passing*. For both, literary art itself was a self-conscious system of knowledge, involving intellectual patterns of coherence and selection. Like their peers in New York's avant-garde, they also saw art as a form of social experimentation that could challenge the systems of knowledge that shape human institutions of education, marriage, and individualism. In making spaces for themselves and their work outside an emerging system of cultural capital, Moore and Larsen helped to develop a tradition of bohemian skepticism that remains a major legacy of literary modernism.

As it crowded the stacks in library buildings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knowledge turned out to have a limited shelf life—or rather, with the evolution of media technology, to have outgrown the capacity of the print medium to store and disseminate information with the speed and efficiency demanded by modern service economies and what Manuel Castells terms “the network society.” New technologies enabled the transfer of printed texts to new formats, and made the once-primary function of the library, *to collect*, itself obsolete. In telling the story of Robert Binkley and the Joint Committee on Materials for Research, Ken Carpenter suggests how photographic technology sparked new efforts in the 1930s to design and sponsor new institutions and forms of scholarship. The advent of microfilm helped to speed a transformation already under way of academic institutions into centers for the advancement of learning, bound by specialized standards of training and inquiry, disciplinary associations and professional organizations, and the dissemination of a common research archive. Microfilm would preserve and make accessible newspapers, periodicals, card catalogues, and scholarly publications, but also manuscript materials, images, and imprints that had been preserved by libraries because of their uniqueness or rarity. Especially with the growing threat of totalitarianism, however, it also promised, if only for Binkley, to promote democratic freedom by fostering new systems of inquiry—to create a national design for culture as a community enterprise. By freeing research from what Binkley called “the tyranny of print”—a paper tyranny that, following the use of wood pulp in the later nineteenth century, was already proving highly perishable—microfilm could

decentralize the control of communication on which fascism depended. It might also blur the classification of expertise on which modern institutions of authority depended by making, as Carpenter observes, the writing of literature and the family or local history “as common throughout America as local art shows or amateur theatricals.”

Until the twentieth century, one of the library’s primary functions—to collect and preserve materials about the past—remained safely linked to the apparent stability of the print medium. As publication processes, research collections, and catalogue systems were adapted to microfilm as well as electronic and digital formats for the Internet, however, the very presence and shape of the historical archive have become newly protean. As a result, Roy Rosenzweig argues, the future of the past—the methods, concepts, and objects with which we practice historical inquiry across the humanities and social sciences—has become uncertain. The rapid obsolescence of computer and software technology that brought information into the electronic era has left us with countless records that literally cannot be saved or read. Given the volatility and fragility of technological innovation, where will scholars one hundred years from now turn for evidence about our present moment, and what standards will they use to navigate the sheer quantity of data and to evaluate its authenticity? The collections libraries assembled and stored throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were themselves highly selective, unrepresentative of ephemeral materials and experiences that, for reasons of convenience or ideology, never became a part of the public patrimony. As the virtual library ushers in what Rosenzweig describes as “a fundamental paradigm shift from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance,” scholars have the opportunity to reexamine the boundaries between experts and amateurs, objective facts and subjective tastes, study and leisure, by which the reading of textual documents itself was institutionalized as a practice of history.

ADAPTING NEW technologies to its evolving forms and functions, the modern library embraced a more general faith in progress—that the library, as an institution, can be an engine of social and scientific modernization. In Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward* (1881), for instance, set in the year 2000, the protagonist makes a visit to the Boston Public Library. There is, however, no description of a building, circulation or reference desks, or reading rooms: the library offers only “the temptation of the luxurious leather chairs with which it was furnished,” “book-lined alcoves” in which to “rest and chat awhile.” The narrator then compares the “glorious liberty that reigns in the public libraries of the twentieth century” to “the intolerable management of those of the nineteenth century, in which the books were jealously railed away from the people,” to be obtained with “time and red tape calcu-

lated to discourage any ordinary taste for literature.”²¹ As Bellamy suggests, the library of the future would be built on faith that technological progress would reduce the cumbersome and unreliable factors of human labor in the timely delivery of books.

Now that we have passed the year 2000, Bellamy’s oblique image of the library of the future offers a remarkably prescient image of the domestication of knowledge. Following the development of integrated circuitry and the invention of the now ever-shrinking microchip in 1968 by Robert Noyce, the very presence of the library as a physical and social space, with all its antiquated and cumbersome processing of people and paper, has become peripheral to the storage and distribution of information. As with the Library of Congress’s American Memory Project or Google’s virtual library, entire archives of books, periodicals, and documents are becoming available to readers, to be searched and read over the Internet from the ease and comfort of one’s home. “The library of the future is inscribed where all texts can be summoned, assembled, and read—on a screen,” as Roger Chartier notes. As a library without walls, electronic access to texts has made the Enlightenment dream of the library truly virtual, connecting “the closed world of any finite collection and the infinite universe of all the texts ever written.”²²

And yet, as all of the essays in this volume demonstrate, libraries in the United States have served needs and aspirations that go beyond the physical problems of where and how to store information. Despite the advent of the Internet and the opening of Google’s online archive, libraries continue to occupy physical space in thousands of communities across the United States, and to furnish the primary infrastructure for our individual and collective experience of culture.²³ (See figure 1.5.) So what, then, is a library? How have libraries fostered communities of readers, and shaped the experience of reading in particular communities? How did the development of modern libraries alter the boundaries of private and public life? *Institutions of Reading* offers at once a social history of literacy and leisure, an intellectual history of librarians’ innovations in mass distribution of printed books and periodicals, and a cultural history of the organization of knowledge in an increasingly diverse urban society.

21. See chap. 15 of Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: From 2000 to 1887*, at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/BELLAMY/ch15.html>.

22. Roger Chartier, “Libraries without Walls,” in *Future Libraries*, ed. Block and Hess, 48.

23. As Wayne Wiegand points out, more people visit libraries than public parks, movie theaters, and other popular venues for recreation. See Wayne Wiegand, “To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies Can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User,” *Library Quarterly* 73 (2003): 369–82.



Figure 1.5. The new downtown Minneapolis Public Library, designed by Cesar Pelli, opened on May 20, 2006. Much of the building's \$138 million cost was paid for by a 2000 tax referendum. Traditional features of public library architecture such as a children's room, open-stack bookshelves, and reference services are incorporated with the soaring atrium of a "library commons," working fireplaces, and over 300 computers for free Internet access. Photos by Thomas Augst.

