PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS ENGINES OF DEMOCRACY: A RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGICAL CASE STUDY ON DESIGNING FOR RE-ENTRY

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ABSTRACT

Founded with principles of equity, freedom and access, public libraries have always served as a cornerstone of democratic values and civic participation. In the context of 21st century transformational forces of globalization and digitization, libraries are also evolving their role from repositories of information and learning, to critical contributors of a culture of care in their communities. In this paper, we present insights from an ongoing collaboration with the Brooklyn Public Library that focused on the library's current re-entry services directed to formerly incarcerated patrons and their families. Drawing from participatory design and visual ethnographic approaches to inquiry, this study contributes to our understanding of the relational dimensions of design and its role as a reflexive and caring practice.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is the world's leader in incarceration. There are approximately 2.3 Million people in the nation's prisons and jails.[1] While states and the federal government have steadily reduced their prison populations in recent years through a combination of changes in policy and declining crime rates,

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[1] Prison Policy Initiative. Available at https://www.prisonpolicy.org/. Accessed January 9, 2019.

incarceration trends continue to vary significantly across jurisdictions. The reality of the criminal justice system and its impact on the US population is a complex one, with both profound racial disparities persisting, as well as discouraging rates of recidivism–the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend–remaining key societal challenges across many of the major urban centers in the country.[2] Given the magnitude of the issue, supporting the rehabilitation of formerly incarcerated individuals and their successful transition from incarceration to life back with their families and neighborhoods presents important implications for public safety and community resilience at large. In this context, a robust ecosystem of public sector organizations, government programs and social service providers are dedicated to providing "re-entry" services designed to facilitate the transition. These programs, some of which begin before an individual is released from jail or prison, address head-on the interdependent factors that account in part for the high national averages of recidivism--up to forty percent within three years of an individual's release (Davis et al., 2014). Within the system of re-entry service providers, programming is multifaceted to offer critical assistance and meet crucial needs. The range of existing services run the gamut from assistance with finding employment and housing referrals, to substance abuse and treatment support, family therapy, and educational and vocational training--to name just a few of the principal areas of programming and support.[3]

In recent years, public libraries have emerged as leading institutions and effective supporters of re-entry programs by facilitating access to information and services regarding reentry, mainly through community-based organizations. This is a phenomenon that can be related to the ongoing evolution of the traditional role of the public library as a civic institution for social aspiration, knowledge and learning–with information and resources freely available to everyone–to one of the last remaining "nerve-centers" of urban life. Libraries are increasingly transforming themselves into active civic engines and central players where citizens practice "deliberate democracy" (Willingham, 2008). They are also positioning their role in the community as physical places that welcome individuals and families facing

circumstances of great socio-economic adversity with a culture of openness, compassion and care (Orlean, 2018).

This study presents insights from an ongoing design research project led by the Parsons DESIS Lab, an action-research laboratory at The New School, in partnership with one of the most prominent library systems in the United States, The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL).[4] BPL recently launched a new strategic plan which articulates its renewed commitment to become a forum for democratic participation, where each branch acts as a de facto community center to effectively serve the needs of its patrons, particularly those in the most vulnerable and precarious situations.[5] A crucial part of this strategic plan addresses issues related to incarceration and post incarceration, which impact Brooklyn residents at some of the highest rates of incidence in the New York metropolitan area. BPL has pioneered a set of unique services for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations and invited researchers from the DESIS Lab to develop design strategies to amplify the effectiveness of existing programs as well as surface the unique perceptions, needs and aspirations of patrons of BPL that could benefit from access to future re-entry services. As part of the ongoing partnership with BPL, DESIS Lab researchers pursued a multi-pronged methodological approach that includes video ethnography and co-design sessions to arrive at preliminary recommendations for actionable programs moving forward.

Our guiding research questions investigated how designers working collaboratively with non-designers at the edges of disciplinary boundaries could strengthen organizational capabilities in order to contribute to better services and positive social change. As part of this process, our Lab also tapped into a studio in the Parsons graduate program (MFA) in Transdisciplinary Design. Throughout this semester-long studio, graduate students helped conceive of and participated in key codesign sessions with the Lab's team. This intentional integration became the source for a transformative experiential learning and field research opportunity for the students and created an expanded set of design insights that were aggregated into the Lab's arc of inquiry.[6]

[2] A good analysis of demographic data fluctuations and patterns in the prison population is provided by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2015. Available at https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p15_sum.pdf. For a recidivism overview by the same agency see https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=17#summary. The Sentencing Project presents a comprehensive set of data points in the context of advocacy for correctional reform. Available at https://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/incarceration/. Accessed January 9, 2019.

[3] In the New York area, the ecosystem of re-entry services is rich and varied and includes organizations such as The Osborne Association and Fortune Society as well as programs from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice --all of whom have informed key aspects of the present study.

[4] The Parsons DESIS Lab works at the intersection of strategic and service design, management, and social theory, applying interdisciplinary expertise in problem setting and problem solving to sustainable practices and social innovation. For a portfolio of initiatives see https://www.newschool.edu/desis/.

[5] For details of Brooklyn Public Library 2018 strategic plan see: https://www.bklynlibrary.org/strategicplan#preface

[6] The project studio represented a core curricular requirement for students in the Transdiciplinary Design MFA offered by the School of Design Strategies at Parsons. A handful of students from a second graduate program in the school, the MS in Strategic Design and Management were also part of the cohort. It is important to emphasize however, that the student work that is reported in this paper represents only one bounded engagement in the longer span of the research

At a critical moment when design discourse in publications and forums like this conference is addressing the complex and urgent challenges for strengthening and envisioning a culture of care as both "the future possible and the responsibility of design" (Vaughan, 2018; Lancaster Charter, 2019), our research provokes important questions and elucidates promising approaches for design research, pedagogy and practice. Specifically, as a contribution to current design research and theory, our study informs our understanding of the relational dimensions of design and its role as a reflexive and caring practice.

Our paper is organized as follows: we first offer a summary review of the literature streams in public sector design, service design and social innovation that inform our inquiry. This overview also includes discussion of social science literature concerned with matters of care and infrastructure as understood in social and human terms. Secondly, we present the methodological approach of the research conducted to date. Finally, we discuss some of the key insights from the discovery phase of the inquiry and conclude with a reflection about opportunities for next steps.

We use the term "discovery" with caution. Although discovery is the language used by designers to explain how they acquire first-hand experience of the challenges, opportunities and capabilities experienced by the various stakeholders, and is therefore legible to a design-based audience and readership, we find this language controversial and in need of clarification. We do not adhere to the understanding that there is a world out there independent of us that can be unearthed through research and design. Rather, we see research and design as engaged in processes of worldmaking where "worlds are as much made as found" (Goodman 1978: 22). Colonizing projects repeatedly make claims to have 'discovered' peoples, places, and resources which of course were already active and meaningful sites. Our use of "discovery" rejects this understanding and recognizes and struggles with the fact that our vantage point is unavoidably situated (as per Haraway) and, as such, what we are able to see is neither complete nor stable.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws broadly from contemporary streams of design theory in service design, public sector design and design for social innovation. These streams are an important backbone to our methodological approach and insights.

DESIGNING SERVICES IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC SECTOR AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

There is a maturing field of design research and practice toward social innovation and designing services in the context of the public sector. The work takes a variety of forms, and exists in increasingly complex organizational settings and interdisciplinary contexts of use, challenging and complicating our assumptions about the responsibility of designers and their efficacy in the context of situations of great complexity where there is an aspiration and intent for positive social change (Amatullo et al., 2016; Binder et al., 2011; Jégou & Manzini, 2008; Staszowski & Manzini, 2013). The following definition of social innovation establishes a clear baseline for understanding design research and educational design programs in this domain: "a social innovation is a new solution (product, service, model, process, etc.) that simultaneously meets a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and leads to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources that may enhance society's capacity to act (Grice, Davies, Robert, & Norman, 2012; Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & Gonzalez, 2005).

The principle of "dialogic collaboration" in design for social innovation is an especially salient dimension of the many variations of these humanistic design practices (Escobar, 2017). In fact, our study demonstrates that the technical expertise of designers in these circumstances becomes at times a secondary skill-set compared to the mediator role they play in navigating the entanglements and highly fluid circumstances with community stakeholders and project partners with whom they are confronted (Escobar, 2017; Manzini, 2015). As we further note in our discussion section, this mediating capacity of design–one that is fundamentally about facilitating generative processes that contribute new meaning and break with traditional thinking in decision-making through deliberation, stewardship and action (Boyer, Cook, & Steinberg, 2013; Buchanan, 1998; Kimbell, 2009) is a salient dimension observed throughout this study.

Nested in these streams of design literature is a robust body of work about participatory design and participatory design research methods (Manzini, 2011; Sanders & Stappers, 2012; Sanders & Stappers, 2014; Simonsen & Robertson, 2012). Participatory design is first and foremost about the direct involvement of non-designers in the co-design of the solutions that are sought. Its central concern is about how collaborative design processes can be driven by the participation of those who will be most affected by what is being designed (Simonsen & Robertson, 2012). This study is informed by streams of participatory design theory, particularly the foundational research of Pelle Ehn and colleagues at the Malmö Living Labs (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Hillgren, 2013) as well as the theoretical and empirical research of scholars like Andrea Botero (Botero et.al, 2010; Botero & Hyssala, 2013) that

surface critical questions about the extension of design spaces, and modes of sustained engagement that arise when design researchers and educators strive for long term design collaborations with public sector and civic and marginalized communities. The research design adopted in this study, by considering for example the graduate studio contributions and pedagogical aims as a discrete component of a much more expansive and longer-term arc of inquiry and co-design with sustained dialogue and collaboration with the BPL partner, is purposely reflexive and thoughtfully shaped to expand design spaces for participants beyond the confines and temporality constraints of academic calendars or research funding awards.

SERVICE DESIGN AND THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION

Service design has grown as a practice particularly in the public sector, in great part anchored in immersive ethnographic research and participatory approaches. Service designers typically use observation and contextual inquiry methods that involve engagement with communities and organizations (Penin, 2018). The aim is gaining access to communities and individuals, forming trust-based relationships through deep, active listening and from there identifying entry points for improving services and processes, ultimately enriching the way to serve users. Participatory methods usually involve co-creation sessions or workshops during which people from different parts of a service provision -- including staff, management but also end users and other participants -- get together in semi-structured creative sessions. These typically result in generative discussions that yield insights from research and can tentatively create and define new concepts and strategic directions. One emerging contemporary issue for the service design community, as well as others practitioners that make use of immersive research and participation techniques, is the risk of suppressing political aspects and overlooking the power relationships that are at play (Aye, 2018). These dynamics can result in the deepening of existing unbalanced power relations in user-participation contexts. An additional risk is favoring a simplistic step-by-step process and in the name of a streamlined design process.

This approach in design reckons with the ways in which "participation has typically been read through romantic notions of negotiation, inclusion, and democratic decision-making" (Cupers and Miessen, 2012: 109), papering over the ways in which people are excluded in deliberative processes and downplaying how institutional sponsorship of projects comes with a set of interests.[7] It acknowledges and takes responsibility for

the fact that participants are more likely to cede control to a designer who approaches them when their agency is limited by political, economic, and social circumstances: "the more people are dispossessed, above all culturally, the more they are constrained and inclined to put themselves into the hands of representatives in order to have a political voice" (Bourdieu, 1984/5: 59). In delegating their voice to designers, policy makers, and administrative programming, people transfer power and this can result in a relationship of reliance rather than actual collaboration. While a delegate or representative is often needed for a group to articulate its position and needs (certainly our social and political systems and institutions often demand this), speaking in place of someone expresses "a complex dynamic of privilege, authority, and access" (Kester, 1995: 9).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CARE

Literature in the social sciences provides lenses through which people are seen as neither passive victims nor superhuman agents, but as actors with complex personhood (Gordon 2008) embedded in networks, structures, institutions, and systems that are also complicated and shot-through with power relations. Some of this work argues that investments in social infrastructure of vulnerable urban areas promotes resilience and the development of social networks that can facilitate meaningful connections (Klinenberg, 2018). Social infrastructures foster the development of social capital that create changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action. This action can, in turn, cultivate human capital that, through the acquisition of skills and capabilities, enables people to act in new ways. This may be done formally through networks, or informally via contact (Delany, 1999). In either case, social relations can constitute useful resources for people in a number of ways from opening information channels to creating a sense of trustworthiness that arises from shared norms and expectations. In the absence of or inability to access social infrastructures, people may seek other modes of provisioning.

AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) argues that in the context of marginalization and limited means, people's activities and their ensembles of relations are constitutive of a form of infrastructure that, although immaterial, sustains people much in the same way more formal architectures might. "This infrastructure is capable of facilitating the intersection of socialities so that expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means" (Simone, 2004: 407). In this understanding, residents "engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices" to survive and pursue their goals (Simone, 2004: 408). When services, spaces, and opportunities are dislocated, people seek ways to anchor their aspirations. Social infrastructures, it has

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[7] The proliferation of standardized design tools to guide socially engaged design projects is another example of how the details particular to site and the social worlds that constitute that site are lost when practitioners understand the work through pre-existing protocols and procedures versus developing their process from the ground up, in dialogue with participants. Site specificity is actually not so specific

when people and place are allegorized and placed in typologies or generally othered.

been shown, are one resource in providing the foundations for this. Social infrastructures do not function without effort, attention, sustenance, and upkeep--or more simply, investment. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues that "for interdependent beings in more than human entanglements, there has to be some form of care going on somewhere in the substrate of their world for living to be possible" (2017: 5). Care in this instance involves the concrete work of maintenance while it also has ethical, political, and affective implications.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As a transdisciplinary group of researchers, we see the literature in design research as conversant with that in the human sciences. In building relationships with our interlocutors on site, we are attuned to the ways in which knowledge is always partial and situated (Haraway, 1988) and how recognizing and valuing the interdependence of our social world demands "thinking with care" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). Our fieldwork is based in presence. We shadowed librarians and BPL staff, spending time at the front desk, in their shared office, at organized activities such as open house events and special programs, and also during activities sponsored by community groups and partner agencies. Our proximity to these events within flexible time frames allowed for a nuanced revelation of the relationships of library staff, patrons, and partner members as dynamic and reciprocal.

Attuned to the uniqueness of locale, our approach allows for open-ended, immersive experiences with collaborators where issues bubble up as part of everyday social situations. Our research builds on and intersects with BPL's strategic plan, identifying needs and assets through ethnographic research. Our approach recognizes participants as keenly reflexive and knowledgeable and we invite them to "experiment collaboratively with the conventions of ethnographic inquiry" (Holmes and Marcus, 2008: 595). Participants are not "tokens of their cultures to be systematically understood" but are "agents who actively participate in shaping emergent social realms" and are "treated like partners in research" (Holmes and Marcus, 2008: 596).

The first phase of the research involved video ethnography focused on participant observation at a local library branch where we shadowed library staff and followed the daily rhythms of the library's activities and social world. Although most of our ethnographic work was carried out at one local library, we also visited offices at the main branch, attended a court hearing with one participant, and observed other local activities to gain understanding of the broader contexts in which the library is embedded.

Image 1: Screenshot of video showing Bedford branch welcome desk

We followed a research process that was heuristic and iterative versus linear. The main ethnographic inquiry was conducted alongside a graduate studio research track. Graduate students led one line of inquiry that started with observational research in different library branches and neighborhoods revealing for example a variance of perceptions, knowledge and interest towards the expanded social role of the library by staff in different branches followed by generative design activities. Through a combination of ethnographic work, expert interviews and secondary research, students were able to identify specific areas of interest that were used to structure a co-design workshop designed and facilitated by graduate students. Participants were recruited from different parts of the library system, including front line library staff, central administration and specialists of specific programs as well as family members participating in existing reentry services offered at the library. Representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) pertaining the reentry landscape also participated. The workshop departed from our fieldwork done as video conversations in the weeks preceding the workshop. The workshop opened with the screening of selected video clips that, considered as a body of work, capture current services and practices at the Bedford branch. In particular the video clips contain scenes and dialogue that focus on the four main themes that emerged from the research: organizational culture at BPL, reentry landscape, perceptions of the library within the community and referral systems. These four themes formed the basis for the workshop where participants were split into four groups to explore questions and opportunities through a series of exercises facilitated by our graduate students. Each group explored one of the key themes at their table and shared their findings with the larger group at the end of the session. Some of the assets produced by the student facilitators included a deck of cards featuring the services BPL currently offer, worksheets for idea generation and other assets representing the architecture of the library, user journey maps, and stories/narratives of patrons. The workshop, aimed at identifying opportunities and potential design strategies for new or improved services and programs, generated a number of learnings, such as:

- The role of front line staff in dealing with patrons in need relying on their lived experience and empathy, their resourcefulness and referral capacity
- The existence of part of staff who still identify with the traditional and more contained role of the library in contrast with the new ambition the library has for an enlarged social role
- The need for engagement and communication with the general public about this new role
- The need for a nuanced kind of engagement that respects and copes with sensitive issues such as stigma, so crucial with incarcerated-affected persons and families.
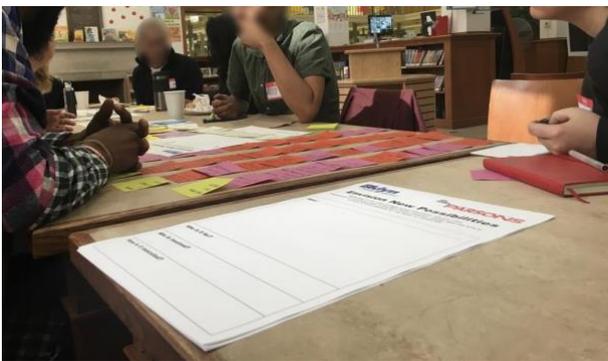
Image 2: The co-design workshop designed and facilitated by students; participants included front line library staff, central library administration, family members participating in existing reentry services offered at the library and representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs)

Based on the learnings from the workshop, students created design proposals for the second half of their studio. This design research process conducted by the students contributed to reinforcing and materializing an expanded understanding about what libraries may need to prioritize in supporting their staff as they redefine their role. The concepts were comprised of a mix of communication and service ideas, that included: events where staff could learn to interact with patrons through game-like activities and props designed to help drop barriers related to the stigma of incarceration; events for formerly incarcerated patrons and the general public to engage in political action and movement building toward criminal justice reform; a new ID card that embodies and informs patrons about the new role of the library as a community resource; bookmarks designed to help stakeholders navigate the fragmented reentry landscape of services by also developing processes that connect the dots between the various resources available.

These varied lines of inquiry intertwined with the different themes as the research developed. They were effective in engaging a range of participants through various means of data collection. The multiple tracks happening in the field and studio also allowed us to place findings in dialogue, with the rationale that the flaws of one method are often overcome by the strengths of another. We anticipate that future steps of the project and collaboration with BPL will revisit concepts and three main leverage points that emerged from these varied lines of inquiry in this initial phase of a much longer and ongoing process, that will be detailed in the Discussion.

In the next phase, we foresee the use of these leverage points in developing design briefs around which possible services can be designed and prototyped. These would be deployed in concert with the library's perceived priorities and needs.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of our combined research efforts to date affirms and contributes to the understanding that libraries are uniquely positioned as critical forms of social infrastructure where people develop relationships through sustained interaction and involvement in activities they enjoy (Klinenberg, 2018). As social infrastructure, libraries create the conditions for the development of social and human capital. Our research showed that libraries are places where alliances are built that have the potential to become transformative connections. Although libraries are no longer simply repositories of books that patrons can borrow without fees or other obligations, that basis of trust remains central to the institution's relationship with its patrons. Where much public service provision is historically linked to a paternalistic approach rooted in a reformer's tradition and has to some extent incorporated the bureaucratic ethos of the public sector, public libraries stand apart as spaces of appearance (as per Arendt, 1998) where people, in all their diversity, can meet as equals and negotiate the terms of living together in spite of their differences. As such, libraries are engines of democracy. Our research found that an ethos of trust and expanded care along with the exchange of knowledge across power-differentiated groups were the principles and practices central in the development of this capacity. Through our fieldwork, we began to see the library as a site of radical hospitality welcoming broad swaths of people (in fact, we never witnessed someone being turned away, although we did see people referred to care providers more skilled in meeting immediate or long-term needs of those in crisis.). Patrons were welcome to use the library in a flexible and strategic manner. Groups of nannies from the neighborhood bring children to story hour, people from a nearby shelter for the unhoused gather in the library to socialize, read, and search for work online, young people stop in to see if there are afternoon activities planned for that day, and others simply need to use the restroom. Library staff consistently interacted with patrons without judgement, regardless of the circumstances. They diffused difficult situations with elegance and skill, attuned to a broad range of needs. In

offering hospitality, the library seeks not to reproduce society as it is, but offers an alternate system of values.

These core commitments were observed in practices and relations across scales--from the institutional to the most intimate. Foundational in generating a caring and deliberative context, our findings show that the library functions as social capacity and the library staff as community problem solvers. The staff at the library mediate between the institutional and the local context, engaging patrons in ways that go well beyond the responsibilities of their job descriptions. And, although the institution supports patrons, we also witnessed the various ways in which the patrons actively contribute to the library ecosystem.

We synthesized these findings as three interconnected leverage points contributing to multi-directional learning, expanded gestures of care and trust.

- **Library as social capacity**. Library programming must address a wide range of publics. Programs must be adaptive, attuned to local texture, and inclusive. Library activities should extend beyond the confines of the library building, and should be enjoyable rather than strictly service-oriented.
- **Library staff as community problem solvers**. Library staff, in the course of their work, develop practice-based strategies to navigate complex and often stressful situations. They are a crucial and skilled resource, but they also require care and support.
- **Library patrons as infrastructure**. Patrons are not simply people in need of services; they have valuable experiences and expertise to share. Services should make space for patron-led advocacy, taking particular care to make space for the input of "credible messengers"—those who have direct personal experience with the issues at hand—as well as people of color (POC) perspectives and the full, intersectional identities of patrons.
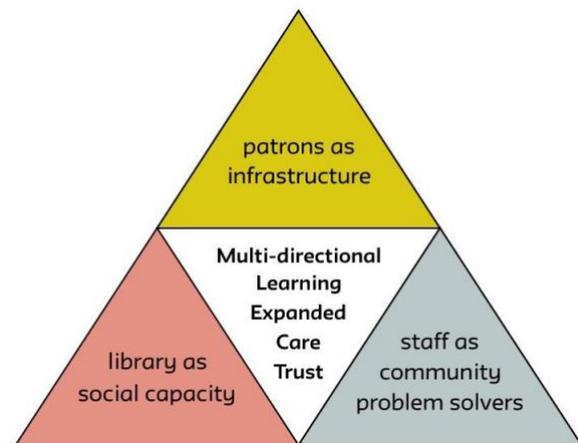

Image 3: Leverage points identified through the research so far. At the center, key principles cutting across the three leverage points: multi-directional learning, expanded care, trust.

Literature and research focused on the benefits of social infrastructure for a vibrant public argue that the places that serve us well every day are also those that serve us best when we experience challenges or crisis (see Klinenberg, 2018). Our inquiry showed again and again that the library intervenes when other services fail or are absent. Moreover, the library functions not only as a resource in itself, but it forges connections with and catalyzes other service providers. But it would be wrong to position the library simply as a service provider, in that, the library is more importantly a proactive site of community engagement where formal networking and informal contact occur (see Delany, 1999 for a rich discussion of networking and contact). Official programming is regularly complemented with informal assembly and impromptu activities, and both of these forms create conditions where social capital is developed through forging human connection. Libraries reach a broad range of people, addressing the needs of publics (in the plural), and bring people into contact across the differences that typically divide us in a polarized and stratified society. Library staff often directly participate in activities with patrons that include completing job applications and drafting resumes, with reciprocal, rather than transactional, ongoing exchanges. Relationships evolve supported by the consistent presence of library staff, some of whom remain actively invested in the projects that patrons endeavor. For example, one situation involved library staff personally funding a haircut and new work attire for a patron who had secured employment with the iterative assistance of the staff member. Psychic and emotional support provided through contact contributes to positive impacts beyond measurable services. Informal exchanges of child mentoring and tutoring take place among patrons within the library. One particular case involved a patron being present at the library several times per week to attend to scheduled tutoring sessions with children, having served in this capacity for more than two years. Community organizations utilize the library facility and

host activities. For example, youths participating in the Children of Promise program, serving youths impacted by a family member who is incarcerated, attend an afterschool program once a week featuring educational and recreational activities. The library also hosts several events each week, such as story reading for different age groups, craft activities, and open house informational events showcasing services available from other community and civic organizations.

Our research showed that library staff plays a central role in the library's ability to make critical connections. Their knowledge is situated and local, as well as institutional and based in expertise. Shadowing staff via participant observation revealed the varied and complex roles navigated by librarians. In addition to the traditional tasks demanded of library staff, we can add the role of community problem solver. We documented the myriad ways library staff addressed the needs of patrons in tactical, improvisational ways. This is a form of human capital that functions beyond the boundaries of job descriptions and the given. This way of working calls for an adaptive stance that moves at the speed of trust. Because demands are based in human relationships, staff are attuned to the provisional nature of needs and the necessity to adapt. These practices involve a nimbleness and the capacity "to circulate across and become familiar with a broad range of spatial, economic, residential, and transactional positions" (see Simone, 2004). Moreover, this capability is grounded in a commitment to transformative justice expressed through quotidian relations. Staff are radically open and exhibit the capacity to effectively engage a wide range of publics.

When official supports fail and people are marginalized from the everyday practices of urban life, they collaborate in informal ways to anchor their livelihoods through a network of social and economic relations--in doing so, people themselves can be seen as a form of infrastructure (Simone, 2004). Although library patrons vary in terms of socioeconomic, housing, employment, educational, and other significant statuses, a vast number of those using the library on a frequent basis live in precarious situations. This was particularly obvious at the branch we studied in Bedford Stuyvesant, a neighborhood that, although undergoing rapid gentrification, is disproportionately impacted by high incarceration rates and homelessness among other challenges for residents.[8] An ethnographic approach allowed us to see how these issues are addressed by the library. On a daily basis, a large number of patrons came to the library for refuge from one of the city's largest homeless shelters which is closed during much of the day. It was not uncommon to see people sleeping,

socializing, and using the library's laptops and computer stations to seek vital services. One striking observation was constant use of the public restroom. This BPL branch (its staff) is adept in recognizing, respecting, and building on existing community and neighborhood relations. In this way, patrons are not only served by the existing infrastructure, they are seen as actors who come to the library with their own, existing 'infrastructure' that can be leveraged and incorporated in ways that strengthen existing bonds while also creating new ties. This sort of human investment is committed to delegating agency to those who are often stripped of avenues for meaningful action. As infrastructure (and the staff and BPL become part of this infrastructure), people work as allies, in coordinated ways that reach across differences. Tacit knowledge is valued as legitimate and is included as an active voice in decision-making processes and human relationships are valued in non-instrumentalized ways. Importantly, when institutions see people as infrastructure, rather than efforts to help or 'empower,' they develop relationships where resources and knowledge are exchanged (not passed in a unidirectional manner). This increases the visibility of a variety of actors and their experiences, which can cultivate a sense of dignity.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents and discusses on our initial discovery phase, which deepens understanding of BPL's services for their reentry population, identifies innovative practices underway within BPL branches and partner organizations, and provides BPL with reflection on what was learned, offering recommendations for possible courses of action. Our research builds on BPL's strategic plan, identifying needs and assets through ethnographic research. As an exploratory work-in-progress, the findings included here provide insight into our process and gesture toward promising outputs that will be developed in the next phases of the project. The views expressed here of the authors may not fully reflect the positions of our project partners, community groups or the official positions or policies of BPL. All errors and omissions are the authors' own.

As we move into the next phase of the project we expect to draw on these powerful insights from the discovery arc of this first stage of collaboration with BPL. Salient findings underscore an approach grounded in care that we foresee extending through the continuation of a mix of ethnographic methods and participatory design that might inform the cocreation of future programmatic interventions that are underscored by a commitment to care: "standing for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumental ones" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 70). In the context of extending and developing BPL's services related to reentry and incarceration, care matters in a number of ways--primarily in enlarging our sense of kinship and alliance (see Puig de la Bellacasa for more on this capacity). Also central, is the way an ethos and practice of care

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[8] For more on this see: http://home2.nyc.gov/html/endinghomelessness/downloads/pdf/brooklyn.pdf, http://gothamist.com/2013/05/01/these_interactive_charts_show_you_w.php, and https://www.osc.state.ny.us/osdc/rpt5-2018.pdf for more details.

can validate and make visible those forms of knowledge that are often silenced or overlooked, and how design might steward and nurture that.

Moving forward we recognize the local specificity of the branch we studied, that was particularly rich and forthcoming in terms of manifestations of care. Other branches might be different in this regard, we see this diversity not as a limitation, rather as an opportunity where we can leverage local specificities and texture, using the initial findings as a model to learn from. Although site specific, there are overarching themes that can be tested at other branches. Our continued efforts will emphasize how to harness and amplify knowledge from "below" (from staff, from patrons)--flipping the direction in which knowledge normally flows, as an exchange rather than a transaction. Finally, as designers, we will also need to tackle how to create mechanisms that can sustain these knowledge and power flows, how to structure without being too structured, seeing people in all their complexity versus allegorized as "a population" to be assessed.

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