

Report - January 2013

Branches of Opportunity

New York City's public libraries are serving more people in more ways than ever before, and have become an increasingly critical part of the city's human capital system; but they have been undervalued by policymakers and face growing threats in today's digital age.

by David Giles

This is an excerpt. Click here to read the full report (PDF).

As more and more New Yorkers turn to digital books, Wikipedia and other online tools for information and entertainment, there is a growing sense that the age of the public library is over. But, in reality, New York City's public libraries are more essential than ever.

Far from becoming obsolete, the city's three public library systems—Brooklyn, Queens and New York, which encompasses the branches in Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island—have experienced a 40 percent spike in the number of people attending programs and a 59 percent increase in circulation over the past decade. During that time, 48 different branches citywide have at least doubled annual attendance at programs, ranging from computer literacy classes to workshops on entrepreneurship, while 18 have more than doubled their circulation.

These trends are grounded in the new realities of today's knowledge economy, where it is difficult to achieve economic success or enjoy a decent quality of life without a range of basic literacy, language and technological skills. A distressingly large segment of the city's population lacks these basic building blocks, but the public library has stepped in, becoming the second chance human capital institution. No other institution, public or private, does a better job of reaching people who have been left behind in today's economy, have failed to reach their potential in the city's public school system or who simply need help navigating an increasingly complex world.

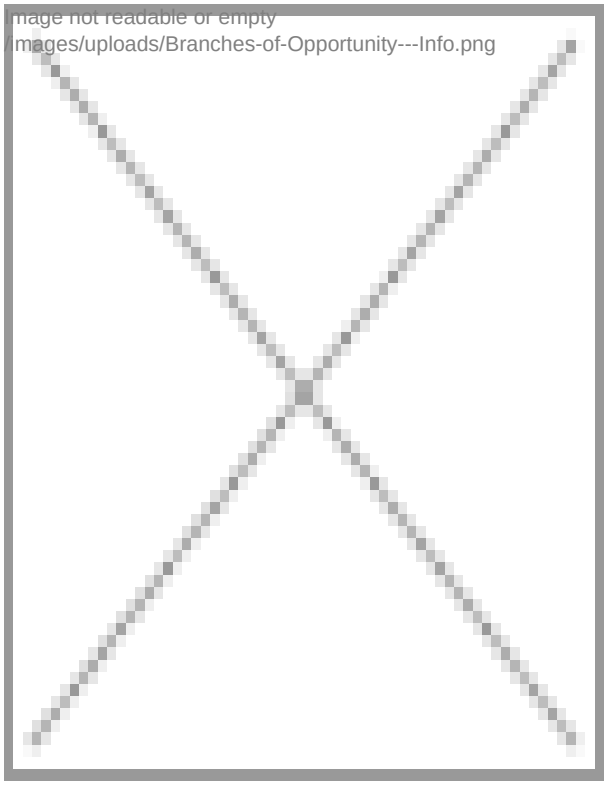
Although they are often thought of as cultural institutions, the reality is that the public libraries are a key component of the city's human capital system. With roots in nearly every community across the five boroughs, New York's public libraries play

a critical role in helping adults upgrade their skills and find jobs, assisting immigrants assimilate, fostering reading skills in young people and providing technology access for those who don't have a computer or an Internet connection at home.

The libraries also are uniquely positioned to help the city address several economic, demographic and social challenges that will impact New York in the decades ahead—from the rapid aging of the city's population (libraries are a go-to resource for seniors) and the continued growth in the number of foreign-born (libraries are the most trusted institution for immigrants) to the rise of the freelance economy (libraries are the original co-working spaces) and troubling increase in the number of disconnected youth (libraries are a safe haven for many teens and young adults).

Despite all of this, New York policymakers, social service leaders and economic officials have largely failed to see the public libraries as the critical 21st century resource that they are, and the libraries themselves have only begun to make the investments that will keep them relevant in today's digital age.

One way or another, New York needs to better leverage its libraries if it is to be economically competitive and remain a city of opportunity.



This report takes an in-depth look at the role that New York's public libraries play in the city's economy and quality of life and examines opportunities for libraries to make even greater contributions in the years ahead. In the course of our research, we visited more than a dozen library branches in every borough and interviewed well over 100 individuals, including advocates for immigrants and the elderly, librarians and library administrators, education experts, nonprofit social service providers, entrepreneurs, economic development leaders and library patrons. As part of the report, which was funded by the Charles H. Revson Foundation, we also reached out to innovative thinkers in the technology, publishing and design communities in order to better assess how libraries might leverage structural changes in the economy to innovate and improve.

The idea that the iPad or the Internet will come to replace the library as the dominant mode of accessing books and other information is a deeply intuitive one.The Internet is without question the single biggest driver of economic growth and change in recent history, and the number of services that rely on it has grown exponentially in just a few years. E-book sales, which already comprise nearly a fifth of all book sales, are growing exponentially, and a number of prominent universities and non-

profits are building out sophisticated online learning programs. With so many resources readily available online, it is not surprising that some question whether there is still a role for public libraries.

Our research suggests that this couldn't be further from the truth, just as the widespread claim in the early 1990s that telecommunications technologies would render cities obsolete has proved to be way off the mark. Indeed, we find that, in today's information economy, libraries have only gotten more important, not less.

"The libraries are much more important today than ever," says Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at NYU. "They get old people during the day and they get young people after school. [In many city neighborhoods] they are now the only institution where kids can go after school that is safe."

Data collected from the city's three public library systems certainly suggest that libraries are increasingly important in New Yorkers' lives. In Fiscal Year 2011, the city's 206 public library branches greeted over 40.5 million visitors, or more than all of the city's professional sports teams and major cultural institutions combined. They offered more than 117,000 different public programs, a 24 percent increase since 2002. More tellingly, the number of attendees at those programs shot up by 40 percent, from 1.7 million in 2002 to 2.3 million in 2011. Although some have questioned the need for material collections, circulation is up 59 percent, going from 43 million materials at the beginning of the decade to 69 million—another record. Meanwhile, libraries answered 14.5 million reference queries in 2011, and library patrons logged 9.3 million sessions on library computers and 2.2 million sessions on their own computers over library WiFi networks.

In the Bronx, the borough with both the highest poverty rate and unemployment rate, 19 of the 35 branches at least doubled their attendance since 2002, while nine branches did the same with their circulation numbers. "The libraries are of critical importance to under-served youth and adults," says Denise Scott, the managing director of the New York City program for the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC).

Overall, high performing branches across the five boroughs include large regional libraries such as Brooklyn Central, Kings Highway, Mid-Manhattan, the Bronx Library Center and of course Flushing, which has one of the highest branch circulations in the U.S. But dozens of much smaller neighborhood branches across the city attract tens of thousands of patrons as well, including High Bridge, Forest Hills, Jackson Heights and McKinley Park. Despite having only 8,000 square feet, circulation at McKinley Park in Brooklyn last year topped out at over 950,000 materials, making it the seventh most popular branch for checkouts in the city.

In terms of basic user metrics like circulation and programming, New York's libraries compare favorably with other big city systems. Out of 25 large urban library systems that we consider in this report, Brooklyn ranks first, NYPL second and Queens third in total number of programs offered. And, on a per capita basis, only Columbus provides more programs than Brooklyn (ranked No. 2), while Queens and the NYPL rank No. 5 and No. 7 respectively.

Meanwhile, New York's three systems all experienced higher program attendance levels than any other system except Toronto. In fact, the program attendance at the city's top five branches in that category—Brooklyn Central, Kings Highway, Flushing, The Bronx Library Center and Forest Hills—was higher than the system-wide attendance in 12 other cities, including Charlotte, Detroit, Jacksonville, Baltimore, Boston and Phoenix. The New York systems do less well in terms of circulation per capita. Yet out of 25 systems, both Queens and NYPL are still in the top ten, while Brooklyn comes in at No. 11.

Although this report includes a host of new data demonstrating how New Yorkers use libraries, the importance of the libraries cannot be measured with numbers alone. Interviews with community-based leaders make it clear that public libraries have a unique strength: No other institution in New York serves so many different people in so many different ways.



For instance, at a time when 37 percent of the city's population is foreign born, around 60 percent of residents are either immigrants or children of immigrants and nearly a quarter of the population is less than totally fluent in English, the public libraries are an unmatched resource for assimilating these New Yorkers and giving them opportunities to succeed. Of the ten branches in the city with the highest circulation, six are in neighborhoods in which immigrants make up a disproportionate share of the population: Flushing, Queens Central (in Jamaica), Kings Highway, Elmhurst, McKinley Park and Fresh Meadows.

While nonprofit organizations and government offices also attempt to serve this population, libraries reach more of them and do it more effectively in large part because libraries are arguably the one institution that immigrants trust. Libraries offer English for those who are not native English speakers, preparation for the U.S. citizenship test and computer literacy classes, many in foreign languages such as Spanish, Chinese and Urdu. In Midwood, Brooklyn, the popular Kings Highway branch has two Russian speaking librarians who not only field questions about books but help both recent and older immigrants learn basic computer skills.

> "There have been many immigrant waves in America's history and many different institutions that helped them assimilate. In this age, I think libraries are the leading institution playing this role."

"Libraries are an indispensable resource for immigrants," says Madhulika Khandelwal, director of the Asian/American Center

at Queens College. “There have been many immigrant waves in America’s history and many different institutions that helped them assimilate. In this age, I think libraries are the leading institution playing this role.”

Libraries are also a singularly important resource for seniors, an essential role in a city where the number of residents over the age of 60 grew by 12.4 percent during the past decade (compared to 0.2 percent for those under 60) and where the elderly population is expected to grow by 45 percent in the next 20 years. Older New Yorkers seem to be ever-present at branches across the city, in part because libraries provide a safe and convenient outlet for seniors to read the newspaper, send emails to relatives or just socialize in an environment that many see as more engaging than a senior center. Libraries are also increasingly the places where older adults go for resources they can’t find elsewhere as branches offer specialized courses for older New Yorkers in everything from basic computer skills and electronic tax filing to defensive driving and “Facebook for Seniors.”

“Libraries offer seniors the opportunity to flourish and stay active and engaged in their development,” says Tom Kamber, executive director of Older Adults Technology Services (OATS). “At a time when the city is rapidly aging, there really isn’t another institution that does that.”

The public library system is an unparalleled portal to the Internet for the many New Yorkers still on the wrong side of the digital divide. An incredible 2.9 million city residents don’t have broadband Internet access at home. Not surprisingly, there has been a huge increase in the number of New Yorkers who go to the city’s public libraries to get connected. Since 2002, the city’s three library systems have increased their total number of public access computers by 89 percent, with number of users rising just as fast or even faster. In the last five years alone, the number of computer sessions logged at public computers in the city’s libraries has grown by 62 percent, going from 5.8 million sessions in 2007 to over 9.3 million in 2011. At NYPL alone, attendance at technology programs nearly doubled from 2003 to 2012, going from 30,000 to 58,541.

“Libraries are often the only access to digital resources that are available at no cost in low-income communities,” says LISC’s Scott.

The libraries serve job seekers and provide a range of workshops and services for those who need to bolster their skills for an economy that no longer produces large numbers of decently paying jobs for those with only a high school diploma (or less). The intensive literacy and pre-GED courses that the libraries offer—along with the many informal educational opportunities they provide—is critical in a city where nearly 30 percent of the working age population, or 1.6 million people, currently lack a high school diploma and which has one of the lowest GED attainment rates in the country.

Libraries also complement the city’s public school system in a way that is often underappreciated. When school buildings are closed during the summer, on weekends and after the school day ends, the public libraries provide an alternative to the streets and offer a wide variety of programs for elementary and secondary school students, from early childhood reading sessions and reading groups to music lessons and one-on-one homework help. Libraries also have become a destination for students doing in-class research projects or simply looking for something to do after school. In Far Rockaway, for instance, a popular library center created to serve teens regularly teems with school-age kids who socialize after school and receive job readiness advice from youth counselors.

Finally, at a time when entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly important to the city’s economy, the libraries offer an array of useful resources for current and prospective business owners. Some branches, such as the Science and Business Library (SIBL) in Manhattan and the Business and Career Library (B&CL) in Brooklyn, provide free access to market research databases that would otherwise cost hundreds or thousands of dollars. Many branches operate as de facto incubators, providing a regular home to hundreds of businesses. And the libraries consistently offer programs that connect would-be entrepreneurs with small business assistance experts and mentors. Indeed, at least 250 small businesses have been launched by clients that were advised at SIBL by mentors from SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives).

In the years ahead, New York will need to address a number of profound social, demographic and economic challenges—including a fast growing elderly population, an increasing immigrant population without the English skills to thrive and a large pool of people with limited educations at a time when employers in nearly every industry are demanding higher levels of literacy and digital proficiency. Few institutions are better positioned than the city's public libraries to help the city meet these sorts of challenges. Unlike the vast majority of city agencies, libraries are embedded in nearly every neighborhood in New York and offer an uncommonly broad range of services. In addition, as more of the city's future population and economic growth occurs outside of the city's central business districts, libraries have the potential to be increasingly critical anchors for community and cultural development. Their physical presence in virtually every corner of the city makes them an important resource. And given societal trends such as the demise of book stores and the rise of freelancers, there may be a unique opportunity for some libraries to take on new roles in the economic, civic and social life of communities.

However, despite their growing importance, public libraries have been hugely undervalued by policymakers and are absent from most policy and planning discussions about the future of the city. Meanwhile, there has been insufficient thinking about the future sustainability of New York's libraries at a time when public resources for these institutions are diminishing and growing numbers of New Yorkers are shunning printed books in favor of digital versions they can read on their iPad, Kindle or Nook.

> "With over 200 branches across the city and only enough funding for them to stay open 40 hours a week, there's a lot of infrastructure here going unused."

Libraries offer more programs and circulate more materials than ever before, but these accomplishments have been achieved despite shrinking budgets and support from the city. Since 2008, NYPL has suffered a net $28.2 million reduction in city funds, while Brooklyn and Queens have absorbed cuts worth $18.1 million and $17.5 million respectively.

Due to these funding reductions, all three systems have had to reduce their hours of operation to an average of five days a week, down from six days a week in 2008. Even the Detroit public library system stays open longer. The three New York City public libraries are open 43 hours a week on average, compared to roughly 50 hours a week in Chicago and Boston, 55 in Toronto and 70 in Columbus.
The budget cuts have also forced the libraries in New York to curtail the amount they spend on books and other materials (QPL's materials acquisition budget has dropped from $15 million to $5 million over the past few years) and to lay off staff (the three systems have reduced staff by 24 percent, on average, since 2008). In Queens, circulation is down by 10 percent since the cuts started in 2008, a major turnaround after circulation had increased by 36 percent between 2004 and 2008.

Every year since 2008, the libraries have also had to fight off much larger proposed budget cuts during what has become an annual "budget dance," with the mayor proposing a huge reduction to libraries and the City Council restoring much of the funding. Although the vast majority of these proposed reductions were eventually restored when the official city budget was enacted, the process has severely hampered the libraries' ability to plan for the future and invest in innovative new services.

For this report, we asked the libraries what a modest increase in operating support would allow them to do. By the libraries' own calculations, an additional $50 million a year in city operating funds would allow all three systems to stay open an average of 50 hours a week. And because more people would then be able to access their resources and services, they estimate that circulation would increase by an estimated 10 million materials and their program attendance by 500,000 people.8 An increase of $100 million in city funds would allow the libraries to stay open an average of 60 hours per week and put them in position to become the most utilized libraries in the country, if not the world.

"With over 200 branches across the city and only enough funding for them to stay open 40 hours a week, there's a lot of

infrastructure here going unused," says Queens president Tom Galante.
However, a lack of operating funds is not the only financial challenge facing libraries. Because of the way capital projects are funded, dozens of branches across the five boroughs are confronting what more than one person in our interviews called "a maintenance crisis." The Brooklyn system currently faces over $230 million in deferred maintenance costs, including $8 million at a single branch in northern Brooklyn, according to Josh Nachowitz, the Brooklyn Public Library's vice president of government affairs. Even as several branches citywide—from the new Jamaica Central Branch to the Bronx Library Center—have undergone much-needed renovations in recent years, a number remain in bad shape. "The Bronx Library Center is beautiful, but the local [branches] are struggling," says one Bronx-based community leader. "They are short of books, look dull and dreary, and lack programming."

We heard similar anecdotes in every borough, a major problem for the libraries since our research suggests there is a strong correlation between the condition of branches and the number of people using them.
As we detail in this report, Brooklyn has fallen far behind the other two systems in total capital funding. Of committed funds—a term city officials use to designate dollars spent rather than simply budgeted for a future project—NYPL raised $215 million between Fiscal Year 2003 and Fiscal Year 2012; and Queens raised $153 million during that time, while Brooklyn only brought in $101 million.9 Taking into account the relative population sizes of their service areas, that comes to $62.41 per person for NYPL, $68.79 per person for Queens and just $40.50 per person for Brooklyn. When broken down by borough, branches located in Brooklyn and Staten Island have raised much less in capital funds than branches located in Queens, the Bronx and Manhattan. Staten Island branches have raised only $6 million in funds in the last ten years, compared to $97 million for Manhattan branches and $107 million for Bronx branches.



The libraries could also use additional funds and more financial security to address gaps in service and to make investments in technology that would help them stay relevant in an age where people are increasingly reading books digitally.

Libraries in several neighborhoods with high levels of unemployment, high school dropouts and chronic illness often are underutilized by their communities. For example, the Red Hook, Brownsville, Stone Avenue and Walt Whitman branches in Brooklyn have struggled for years to attract patrons. In northern Manhattan, the 125th Street branch on the far east side remains badly underutilized, while in the South Bronx, Woodstock and West Farms have maintained relatively low circulation numbers for years. Many of these branches are physically isolated, far from commercial districts. Safety also is often a big concern, as in Brownsville, where the main branch is far from the closest commercial center.

Next, public libraries currently can serve only a tiny fraction of the people who come to them for ESOL and pre-GED training. Because libraries aren't eligible for the vast majority of state funding for adult literacy courses, they can afford to serve only 7,000 students citywide every year, despite long waiting lists for these services and having the physical space for at least double that number. Katherine Perry, director of adult literacy at the Flushing branch in Queens, says that the demand for ESOL in the neighborhood is so overwhelming that only 20 percent of the people on the library's wait list end up getting a spot.

Another big challenge facing libraries is the need to build a virtual environment—and business model—to support the lending of electronic materials over the Internet, including e-books and audio files. Although almost everyone seems to agree that e-books are the wave of the future, many major book publishers have put up roadblocks to e-lending. Not only do e-books cost libraries considerably more than hardbacks or paperbacks, some publishers like HarperCollins only allow 26 checkouts for every e-book purchase, forcing the libraries to buy those books again when the limit is reached. Other publishers like Macmillan and Simon and Schuster won't sell e-books to libraries at all. Because checking out an e-book is so much easier than checking out a physical book—patrons can do it at any time of day without leaving the comfort of their home—publishers are worried the libraries will "cannibalize" sales.

Yet all three library systems have been marching ahead anyway. Between January 2011 and January 2012, e-book checkouts across all three systems rose 179 percent. The libraries have added new e-book platforms like the Amazon Kindle and a bunch of new titles, and have been working with the technology company Overdrive to build out their websites with more interactive capabilities and suggestion engines like those on Netflix or Amazon. Still, the three systems have a long way to go before e-lending becomes the norm. In NYPL's case, electronic checkouts account for only 5.5 percent of total circulation, and at both Brooklyn and Queens they constitute less than 1 percent of the total.

Beyond innovating in the digital realm, libraries have been examining new library typologies, mainly smaller, more flexible spaces in storefronts in busy commercial districts or transportation hubs such as Grand Central Terminal or JFK airport. They also have been looking at new partnerships and programming possibilities, such as turning some of the underutilized space in struggling branches into incubators for artists. But, because of funding constraints, the systems have barely begun to scratch the surface of possibilities.

For this report, we spoke to a number of designers, architects and technologists to discuss how libraries might change for the better over the next few years, and we came up with a long list of tantalizing possibilities. For example, many of the innovators we spoke to said that the potential for new, neighborhood appropriate partnerships has never been greater in New York. Arts groups like Spaceworks, chashama and 3rd Ward are renovating underutilized spaces for art shows and workshare spaces. Non-profits like 826NYC are running successful storefronts that double as shops selling quirky, genre-inspired merchandise and locations for afterschool mentoring and tutoring. As one designer told us, there is no reason libraries can't build "super hero shops" or "pirate shops," as 826NYC has done in Brooklyn and Pittsburgh respectively, on the ground floors of select library branches and work with these groups' extensive volunteer networks to put on creative writing programs for school children. Or how about partnering with Facebook, Google, Tumblr or one of the other tech companies in

New York to build a library-based tech center that would provide access to new gadgets and basic software classes?

Absent a partnership, libraries could learn a lot from the Apple Store or, indeed, from many other private sector retailers and service providers. The bright sight lines in those stores, for example, create a sense of openness and dynamism. “You enter and you don’t feel like there’s a list of rules you have to decode,” says Albert Lee at the design firm IDEO. Moreover, with enough support to cover major upgrades, libraries could begin to tap new revenue possibilities. Library websites attract millions of visitors a month. If they could perfect an online browsing environment with recommendations and interactive capabilities, libraries could sell advertisements and user data like any other digital media company. Knowing how a user landed on a particular book, for example, could be extremely valuable to publishers.

Libraries are without question at a crossroads. The business of making and distributing books is undergoing a tremendous upheaval as the Internet matures. At the same time libraries are experiencing an historic resurgence as community centers at exactly the same time that government support for them is waning. Circulation is at historic highs despite dwindling book budgets, and the number of programs on offer is greater and more diverse than ever before, even as staff levels have plateaued. This is a huge lost opportunity for New York. If libraries are going to fulfill their potential as engines of upward mobility and take advantage of opportunities afforded by the Internet, they will need far greater financial and institutional support than they have received so far.

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