Handling Replacement: Tending to a Local Library and Repair Centre

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Towards the back of the community library, a retired engineer works as a volunteer and is sorting through the bags and piles of used household electrical and electronic devices. Between the used DVD players, toasters, kettles and laptops, he is at his desk where he carefully cleans, repairs and restores the donated items. Those items he cannot save are stored “out the back” to be recycled, after he has carefully salvaged useful parts for re-use in future repairs. The refurbished household items are sold cheaply to those who would have no or limited access to them: a computer for a father who could otherwise not communicate with his sons abroad; a family with disabled children who wanted a TV. Any money raised from sales goes directly towards the running costs of the library, such as space heating. Teas and coffees, sold from the hatch in the wall opposite, are also affordable, which along with sales of second hand books, other “entrepreneurial” initiatives and all the volunteers’ time and energies are what keeps this important, freely accessible, civic space open to the public.

The scene in this vignette offers a perspective on the intersecting realities of scarcity and austerity in the UK today. It is the site of two infrastructures: the first, an existing public library now transferred to a social enterprise and the second, an infrastructure for the processing of used household goods. These infrastructures, while currently unusual together, are each separately increasing in number. The first with the rise of community libraries in the UK and the second in the emerging context of the circular economy based on repair, re-use and recycling. In what follows, we depart from the vignette of the Crofton Park Community Library to explore how

the world we live in by reflecting from our own bodies. “We cannot speak of a body without knowing what sustains it and what relationship it has with that support (or the lack of it). In this way the body is not so much an entity, as a set of living relationships; the body cannot be completely separated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its life and action.”

Therefore, bodies co-produce their urbanity assembled with other entities. Mares understands that these assemblages can be modified and adapted in new pacts drawing on lively links to create a more feminist city, one with companies that produce urban innovation and which promote a more sustainable city, one with fewer emissions, and one that is more inclusive and, of course, which creates a more affective economy.

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Libraries and community repair each are latent with possibilities of new social forms, yet also risk reproducing neoliberal relations and subjectivities.

Libraries as Spaces of Care

Libraries are known for their commitment to providing universal free access to knowledge, vital in a democracy, as well as being one of last vestiges of public space that are warm and freely, universally accessible. Media scholar Shannon Mattern aptly named libraries as a form of “social infrastructure,”¹ to highlight their important social role in localities. From offering help with homework to children whose parents are at work after school, clubs, activities for preschoolers, English lessons, study areas, book clubs, or providing access to the internet (particularly important for those needing to access government services, such as welfare payments or making job applications), libraries provide multiple aspects of welfare and care to their local populations, hosting a number of functions linked to social reproduction. With an increasing number of government services moving online, libraries are also particularly relevant to those, who don’t have internet access. Estimates from a 2011 report from the Office of National Statistics showed that 23% of the adult population in the UK did not have access to the internet at home. One group particularly affected by this, are benefits claimants.²

Libraries’ composite cultural and social offer evolves in relation to the specific communities who use them. Their programs are not generic, which often makes their loss from a neighborhood more felt. As Graeme Evans argued, many studies on cultural engagement miss this vital connection between “place and participation,”³ and yet, cultural provisions that are specifically tied to their own locales “offer the cultural content and progression […] that other forms of cultural exchange rely upon.”⁴ In this sense then, libraries are infrastructural in the way that they provide the core access that encourages and sustains other forms of civic activities. They act and sustain in relations of proximity that are all the more important for less mobile constituencies, such as lower income populations and young people.

Recently, libraries have been the target of a number of restructuring and funding cuts that risk undermining their primary function of granting universal and free access to knowledge. The proliferation of other activities, services and initiatives now squeezed into library buildings are those which are progressively losing their own legitimate spaces in the contemporary city. It is not unusual, therefore, to see part of a library building repurposed to host a crèche, a point of contact for social services or a makerspace. The pressure of hosting additional services, coupled with reduced funding, coincides with the call to become “entrepreneurial” entities, which risks undermining or side-lining libraries’ core mission.

In the UK context, the neglect and devaluing of this crucial democratic institution is observable when considering the number of libraries that have been closed down in recent years. While library closures and funding pressures in the UK predate austerity,⁵ in 2012 alone 200 libraries were reported lost,⁶ and according to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy a further 105 libraries were lost during 2016/17.⁷

In this climate, volunteers now represent a core component of library staff and a strategy for councils and constituencies that wish to keep their libraries open. In March 2016, after a series of information requests, the BBC made a dataset following its research into changes to public libraries since 2010. It showed that almost 8,000 library staff have lost their jobs: In 2016 there were 31,403 unpaid volunteers working in libraries (up from 15,861 in 2010), while the number of paid employees fell from 31,977, to 24,044 in the same period.⁸ A number of libraries that would otherwise have been lost with the cuts have been saved by local campaigns and now run as “community libraries.” While the government’s “Library Task

⁴ Ibid, 4.
⁸ https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HxIL66yC2/revision#xgjc=soXG6yB1DNYKLX8PvCjR-Rpd5Lo/edit#gid=0.

The phenomenon of community repair has also been gaining momentum in the UK in recent years. Manifesting as a mobilization against the growing problem of waste and counteracting throw-away cultures, initiatives such as repair cafés, community fix-it clinics and others have been providing a meeting space for skilled repairers and owners of broken items. Several similarities can be observed between the ethos of community repair events and the more traditional one of public libraries. Both offer a site of cultural activities that work with relations of proximity, engaging neighborhoods or similar smaller constituencies in their area. By doing this, they contribute to creating and sustaining a specifically convivial value of an urban area.

Moreover, they both engage in different kinds of citizen-led pedagogy. In the case of community repair, this is made explicit by the mission statements and online communication of some of the main organizations behind such initiatives, who emphasize the relevance of the knowledge exchange between volunteers who teach participants how to fix their own items whenever possible. At Repair Cafés for instance, the events are seen as an opportunity for skill-sharing and learning where “valuable practical knowledge is getting passed on.”

Both libraries and community repair initiatives are aiming to protect the idea of free and universal access to knowledge as a cornerstone value of a democratic society. The growing repair movement is fast becoming a crucial actor campaigning for the “right to repair,” allowing owners to open up and tinker with their devices, an increasingly important permission in the age of the so-called Internet of Things, which will see many everyday objects being fit with proprietary software.

Despite the genuine similarities between the two, the reasons for their co-presence in the space, in this case, has more to do with the ongoing devaluation of maintenance and care labor. The government’s “Library Task Force” is actively committed to extend partnership projects, stating that libraries should “continue to provide core services free for users, but develop and use commercial skills to generate income so they can offer new services while maintaining neutrality.” Makerspaces and “innovation centers” are described by the Task Force as opportunities for entrepreneurship and business in libraries. For example, the FabLab in Exeter Library, Devon, is seen as an opportunity “or businesses to access resources and support to enable them to develop new products and services in a cost effective manner, which may lead to reduced lead or manufacturing times and increase their national and global edge.”

**Spaces of Care and Volunteer Labor: The Return of an Old Problem?**

The choice of locating community repair activities in a library can be an opportunity that, by taking advantage of proximity, can nurture the ethos of social care present in both types of infrastructures. Yet, in their current re-organization we see a potential social and political drawback that could debilitate, rather than invigorate, the transformative traction of both free access to books and collaborative mending activities.

The “old” infrastructure of the library, its building, furnishings and stock, is now “handled” by volunteers, as is the newly emerging community infrastructure for repair and re-use. Their reliance on free labor problematizes the vision of a smooth transition towards circular economies and “post-work” futures.

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11 Community managed libraries, ibid.
15 The Library Task Force is “committed to support the extension of partnership projects such as […] maker-spaces,” and has so far provided funding to 24 libraries across the UK to host makerspaces. See “Libraries and Maker-spaces,” DCOMS, accessed October 16, 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-and-makerspaces.
Since the first EU report on the issue in 1976, one of the key claims of advocates of circular economies is that the repair, re-use and recycling of goods will create (local) jobs. “In 2015, WRAP published data predicting that an expansion of the circular economy could generate as many as 3 million new jobs and reduce unemployment by $20,000 across the EU by 2030.” Yet even the title of this report, “The potential for substituting manpower for energy,” underlines a crucial yet taken-for-granted relation of energy and labor: namely, cheap (fossil) energy and cheap materials have until now been substituted for labor. As Jamie Lawrence, Senior Sustainability Advisor Forest and Timber at Kingfisher, points out, access to virgin wood and fibre has been so easy in the past that reusing fibre was never on the industry’s agenda. In fact, the biggest economic efficiency gains have resulted from using more resources, especially energy, to reduce labour costs. Such a system had few difficulties delivering lower costs as long as the fiscal regimes and accounting rules that govern it allowed many indirect costs to remain unaccounted for—the externalities.”

To replace “cheap nature,” to borrow Jason Moore’s expression, capitalism will need cheap labor.

In this sense, the case of Crofton Park is symptomatic, as the reliance on volunteers testifies to the passion and commitment that both anti-waste and pro-library movements can generate. Yet, their co-presence and similarities also raise a number of questions in relation to the sustainability of these spaces and their position vis-à-vis the rising weight of capital extraction from urban life.

One of such questions remains whether the shift towards volunteering and, more problematically, mandated free labor such as workforce placement programs represents a significant devaluation of skills. The forms of organization that can rely on free labor tend to be organized around tasks that are created to be as simplified as possible, to accommodate turnover and low degrees of expertise. In doing this, spaces such as community repair centers and community libraries risk replicating the management structures of the Fordist era, rather than moving towards different ecologies of practice and of knowledge transmission. Tending to the brokenness of our infrastructures means to rethink the relations of power that they entail, including the regimes of property and the contractual agreements that sustain them. This kind of progressive capacity for society to learn and make positive change is the promise and the commitment underpinning the very idea of a public library—useful knowledge to empower democratic self-determination, a horizon that stands in contradiction with the separation between being given responsibility or being given power, as criticized by many feminist critics of care labor. Similarly, collective repair practices hold the potential to reshape the economy towards a different relation with both the means of production and the objects of everyday use. However, in order to do so, these practices must at the same time attend to the brokenness of the political conditions in which they are enmeshed.