Fisher and Dervin and the Ordinary Citizen: How Information Grounds and Sensemaking is Spurring Library and Information Science in the Areas of Design, User Behavior, and Library Amenities

Prologue

Across the globe there have been dozens of high-profile libraries that have opened in the past twenty years, many with breathtaking design elements and enhanced facilities. A few remarkable examples are the ones in Sao Paulo, Brazil; South Dublin, Ireland; and Stuttgart, Germany. (Kowalczyk, 2017). In my view, there is joy, pride, generosity and versatility to these dozens of 21st century libraries. It is something the sector has not witnessed since the Carnegie library era at the turn of the 20th century (Kowalczyk, 2017).

For my studies I have chosen three libraries: the public flagships of Helsinki, Seattle, and Boston. Each of the three share two noticeable attributes: a civic boldness and a successful public relations strategy. In the case of the Boston Public Library’s (BPL) 2016 main branch renovation, I chose it for study because it was the country’s first free municipal public library (BPL History, 2019). As an adolescent in suburban Boston, I would visit the BPL’s Beaux Arts edifice with enjoyable frequency. Seattle, on the more temperate west coast of the U.S., was the closest big city to my university campus. Although I had left the region by the time of its arrival, I consider the Seattle Public Library’s (SPL) brand new Central Library opening as one of the best national news stories of 2004. Helsinki’s “Oodi” is in its own stratosphere; it has an intriguing backstory and a heavenly look. Oodi (“Ode” in Finnish) is a 186,000 square foot library that shares the same public square as the Finnish parliament. Oodi was erected in 2018.

All three libraries are special platforms for two constructivist user behaviour models that we will discuss. The first is Information Grounds: a pro-social user behaviour model that relies on the co-presence of other people within a context-rich environment. The second is Sensemaking, a more interior, individualistic user behaviour model that seeks understanding within power dynamics. User behaviour models are ways in which an information seeker or library patron acts within a certain environment. I argue that a certain environment can bring these two user behaviour models into consciousness within the user.

For purposes of my assignment, I have conducted desk research along with email interviews and a soft Delphi Study to see if any commonalities exist amongst my three subjects especially in activating user behaviour models. The first step was to reach out to Oodi’s...
librarians in Helsinki to inquire what sorts of questions the planners, designers, and librarians were asking themselves in the design and amenities development process. In return I was kindly given a number of internal documents related to Oodi. These comprehensive items include a 59 page review report, videos, press releases, and further correspondences via email.

Three Paragons: The Libraries of Helsinki, Seattle, and Boston

Helsinki

As a people and as a nation, the Finns have a lot to be proud of. According to the World Happiness Report released by a research branch of the United Nations, Finland was deemed to be the happiest country in the world for the past two years (Bloom, 2019). Finland has, as of late, also ranked at the top or near the top globally in terms of teacher satisfaction, student performance, and educational system performance (Hancock, 2011; Partanen, A. and Corson, T., 2019). On December 6, 2017, this small nordic country of 5.5 million people celebrated their centennial anniversary as an independent nation, free of Russia. On December 5th, just one year later, Finland opened its doors to Oodi (“Ode” in Finnish), Helsinki’s new gigantic public library (Stewart, 2019). According to its own website, Oodi contains nine living trees, two cafes, sixty-four employees and over a hundred thousand books (Oodi, 2019).

Oodi, in my estimation, looks like a gigantic slice of dessert, fashioned with art nouveau delicate waves, built of steel, glass, and locally sourced Finnish Spruce (Stewart, 2019). Other architecture fans and library lovers delivered similar accolades:

"Inside and out, the facility is as handsome as Finnish Modernism fans might expect, and it has proved to be absurdly popular: About 10,000 patrons stop by every day, on average (it’s open until 10 p.m.), and Oodi just hit 3 million visitors this year“ (Dudley, 2019). The numbers are “a lot for a city of 650,000,” added Tommi Laitio, Helsinki’s executive director for culture and leisure. “In its very first month, 420,000 Helsinki residents—almost two-thirds of the population—went to the library." (Dudley, 2019)

Finland already had impressive library attendance. It is a nation where 50% of its citizens have visited a library in the past month and 20% in the past week (Lindberg, 2016).
A new library, if designed correctly, can transform non-users into users and information avoiders into information seekers. A new library therefore is also the perfect study platform for two constructivist user behaviour models. One such information behaviour model is called “Information Grounds” and has been championed by Dr. Karen Fisher, a professor at The University of Washington in the USA (iSchool Directory, 2019). Sensemaking is another user behaviour concept. Pioneered by Ohio State University Professor Brenda Dervin, Sensemaking has a more interior, individualistic rationale on how people thrive in information settings.

Information Grounds has its roots in a constructivist, “whole environment,” pro-social paradigm (Bawden, 2019) within library and information science. Fisher’s user behaviour concept was inspired by author Ray Oldenburg who wrote the book, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Fisher, 2007). *The Great Good Place* assessed the phenomena of “third places,” neither the privacy of home nor the obligatory dynamic of the workplace, but instead a “third place” that has historically served as a destination in which to relax, to socialize, to build trust, and to strengthen community ties (Oldenburg, 1999). Fisher, however, noticed that Oldenburg had excluded libraries in his initial survey and soon found her career and academic niche. She posited that public libraries *may be* vital third places for any democracy or functioning society in how they provide opportunities for social cohesion. Libraries, Fisher argues, have a role beyond their primary goal of educating the public (Buschman, J. and Leckie, G., 2007).
This “third place” phenomena intermixed with an Information Grounds approach, I argue, is essentially what these new, innovative libraries are giving millions of people around the globe, even if the planners are unfamiliar with Fisher’s explicit philosophy. Information Grounds does not require a need to go somewhere in search of information; in fact, such concerns are secondary (Fisher, Landry, Naumer, 2007). I do believe, however, enhanced facilities at a library can provide whole new streams of information that a user may not have predicted before crossing the threshold, or, in which I will elaborate on shortly, “bridging Dervin’s gap.” New streams of information, for instance, would include neighborhood gossip/news like finding out about discounts at amenities in the city, or free computer classes, or who in a network is available to babysit, etc. The better populated and patronized a facility is, the more an Information Grounds approach succeeds. Based on these points, I would argue that Oodi is a hive of Information Grounds.

The thoughtful Oodi envisioners were similarly conscientious in their approach in how the new library would be centered around the user (Leisti, 2008). In fact, out of the three libraries scrutinized, Helsinki was the most inclusive when implementing citizen feedback. Over 2,300 “dreams” were incorporated into the design and building. Also, 2,600 names were suggested on what to call the new civic edifice (Haavisto, 2017). This open-ended, user-solicitation approach is reminiscent of Brenda Dervin’s life mission and Sensemaking user behaviour model (Dervin, 1998). A concept that seeks to challenge power structures in information-seeking, Sensemaking demands or appreciates a place at the conference room table. When applying Sensemaking, the intuitive individual can detect whether or not he or she is valued, appreciated, considered, chosen, asked, and involved. It is a user behaviour model based on concepts of verbing; it is not about victimhood but about belonging to, acting within, and interfacing with library and information design models. With a Sensemaking approach, the user is constantly asking himself or herself (at some level) where she fits into and within the power dynamics of an information setting (Jones, 2015).
Sensemaking as a philosophy knows that we bring our own sense of history and memory to every information setting (see Figure 2). Finland, for instance, had a horrific civil war in 1918 in which 36,000 Finns were killed (Dudley, 2019). The conscientious planners, architects, and builders of the Oodi library understood this turbulent national past at a deep level. Thus the early thinkers and designers of Finland’s megastar library had solicited feedback (or tried to) from everyone in the community, even library non-users by speaking with them in places far away from the original site (Design Helsinki, 2019). The methods were so sophisticated and far-reaching that planners and community leaders had designed a “Tree of Dreams,” illustrating over 2,000 dreams and suggestions on how native Finlanders imagine their Oodi and the types of services it would deliver (Haavisto, 2017). This “public dreaming” information response feedback loop was then reiterated with a “megaphone call” by public figures and local celebrities to visit the “Tree of Dreams” and witness infographics in real time (Haavisto, 2017). Since its opening on December 5th 1918, a day before Finland’s 101st year of independence, Oodi has widely been considered a national success story (Dudley, 2019).

Oodi exemplifies the very best of Sense Making and Information Grounds. As writes Helsinki Library Review Chairman Mikko Leisti, “The library of the future is where people come together. The collection is constantly evolving. The library is buzzing with activity. People
gather. An event can be defined as a shift, a big or small occasion that generates interest and inspires people to visit the library” (Leisti, page 5).

**Seattle**

Involving a city’s population to rally for better library services is always good politics. In November 1998, 72% of Seattle’s voters approved a 197 million dollar bond for a new public library (Addison, 1998). While it took six years from initial approval to official opening, the Central Location of the new Seattle Public Library (SPL) garnered international attention and praise from admirers in Helsinki who noted that the project was characterized by “genuine determination, first-rate communications strategies and excellent team spirit, [and] high-quality design solutions” (Leisti, 2008, p. 13). Karen Fisher, one of the proponents of an Information Grounds concept of user behaviour, and adjunct professor at nearby University of Washington, set out to discover the opinions of pedestrians of the new SPL, six months after its construction. In a co-authored journal article, Seattle Public Library as Place, Fisher had conducted over two hundred interviews of passersby on the street and found that “one of the most common emergent themes was that of civic pride and the role of the central library as a symbol of modernity and forward thinking” (Buschman, J. and Leckie, G., 2007, page 142). Inside, one notable feature of the new 2004 Central Library is the “books spiral,” a four-level, gently-declining spiralling ramp where most of the nonfiction is featured uninterrupted (Seattle Public Library, no date). The “books spiral” is perfect for “berry-picking” (Savolainen, 2018).

Seattle’s new Central Library, whose design was headed by noted Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, opened March 23, 2004 (Seattle Public Library, 2019). The structure resembles an oddly-shaped titanium honeycomb hive. Reactions were strong and mixed. Many of Fisher’s interviewees had complained of its cold, bleak look but most of the respondents expressed civic pride and ownership that this was “their” library (Buschman, J. and Leckie, G., 2007, p.143)

Of the percentage of passersby who identified as library users to Fisher, most had expressed they would usually arrive to the SPL alone. But when asked if ever they had come with others, over 53% had a positive response (Buschman, J. and Leckie, G. 2007, page 145), ratifying the Information Grounds approach. The pro-social elements of library use is something that librarians had long known. Fisher states that “the SPL serves as a connector, providing social opportunities for people to interact across the generations” (Buschman, J. and Leckie, G., 2007, page 145). Of course, for Information Grounds to be activated, it is insufficient that a number of strangers are thrown together haphazardly. Essential is the actor role or social type

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1 I would argue that certain modes of research in and of themselves fit more within the constructivist models championed by Dervin and Fisher: namely the utilization of interviews, focus groups, questionnaires (to a certain extent) and Delphi Studies. This is not to say that literature nor the printed word has no place in these two constructivist models; the printed word is simply unresponsive when trying to form an immediate argument against it or enhancement to it, more so in Fisher’s Information Grounds theory. Town hall gatherings, meetings, group work - these all lead to the best examples of how Sensemaking and Information Grounds can most effectively be brought into play.
who determines how information is fed through the information communication chain (Fisher, et al, 2005).

Models of Information Grounds are often events as well as settings but the crucial point is that they have a pro-social element to it and not have information-seeking be its end goal. It can involve an “information sharing activity” but not do so coercively. Information Grounds seeks to evoke feelings, ideas, and values and is not obsessed with information retrieval itself but celebrates a context-rich environment (Pilerot, 2012). For libraries to work in places like Seattle, Boston, or Helsinki, they need to be peopled. With a concept like Information Grounds, there is a serendipity to learning and information exchange, that is dependent on people but also looks towards different streams of information: highly-visible flyers and posters and easy access to computers, lectures, and activities (Pilerot, 2012). These new libraries take an overview to learning and to the strength of the community; if you build it, they will come.

And come they have. According to SPL’s own numbers, the new Central Library location had received 8,000 people per day in its first year, double the number of people per day of its predecessor (Seattle Public Library, 2019). Remarkably, many of these visitors are global tourists (Krueger, 2019). Seattle, and new libraries similar to it around the world, do not just rest of innovative design to attract visitors but often feature unorthodox amenities like rooftop gardens, movie theaters, gaming rooms, and restaurants (Krueger, 2019). Quirkiness is encouraged. As the New York Times notes, “The new library in Aarhus, Denmark, has a massive gong that rings whenever a mother in a nearby hospital gives birth” (Krueger, 2019).

The new trend in 21st century library design is unmistakable: increased square footage, an attempt to reach every demographic possible, and giving patrons every opportunity to intermix within an open design that has re-gained favour in Silicon Valley. What we think of as open design has its roots in a German 1960s workplace environment movement called Burolandschaft (Hickey, 2015)². Designing space to facilitate information exchange is typical of an Information Grounds user behaviour model.

Although Fisher found that the new SPL did not meet five of Oldenburg’s eight criteria (Oldenburg, 1999) for being a true third place, the SPL did score high marks on neutrality, accessibility, and psychological comfort (Buschman, J. and Leckie, G., 2007, page 152). The ultra-modern SPL, however, may be far too conspicuous an edifice for the comforting feeling of a third place, but Fisher is hopeful that a more modest branch library with its “smaller scale and tighter cohesiveness” might fill the role of third place so desperately needed in these times.(Buschman, J. and Leckie, G., 2007, page 153).

² I believe society will soon be experiencing a backlash against open design and Burolandschaft as noise pollution (Holzman, 2014) becomes an ever-increasing problems in all countries, in all libraries, and beyond. Designated silent rooms are key to keep the forces of din at bay.
Brenda Dervin and her refined Sensemaking approach encourages an interior journey where there is a robust set of self-examining questions. A large part of this user behaviour model is questioning and understanding the power dynamics that underpin situations, settings, and interactions (Jones, 2015).

Peter Jones, an innovation research consultant in Toronto, and an admirer of Brenda Dervin’s work, says that Dervin’s “methods focus on locating authentic situations which surface meaning through discovery of “gaps” and discontinuities in information experience. Different forms of help and support-seeking are located in the subjective journey” (Jones, 2015). For younger patrons, new users, or immigrants at the library or information service, this Sensemaking can cut both ways. Let us imagine a friendly librarian who reaches out vocally to a patron who has just walked through the door. Is this the best tack? Or do people in 2020 feel more comfortable through interacting with machines and computers nowadays? Coming into a new place like a library can be intimidating, even for an English-speaking adult. You are crossing the threshold or what Dervin calls “bridging the gap” (Dervin, 1998).
In the pre-renovated 1972 “modern” Johnson wing of the BPL, crossing the threshold was having to enter a cold, cavernous lobby and navigate through security turnstiles while being scrutinized by security guards on either side. Famous architect, Phillip Johnson, who designed and completed the 1972 modern wing facing Boylston Street felt he had understandably missed an opportunity with the entrance due to design compromises (Goodwin, 2019). But beyond the entrance complaints, the Johnson wing, speaking from personal experience and from the opinions of a number of Bostonians, seemed dim, insipid, lifeless. Any fortuitous window that faced Boston or Exeter Street was often blocked with heavy black blinds.

City leaders found their political courage with new leadership. In 2014, newly-elected Boston Mayor Marty Walsh teamed up with library planners to invest seventy-eight million dollars into a revamped Johnson wing, one more welcoming and fashioned with ultra-modern facilities (Goodwin, 2016).

Director of Library Services, Michael Colford, who was part of the planning and redesign team of the Johnson wing remembers it well, especially the Johnson wing pre-renovation.

“Complaints were numerous,” he wrote in an email (Colford, 2019). “Too dark, confusing layout, dirty, poor lines of communication, [there were] not staff visible upon entrance. We collected feedback through an old-fashioned suggestion box, and prior to the renovation, we did conduct an extensive survey, but the focus was more on what users wanted, not about what they didn’t like.”
Entering the 1972 Johnson wing pre-renovation was an entirely different experience than entering through the Beaux Arts entrance on Dartmouth Street (Cook, 2015). The McKim building, the classic 1895 building that many people envision when they think of the country’s first public library, is considered the crown jewel of Boston. Once inside a visitor ascends a marble staircase protected by two chiseled lions. Eventually the visitor makes her way to Bates Hall, the grand, handsome space filled with quiet college students, reading by green-tinted desk lamps. The McKim building is no place for Fisher’s Information Grounds but it is perfect for Dervin’s Sensemaking. Part of that difference in journey is the expectation around volume, with the McKim building serving as the more classic, traditional version of what a library should be.

Luckily, for Boston, there are two “main” libraries to choose from, even though they are connected, so one can activate a different user behaviour based on the setting. And chatter and gossip, I believe, is essential for Fisher’s Information Grounds and has more of a purpose in the revamped Johnson wing.

“There is not [an] expectation of silence in the Johnson building,” Colford describes in an email, “and we do not tell people to be quiet (unless they’re speaking louder than normal conversation. There is no shouting.) In fact, we often program music events or spoken word events right in the main space. It is meant to be a vibrant, energetic space for collaborative working. There are a couple of rooms for group use that can be booked by the public, but they are not solo, private spaces” (2019).
“In the McKim building, we have several reading rooms where quiet study is the norm. We do ask people not to speak, or to speak in whispers. Most of that building is meant for quiet study. So when people complain that there is too much noise in the Johnson building, we do refer them to the McKim building. It doesn’t make everyone happy, but the people complaining about the noise are few and far between” (Colford, 2019).

Conclusions and Criticisms

Not all cities are as privileged as the upscale metropoles of Boston, Seattle, and Helsinki, and the fact that there is a history of reading, writing, and scholarship in these cities makes library upkeep a pressing priority. In Seattle’s instance, the project was given an unexpected lift when Bill Gates of Microsoft donated $20 million to the new Central Library location (Addison, 1998). The government of Finland and a number of cooperating funding partners had also stepped in to assist the city of Helsinki partly because Oodi was to prove a popular tourist attraction (Leisti, 2008). Boston similarly had a successful fundraising arm if only because the city’s open secret was the ugliness of the pre-renovated Johnson wing (Goodwin, 2016). One criticism is that while these three aforementioned new libraries can be viewed as appealing tourist destinations, they may come at the expense of deepening the information poverty in more rural areas or at least attract some resentment in the corners of a region that are underserved in vital other areas: hospitals, public transport, etc. Obviously, urban planning and library/information design may seem like discrete disciplines but I believe that a city, town or a region is truly an information setting writ large. There is an idea proposed by Schmidt and Etches in their book, *Useful, Usable, Desirable: Applying User Experience Design to Your Library*, called “journey mapping” (p. 16) in which library planners and designers spatially map how efficiently a user can access amenities within a library. We can quite easily extrapolate this “journey mapping” to society as a whole. Ray Oldenburg, with his critique of abysmally poor spatial design in the United States in his book *The Great Good Place*, writes : “Attempting to hold together the pieces of one’s existence across a landscape that spreads and scatters them is difficult, even for those who travel light and alone” (Oldenburg, 1999, page 287).

We are however, I assert, living in more urbanized environments and will have to worry about the geographically disadvantaged at another time. To the urban victors go the spoils.

My conclusion for this essay is that the two user behaviour models highlighted here, Information Grounds and Sensemaking, can be activated or manifested by overhauling the setting, tone, and approach of an information setting. Fisher’s Information Grounds and Dervin’s Sensemaking are both, at their hearts, constructivist in nature and demand a full participation of everyone involved, especially those who feel they sit at the margins of society: people of color, immigrants, senior citizens, LGBT people, and people living with disabilities. Library planning is one of the most joyful and inclusive civic activities and the final product should be one in which

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3 The Boston area, long known as being “America’s Athens” has a college and university employment location quotient three-and-a-half more concentrated than the U.S. average (McSweeney and Marshall, 2009); Seattle was designated a UNESCO City of Literature in 2017 (Redmond & Seattle City of Literature Board, 2015); 50% of Finland’s population have visited a library within the past month (Lindberg, 2016).
all feel truly welcome. That is the essence of Information Grounds philosophy: out of our silos and into the shared environment. Sensemaking, on the other hand, while also constructivist in nature, is more of an interior, individualistic theory and asks that planners, librarians, and designers always consider the needs, actions, and desires of the individual user, done so through the prism of verbing (Dervin, 1998). How does this place make her feel? What images does it conjure? What behaviours will it activate in the individual user? What can she contribute?

Through a careful balance of applying the philosophies of Sensemaking and Information Grounds, the libraries of the 21st century can become the best third places indeed and carry the added benefit of being centers of deliberate information retrieval.
Bibliography


