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Libraries as Third Spaces for Children

Education in young children is often seen as a relationship between the learner and their parents, and the learner and their teacher. However, prominent child development theorists suggest that the place where children learn can be considered a third "teacher"—this place nurtures and provokes the curiosity of young children and sparks play and learning. Public libraries, if designed in such a way, are well-positioned to address this need, creating lifelong relationships with children and their caregivers and providing children with opportunities to help them grow and develop.

OLDENBURG'S THIRD SPACE

In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg posited that to be emotionally healthy, every person needs three spaces: the home, the workplace, and a third space where people voluntarily come together, not for one specific purpose, but for a variety of purposes that interest them individually.[1] Third spaces are anchors of community life, facilitating and fostering broadly creative interactions. It is in these spaces where communities are built. Third spaces allow individuals to relax in public, providing them with opportunities to encounter familiar faces and make new acquaintances.

Public libraries, based on Oldenburg's definition, are an obvious third space. However, not all individuals who visit the space have the same interests and needs, hence the challenge of libraries and the incredible value they bring to the public when they are well-designed and able to serve the diverse needs of their customers. Children present a very specific subset of the public library's customer base. They have unique needs compared with adults. For example, children are always learning, so one cannot separate leisure from learning in children's spaces. For children, the third space needs to be a place where they can play and express themselves,

free of prejudice, where no one group is prioritized over another—a place where each child has agency.

Therefore, in the context of children's spaces, public libraries need to use great care to design children's libraries specifically for children; but how? In short: public libraries can look beyond their four walls to find guidance and inspiration. Reggio Emilia is a widely known and well-respected educational method focused on preschool and primary education. Its principles, while rooted in the classroom, can help guide public libraries as they design third spaces that balance play and learning.

REGGIO EMILIA: AN OVERVIEW

The Reggio Emilia Learning Method offers a similar viewpoint to Oldenburg's third space theory in that it takes careful note of the space as an important factor in community building. Specifically, this educational approach considers the physical space as a partner in children's learning. Founder Loris Malaguzzi described the space where children learn as the "third teacher." Overall, Reggio Emilia spaces are rich learning environments designed to be both aesthetically and intellectually stimulating, while also respecting the rights, interests, and needs of the individuals who use the space. Reggio Emilia teachers want children to make friends and parents to feel welcome. Reggio Emilia teachers prioritize advocacy, such that anyone who enters an environment for young children will recognize that something of importance and value is taking place.[2]

There is a congruence between Oldenburg's third space theory and the concept of space being the third teacher. Both ideas address how the design and content of the space make its occupants feel and act.

REGGIO EMILIA DESIGN ELEMENTS

Reggio Emilia spaces are distinctive as they build upon specific design elements that give them a unique look. One motif is the use of reflective surfaces, encouraging children to see themselves engaged in activity. Natural elements are repeated throughout, while plants and tree branches bring the serenity of the forest indoors. The careful placement of illumination focuses children's attention on a specific task or an item, such as a light table or by spotlighting interesting objects. Aesthetically, wooden accents and subtle references to the local topography help nurture a sense of rootedness and calm. The inside environment of a Reggio space is designed for self-guided, hands-on play and exploration, with thoughtfully displayed objects and activities that subtly entice children's ingenuity. Elements such as furniture and storage are flexible and can be moved around to adapt to the needs of customers and staff alike. Children explore these carefully curated spaces independently, leading with their thoughts, feelings, and questions. In being able to choose where they want to focus their attention, children begin to understand themselves.[3]

In addition to these core design elements, there are four key Reggio Emilia principles that public libraries can leverage in designing their own spaces for children: agency, equalization, play, and making learning visible. The end result is a space reflecting Reggio's powerful image of the child as being "rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children."[4]

The Importance of Agency

Children's developing independence is a priority in both third spaces and Reggio Emilia spaces. In *Haircuts by Children and Other Evidence for a New Social Contract*, Darren O'Donnell explores the relationship between children and the performance arts company, Mammalian Diving Reflex, through the tenets of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[5] The company's commitment to children's freedom of expression means that they refrain from telling children how to behave. Instead, they inform children how their behavior is affecting others and allow them the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions. This respect towards children demonstrates the company's belief that children are valued collaborators with much to contribute.

Ontario Reggio Association President Karyn Callaghan describes children as able communicators, collaborators, and meaning makers who are forming relationships every day with people and materials. Callaghan states that children are "capable of empa-

thy, whimsy, sensitivity, and joy" and the spaces they inhabit should reflect this through "thoughtfully organized, aesthetically rich, open-ended materials that invite children to communicate their ideas in many ways."[6] As democratic organizations that listen to their customers, can libraries strive for this level of commitment to their youngest customers?

Public libraries, like other playful spaces, are designed to balance safety and creative exploration. Children's areas are often closed off from the greater library, providing freedom for younger children to explore on their own—even babies can show agency because the space is designed for their specific needs. They can safely move from one activity to another: crawl to a bookcase and choose a book, pull themselves up to a window, or sit safely in an area designed just for "me." For parents, this careful design creates a sense of comfort and familiarity which initiates a lifelong connection to the library beginning with their child's infancy, the time where most library customers are offered their first library card.

At the library, young children can choose which activities to pursue, from reading books to playing online games with friends. When presented with interactions designed for their level of development, young children can attain a feeling of mastery and empowerment. Over time, they gradually learn library norms and develop their own skills as library users. This, in turn, makes parents feel even more comfortable and satisfied with allowing their children to express their growing independence at the library. Older school-age children may choose to go to the library after school instead of going home alone. For most parents, it offers peace of mind to know that their children may be finishing their homework in a safe, fun, and trusted environment. Here again, the expression of the library as a third teacher can be borrowed from the Reggio Emilia method, championing children as the drivers of their own learning.

The Importance of Equalization

Equality and accessibility are key principles of public libraries. Equalization is even more important for children's library service in the context of the third space. In Alberta, Canada, for example, one out of every six children experiences poverty.[7] Preschool education is not publicly funded and therefore inaccessible to many families, despite the proven benefits to children, families, and greater society. In *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation*, economist Robert G. Lynch found that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, benefit from high quality preschool programs. Children who attend these programs require less special education and are less likely to repeat a grade or need child welfare services. As adults, their incomes are higher and they are less likely to engage in criminal activity, thereby reducing criminality in society overall.[8] By offering high quality early literacy programs to preschoolers for free, public libraries increase their value as third spaces for children, particularly relative to other third spaces in the community that vie for children's time and attention and often charge an entrance fee, such as parks and museums.

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The Importance of Play

Play allows children to take initiative, to test their physical and mental limits and to explore relationships of power and questions about the world around them.[9] Play is so incredibly important for children that the United Nations lists it as one of the basic rights of every child.[10] Through play, children use words and symbols to transform the world around

them. They create worlds where they can act out scenarios with control over conflict and its resolution. There are innumerable types of play that children engage in and express themselves through; these expressions are often described in Reggio Emilia as the "hundred languages of children."[11] Children need to be presented with a broad variety of play experiences that challenge them and provide comfort. If children's areas are intentionally designed and equipped to encourage play, exploration, and socialization by children at different ages, stages, and abilities, the early learning benefits and potential as a third space multiply. Children's libraries provide children with the opportunity to interact with, and observe other children playing with, high quality toys, puzzles, games, and technology—many of which they may not have at home. The learning that occurs through play is critical to children's development. One way to elevate its importance is to demonstrate (to children, their families, and other customers) the result of children's play through careful observation and annotation in the form of documentation.

The Importance of Making Learning Visible

In the Reggio Emilia method, children's families and their home life are extremely important. Photographic reference to children's families are used in both the design of a space and the programming that animates it. Families see themselves represented in the space because their own images are the ones adorning the walls. Reggio Emilia method describes "making learning visible" as a process that involves taking photographs of children's work or play, annotating them, and showcasing them throughout the space. The displays can include children's creations, photographs from projects, and examples of dialogue. These convey to the children that their efforts, intentions, and ideas are taken seriously. This method of documentation can be used in children's libraries to communicate how children and their families are included, regarded, and respected. It also allows children to reflect on their own work and on the work of other children. Documentation of process is still a novel concept in libraries and may appear time-consuming at first. However, the examination of work in the different stages of progress reveals a child's growing understanding of themselves, an understanding of a subject, and showcases library staff's understanding of children's learning through play. Furthermore, this practice celebrates learning and play and demonstrates that the library is invested in and respects children's abilities and achievement.

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BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Children's library spaces should embody the above principles in order to exemplify third spaces for children. Third spaces are foundations of healthy and thriving communities. Third spaces are a venue for all community members to come alive and express themselves without judgment. For children, it is in this space where they can develop a sense of self, where not one child is more important than the next. Here, all children have equal access to play, resources, and information. Through careful design elements, many of which can be borrowed from the Reggio Emilia method, libraries can ensure that their spaces are primed to meet the needs of even their youngest customers. Unlike other third spaces for adults, the embodiment of the space as a theatre for both play and learning is extremely important because it is through play that children connect with learning. Play comes in many different forms

and children will need challenging, playful, and relaxing spaces in which to test out their ideas about the world. Spaces can be inspiring and promote relationships among children and between families. The careful, quiet observation of children's play and learning can be showcased to not only make visible the process of learning, but also showcase the respect and care that the library holds for children. Through documentation, customers without children can begin to understand why play is important and broaden their view of children as valuable community members. The public library can be that third space for children and families if it can build a strong, ongoing relationship with the child—one that is oriented around purposeful design of the physical space. Through careful curation, the space itself will explain to children and families how the organization regards them.

EDMONTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Based in Alberta, Canada, the Edmonton Public Library (EPL) is a library system with 21 branches serving a city of almost one million residents. Although EPL hasn't formally adopted the Reggio Emilia method in the redesign and evaluation of new and existing children's spaces, its principles have been useful in framing an approach to these changes—one that carefully considers the library's relationship with children, their families, and library staff, while also acknowledging the powerful learning potential of the physical space.

Opened in September 2020, the flagship Shelley Milner Children's Library at the revitalized Stanley A. Milner Library downtown branch has been designed from the ground up with these principles in mind. The physical space, in many ways, mirrors a Reggio Emilia classroom with subtle references to nature and the local topography and playful elements to inspire and challenge children. There is a separate space for babies and toddlers, filled with age-appropriate, playful elements, including soft blocks to climb and a crawling obstacle course resembling the rolling foothills and tall grasses of the prairies that surround the city. Here, children exercise their sensory skills and practice physical literacy. For older children, a tactile map of the city made by The Burgeon Group enables them to physically plot out their journey to the library. Bright, colorful feature walls encourage children to engage in the available learning opportunities, from cause-and-effect activities to matching games and sensory experiences, including motion sensors that activate lighting and storm sounds from the clouds above. Loose parts are intentionally set out on tables, designed as provocations to spark curiosity, creativity, and to practice fine motor skills.

Overall, the Shelley Milner Children's Library provides opportunities for children to develop important twenty-first century skills without even realizing it. Interactives and loose parts play foster skills in critical thinking and more often than not, collaboration. Children's conversations with caregivers and staff about their experiences and discoveries help them develop speech and language skills. By combining learning with play, the new children's library will be an important community hub where Edmonton families can learn, connect, and grow for years to come.

Other EPL branches are experiencing meaningful changes as well. The concept of children as experts in their own learning and preferences is showcased in the Kid Picks program, which calls for children to promote books and other materials they enjoy to other children. Library staff regularly collaborate with children in a prototyping process that applies design thinking to the implementation of interactive activities during their development. For example, the development of a game used to teach basic words in Cree, an Indigenous language, involved observations and conversations with children in the space. EPL also avoids restricting behaviors in children, instead introducing elements within the environment to guide actions. For example, EPL needs to have adequate acoustic treatments and directional speakers in branches because children gather in large groups around sound exhibits and gaming computers. This way, these popular activities that will inspire and delight young customers in joyful collaboration can be controlled within the environment, rather than by restricting behavior.

Like many public libraries, EPL offers a variety of free early literacy classes for parents and young children from 0-5 years old to help fill the need for early literacy programming. These classes advance the third space relationship between children and the library. During classes, the importance of early literacy is continually reinforced while parents learn tools they can practice at home. Library staff are available to help and offer suggestions based on careful research, but ultimately promote parents as the child's first and best teacher. The classes allow parents to socialize, to take part in a routine, but also to take a break. Over time, children's independence flourish as they continue to participate in classes. EPL has also started experimenting with documentation alongside loose parts play. For example, a dress form mannequin was brought into one of the children's areas to be adorned with a variety of fabrics by the children. The activity was so popular that it has since been recreated at other library locations. What was once seen as a space of potential disorder is now considered a thoughtful, creative space for exploration. Library staff, hesitant at first, have used the perspective of documentation of process to expand their concept of children's learning through play. Several branches have also developed scavenger hunt activities, encouraging children to explore areas of the library beyond the children's area. This helps them feel comfortable throughout the library and gives them the confidence to access resources in other areas. Furthermore, children have a chance to develop a relationship with staff in spaces outside the children's area, as well as with other adult customers.

As EPL's experience has shown, public libraries have immense potential to serve as a third space for their customers. Moreover, libraries should intentionally strive to fill this role—especially in the context of children's libraries. If children perceive the library as a welcoming space for themselves and their families, where they are treated equally; if it is clear the library is set up to meet their needs, interests, and abilities, and they are given permission to freely explore and contribute to the space; if it is conveyed, through stated and unstated means, that they are valued and considered capable; if all of these are true, then these children are more likely to develop a strong and lasting relationship with the library and enjoy a lifetime of learning. The incredible value that a library can bring to a child's life further cements its position as a vital physical space in any community. PL

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