

**Paula Sequeiros**  
 University of Coimbra, Portugal

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**Reading in Public Libraries:  
 Space, Reading Activities, and User Profiles**

**Abstract** This single case research was developed within a public library in Porto, Portugal, Biblioteca Municipal Almeida Garrett. Its main objective was to understand how public library readers interact with space, the Internet technology, and reading resources, and how these interactions shape the representations of what a public library is. This case was chosen because the library has a recent and renowned building, high reader use levels, and Internet access.

The design of user profiles was an intermediate step, and then a partial result in the process of understanding provision and appropriation of technology, space, and reading resources (all media and supports) in a specific context. The construction of these profiles is presented and discussed in this paper.

A qualitative, single case study was designed according to Burawoy's Extended Case Method, departing from the framework of several theories – Feenberg and Bakardjieva's approach to Internet uses, Lefèbvre and Certeau's approach on space – and some library users and studies of Internet user profiles – by Rodrigues, Bakardjieva, and by other authors. A theoretical, diversified sample was constructed. User profiles were designed as a way of depicting common reading practices by grouping readers' characteristics according to Internet, space, and bibliographical resource usage. Along with this usage, social demographics, motivations, meanings, and feelings were enquired about to construct a thick narrative. Observation of all forms of reading practices, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, children's drawings, photography, and an architectural and social analysis of the building were used.

The library has diversified uses, tied to present-day everyday life conditions, and its space and management style are flexible enough to allow for different user appropriations. As to the general reading atmosphere, high satisfaction was reported, and the most appreciated features of social and architectural space were signaled by readers. User profiles reflect diversified usage modes, diverse relations to space, to Internet and bibliographic resources, and to other users.

Both the theoretical framework and the selected methodology proved fruitful for the intended purpose. These readers' profiles may provide a tool to understand and manage public library services, given the adequate fittingness. The same may be said about readers' evaluation of space, in general, or, specifically, about space appropriations, and, above all, about the production of stimulating reading atmospheres.

**Keywords** User Profiles; Single Case Studies; Space Relations; Qualitative Methodology; Public Libraries; Library Buildings; Portugal

**Paula Sequeiros** is a post-doctoral researcher with the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra and a researcher with the Institute of Sociology, University of Porto, Portugal. Her research interests include social studies of public libraries and the sociology of reading.  
**email address:** paulasequeiros@ces.uc.pt

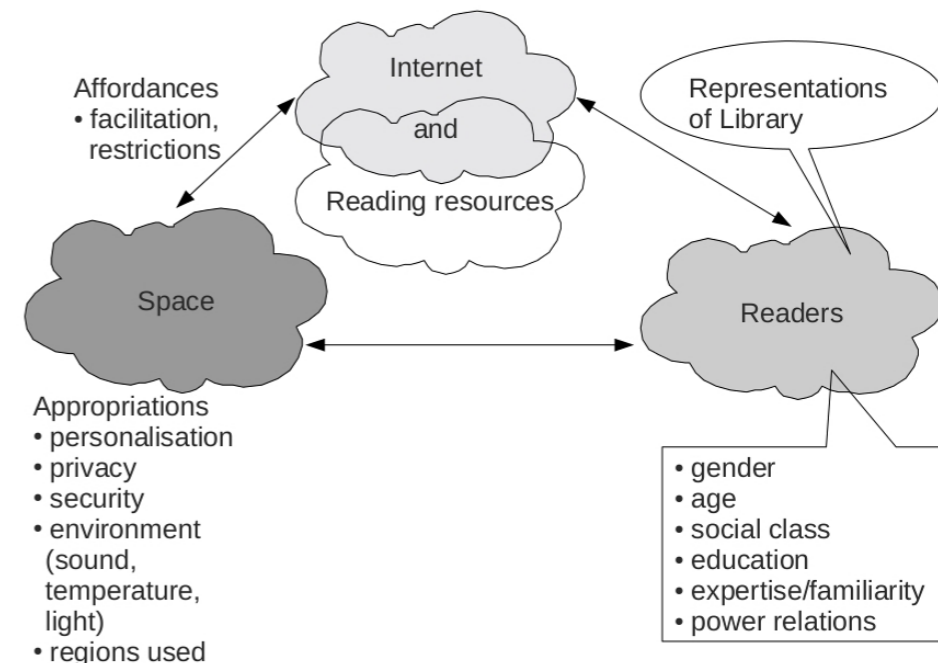
Library buildings are artifacts that shape reading practices; readers, inhabiting and appropriating these provided spaces, along with staff, reshape them constantly. While such a statement would not likely raise special contestation on a theoretical level, empirically grounded research on how such processes take place in public libraries is scarce. However, during this particular research process, understanding the interaction between all resources – space and reading materials, the Internet included – enacted through public readers' activities, was considered an important step in the study of library users. As social relations and space relations are dialectically interdependent and interactive, space may be not only an arena for social relations and conflict expression but also a contingent location for their formation.

While researching how space, readers, and the Internet (Feenberg 2002) interacted in a particular public library, and how this reflected on readers' representations of what a public library is, I began by aiming to understand the spatial social relations, the actual

reading practices, and the interrelations of all three concepts – space, readers, and the Internet (Sequeiros 2010). This was meant to provide context for the main research objectives and those concepts were to be the main dimensions (or facets) of the research object. Having identified different modes of usage both for library resources and for space, a design of readers' profiles followed. This multidimensional design was aimed to depict the main characteristics of readers, how those usages interrelated, what meanings readers constructed around their own practices, and it was ultimately aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the whole framework through an integrated interpretation of results and an integrated presentation of conclusions.

The initial research question was formulated as: How do Internet appropriations, space use, and public library reading practices all interact, and how does this interaction shape users' representations of what a public library is? The following conceptual map drafts that question.

Figure 1. Conceptual map.



Source: self-elaboration.

As soon as the design of readers' profiles was concluded, they were compared with those previously published, which I knew of. The intermediate result of this comparison presented me with similar findings, as well as a particular profile, which derived from the theoretical-methodological option of including space as a fundamental dimension. As the outcome of this option became clear, I thought it would be advisable to discuss both the theoretical and methodological approaches to the research object and the results these approaches provided. This is why I treat space here as a fundamental dimension of the whole project, while presenting the associated results and conclusions.

### Literature Review on Libraries and Space

Below is a list of titles, selected for being light-shedding on the concepts underlying the initial research question. Further reviews were made during the research process to enlighten issues raised from fieldwork.

Buschman and Leckie (2007) edited a comprehensive book on space and libraries, where history, gender, the public sphere sociability are some of the perspectives chosen to address the issues of public libraries.

Hart, Bains, and Jones (1996) refer to diverse categories of library buildings (*temples, cathedrals, office blocks, glasshouses*), which they associate with knowledge production, the arousal of attitudes and emotions.

Recently, some research focused on conviviality as a fundamental trait of a library's life (Audunson

2005; Audunson et al. 2007; Fisher et al. 2007; Aabø, Audunson, and Vårheim 2010). An empirically based research by Given and Leckie (2003), on readers' actual practices in the public space of two libraries, allowed the authors to state that talking was a frequent activity. They reported it as occupying a third place in a parallel with using computers, reading, and writing being first and second activities. Eating and drinking, while not formally allowed, were also observed, which, as a whole, led them to advocate that libraries ought to be conceived more as *interactive places* and less as *silent spaces*.

Christina A. Peterson (2005) focuses on the identification of activities (information seeking, recreation, teaching and learning, connection, contemplation), which informed the planning of a new library and the provision of differentiated areas, but she does neither aim at providing a theoretical framework nor at transferring results.

Terezinha Elizabeth da Silva (2006) associates library architecture to Foucault's concept of *heterochronies* and to the metaphor of human memory and feelings of reverence.

Tina Hohmann (2006) describes some popular buildings and features most appreciated by users.

Drawing profiles, through the categorization of people in the groups by common, shared characteristics, relevant to the research objectives, is a usual procedure when you want to deal with features of social groups and their practices. But, ethnographically based research on public library readers' profiles is equally scarce. Some published papers re-

ferring to academic and/or research libraries were not fit for the context under consideration.

Nagata, Sakai, and Kawai (2007) correlate lifestyle values and attitudes to library use in two libraries, and conclude that residents and library visitors present a different distribution of values from the lifestyle perspective. Yet, the reason why they correlate these two dimensions is not quite explicitly stated. What these groups valued is not clear either as far as attitudes towards the library are concerned. Advantages of using such a methodology appear difficult to be sustained from a pragmatic perspective. Bakardjieva (2005) reports some very interesting research on Internet users, although designed for another context. She grouped users into *infosumers* – rationalist users who repudiated online sociability; *instrumental relations* users – associating rational information seeking and exchange with social interaction; those looking for the debate of *ideas* – valuing informational resources, as well as intellectual sociability and political debate; *chatterers* – practicing forms of relaxed and sometimes humorous sociability; the *communitarian* – looking for information and support from people sharing similar identities. Bakardjieva's profile design may apply to similar research on libraries, given the analogies between library readers and Internet users. The profiles indicated in this paper eventually presented some similitude.

Research by Rodrigues (2007), in another Portuguese public library, points to five *modes of relation with the library* – instrumental, cultivated, self-taught, ludic, and convivial – which are very similar to the profiles further presented, except for the absence of the dimension of space.

To address the research question in a theoretically informed way, a literature review was made from which the main concepts were selected to draw a conceptual schema. This was further enriched both from literature and fieldwork issues, depicting the additions made to the problematic during the research process.

### Theoretical Framework

Lefèbvre's theory on how space and social relations interact in the production and reproduction of space was a fundamental starting point: being simultaneously a condition and a result of social practices, "itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (1991:73).

Being a concrete entity, it should be conceived as a *space of representations*; being also immaterial and symbolic, abstract, the *representations of space* should be considered too.

Lefèbvre's main concern was to surpass space *visibility*, the formal and aesthetic dimensions that do not reveal but instead conceal space sociability by the saturation of images. To unveil the social relations of space, the researcher should consider the interlinked dimensions of form, structure, and function.

Recalling the importance of the opposition between dominated and appropriated spaces, Lefèbvre stresses that property and power issues are a fundamental issue. At this juncture, another approach concurs to the chosen theoretical framework: Michel de Certeau's work on how users

individually appropriate and practice space, eventually circumventing constraints, using strategies and tactical tricks, sometimes in unpredictable ways. His operational definition of place was also borrowed: “an instantaneous configuration of positions, implying an indication of stability ... an order in accord with which the elements are distributed in relations of coexistence”. Place holds “the univocity or the stability of a ‘proper,’” “space is a practiced place” in the context of everyday life (Certeau 1984:173).

Aiming to analyze activities, “*programs* or series of practices through which space is appropriated,” Certeau’s concept of *region*, a “space created by an interaction,” will also be useful (1984:126).

Synthetically, Lefèbvre’s approach allows for a comprehensive and deep analysis of spatial social relations, providing a solid basis to relate reading activities to space use. Certeau’s perspective on power relations, and his focus on the practiced space, provides guidance on the ethnographic empirical work and on the categorization of readers’ actual practices.

## Methodology

Pursuing a comprehensive understanding of the whole social reality (Donmoyer 2000), I followed an integrated, intensive, qualitative approach to analyze and interpret not only those practices but also the wider context of relations and processes, as well as the socially constructed meanings attached to them (Blumer 1969; Geertz 1973).

For the purpose of the wider, current research, I adopted Michael Burawoy’s Extended Case

Method (1998). While comparative approaches favor knowledge *generalizability*, usually through the extensive collection and comparison of data from different cases, a single case methodology makes a stake on knowledge *transferability*, creating knowledge from singular situations. Similar contexts may allow for knowledge transfer, providing there is enough *fittingness* for the produced conclusions.

Social sciences may develop further, in a parallel with personal knowledge accumulation propitiated by vicarious experiences, which enrich individual repertoires. Drawing on the result of single cases, these results may then elicit new questions and, desirably, extend theory.

This single case method allows for a depth of analysis difficult to attain with other methods. Furthermore, linking through theoretical interpretation the micro – unique situation – to the macro – society as a whole – this method will “tell us about **society** as a whole rather than about the **population** of similar cases” (Burawoy 1998 [my emphasis]).

Epistemologically, this approach is based on three fundamental concerns: *reflexivity* – theory does not emerge from data, reflection departs from the existing theory and questions its results in an inter-subjective dialogue with the persons and the processes observed, toward theory reconstruction and improvement (Burawoy 1998); *complexity* – human societies are complex, diverse, living in permanent change and so research should be the result of local, situated, and heterogeneous processes of construction (Nunes 2001); a *dialogical relationship with the observed*, searching for their own

interpretations and socially constructed meanings, and a *commitment* with the purpose of the research (Haraway 1988).

The architectural design of Almeida Garrett Public Library is innovative and has been an object of study. Programmed as a library, it could provide clear clues regarding the conceptual fittingness of the architects’ project to the municipality demands, whereas a re-qualified building could not.

It is discretely inserted within a public park, in the city of Porto. The relation with the park’s traditional space was unclear at the time. Occupation levels are high, there appeared to be social diversity among readers; collections are updated, there is wireless Internet access from the inception, several computers are publicly available, and recreational reading is an important part of this library’s activity – not common in Porto’s heritage-centered municipal library. All of these made Almeida Garrett an interesting case, selected after consulting experts in the Portuguese public libraries’ network.

A non-probabilistic theoretical sample was constructed reflecting the perceived diversity in the library, taking into account dimensions such as gender, age, occupation, ethnicity, visual, and locomotion disabilities. Readers were chosen as to the likelihood of providing interesting information for the research objectives, sometimes with the support of staff (as in the case of frequent visitors). As a qualitative approach was being used, no sample representativeness was sought; the aim was to elicit as much relevant data as possible instead.

Twenty-nine users, one library manager, one assistant librarian, the maintenance supervisor, and the architect were interviewed. When necessary, readers were asked to move and state their remarks on specific spatial features in the very places where they had sensed them. The process ended when data saturation was achieved – data being collected would not add new properties to the researched categories. The empirical research design focused on users’ real practices, in the context of social inequalities and power relations.

Seeking a strong ethnographic support, observation was a fundamental tool. The readers’ practices were registered in a log for several days during a period of three months, at different times of the day (Burawoy 1998) in 2008. Preferred places, activities undertaken, conflicts, accessibility, gender and age distribution, and attitudes; bodily postures were especially observed. Observation proved to be especially useful to overcome most readers’ difficulties to verbalize how they used and felt this space.

Without it, the mezzanine’s role as a privileged place for visual control could have passed unnoticed, and the association of the multimedia area to relaxed leisure, declared in an interview, would have stayed unconfirmed.

Photography of bodily postures, activities, facial expressions was a useful tool for a subsequent, detailed analysis (e.g., Figures 4 and 5).

National law allows photographing individuals’ public activities in public places. Nevertheless, permission was asked.

I also explained photography purposes – scientific, not commercial publication – and that a collective space was the general target, not faces. No one opposed.

To analyze users' practices and discourses, as well as those of staff, management, and architects, alongside with an aesthetic and functional analysis of the building, I used in-depth, semi-structured interview techniques (Kvale 1996; Seale 2004). I also engaged in informal talks with several staff members, and their opinions, doubts, and clues proved to be valuable. Besides social-demographic data, readers were questioned on their place of residence, modes of movement, activities and frequency of visits, evaluation of functionality and comfort, emotions, privacy and surveillance, preferred/usual places, et cetera.

Children's drawings of the library were also used to supplement their interviews through more informal conversation (Eder and Fingerson 2002).

The use of this set of techniques allowed not only for the collection of diversified types of data but also for the triangulation of methods.

Envisioning reading in public libraries as a public service, I assume favoring the provision of democratic spaces to be enjoyed as places of encounter and discovery (Audunson 2005), be it for culture, leisure, information, or learning purposes. A commitment with the intentionality of the constructed research object and with the purposes of the research is also assumed in an effort to look at this social reality through the

eyes of others, establishing a dialogical relation with the social actors in presence, and making a stance for a critical perspective that rejects unquestioned, single-sided, simplistic interpretations (Haraway 1991).

### Constructing the Case: A Public Library's Space

The Almeida Garrett Public Library was inaugurated in 2001 and soon achieved high occupation rates. This is the second public library in the city, the older one being more directed to research, with only one small room with free-access to the shelves.

The library is inserted within a 19<sup>th</sup> century large public park in Porto. Its romantic design includes rose gardens, lakes, gigantic trees, and a magnificent view over the Douro River. Presently, it hosts a sports pavilion, a restaurant, and a children's park. The area is well-served by public transportation, and the library is half way from both city centers, the historical and the tertiary centre.

The three dimensions Lefèbvre (1991) posits as fundamental in social space analysis – form, function, and structure – were empirically applied to ensure that mere visibility is overcome and that social and power relations are unveiled. Further categorization of empirical data developed through qualitative, thematic analysis, partially emerging from the theoretical framework and partially constructed from empirical data coding (Seale 2004).

### Concepts and Function

Figure 2. The main façade of the Almeida Garrett Library.



Source: photo by indicopleustes, Flickr.

The architect, José Manuel Soares, wanted to “bring the garden into the library,” instead of imposing a building to the garden. Similarly, the control of natural light should neither block a relation with the surroundings nor veil the singularity of the place. These were the central concepts to the architectural program, as transmitted by the administration: free access to stacks; a library for “those who are about

to have a first contact with books,” as well as for students; a library where one could walk in or out freely, “in continuity with the public space.” He planned a flexible space, adaptable through time. Inspired by the idea of a Jesuit church, he drew a central, collective nave, and lateral, small spaces, which might simultaneously facilitate individual appropriation and avoid dispersion.

## Structure

Figure 3. The inner face of the main façade to the right, the park trees may be seen at the end.



Source: photo by Eva Lima.

According to some readers, the building's insertion in the park is acknowledged and appreciated as "it's integrated in Nature." Actually, only children use it frequently. Visitors may glance at neighboring houses, urban insertion was not concealed.

The library occupies two of the four levels, while an art gallery, a garage, and a technical area occupy the other two. Visibility over the whole surface is allowed in each floor.

Wireless connection to the Internet is available.

Figure 4. Rear façade.



Source: photo by Paula Sequeiros.

Soares stated that he tried to avoid a hierarchical distribution of services by floors: the hierarchy of spaces was strategically used instead to create decreasing noise levels as visitors progress along through them, still allowing for a global reading of space. However, power relations associated to space usage were to be observed in the multimedia region use – including the TV sets availability – in the use of the mezzanine or in the creation of a reading atmosphere. All of these are analyzed further, and are dealt with in detail by Sequeiros (2010; 2011).

## Form and Design

The lobbies and staircase are overlaid with very white marble. In a brutalist manner, rows of halved pine-wood logs dress, as a curtain, the UV filtering glass main façade, dissimulating it amidst the garden. The remaining floors and furniture are made of light-colored wood, which also partially lines most of the interior walls, and walls are painted predominantly white.

Simple, pure lines, well-defined surfaces predominate. The ceiling has a wavy design for acoustic improvement.

This is an almost open space, though separate, specialized areas were conceived. Alongside the main floor runs a corridor leading to the adults' areas. The children's area, by the entrance and in a slightly inferior level, is separated from those by a glass wall, not reaching the ceiling, added later to soundproof the incoming noise. In the main floor there is a series of corners with sofas, tables in sets of two or four by the front, and back façades; at the far end, there are tables in rows and an area with computers and Internet access; in the middle, a mezzanine reveals an inferior level for multimedia and computers with Internet connection.

A patio mediates the space between the cafeteria and the children's area, so relatives may wait there and still watch over their children, which is in accordance with Eigenbrodt's desirable requirements of "communication, access, orientation and freedom of designing library facilities for everyone" (2008:101).

## Evaluating and Sensing Space

### *A Place Within Reach*

The location was also appreciated, most of the interviewed use public transportation to get there, some just walk. Many come from neighboring cities.

The building is generally accessible for those with limited mobility; a lift is also available to transport baby prams.

A computer workstation is dedicated to the blind or amblyopic.

Crossing the winding garden paths, however, may be difficult for blind persons who sometimes ask for personal guidance.

### *A Place to Feel*

Further to an initial difficulty in qualifying space, readers resorted to hypallages (Lefèbvre 1991) when praising the light and transparency and the integration in the park. In my view, the often mentioned *transparency* and *openness* are, above all, the architect's well-succeeded translation of the concepts of free-access and continuity within public space underlying the architectural program.

Although adults are not frequent visitors, they declared that the garden transmitted a calming sensation.

No particular remarks were made on light, ventilation, temperature, or acoustic conditions, although both the architect and the maintenance officer acknowledged ventilation problems.

Readers expressed their great satisfaction to be able to enjoy such a high quality space, and devalued those issues.

I could observe how readers weaved their reading cocoons: reading gave way to an *absent impertinence*, (Certeau 1984), desensitizing from other physical stimuli: two peacocks paced unnoticed along the window-sills during one of the interviews.

Emotionally, although indulging in diverse activities, they collectively wove a *reading atmosphere* (Sequeiros 2010; 2011), a mixed product of the social spatial relations (Lefèbvre 1991) and of physical, sensory, emotional, and aesthetic features.

### *A Public Place, Personal and Private*

Figure 5. Studying in the mezzanine.



Source: photo by Paula Sequeiros.

Tranquility, organization, concentration, the possibility of integrating a stimulating intellectual labor ambiance were singled out as valued characteristics. Such an atmosphere, however, is not enjoyable if staying home.

For a few readers, with personal histories of surpassing barriers to become library users, their present status is proudly felt as an accomplishment: a woman, daughter of manual workers who toiled to get their children educated, and who became blind in her adolescence, now reads in Braille; a retired male reader, attending the Senior University, rejoices in watching young people study, a chance he didn't get in his own time.

A curious story of users' appropriation was registered: spaces, presently serving as reading surfaces all around the mezzanine, were originally designed to be waist-level shelves. As users were uncomfortable when picking books from them, and this is a coveted area for its central emplacement, they began removing those shelves and sitting there. The management did not oppose. Some particular forms of space appropriation and tactics of place-making could be observed, and displacing some pieces of furniture is an accepted practice. Children may bring in their toys and drawing materials. Chairs were moved according to personal tastes. Some users, particularly students, sometimes use tricks (Certeau 1984) to create additional space and to signal that they don't want company: they scatter books and personal objects on neighboring tables to reserve space. After all, this silent competition appears to be based on assumptions of a legitimated presence supported by the credentials of their occupational status: students are naturally expected to be found here.

Personal, private space created by reading is like a bubble, soft, but protecting. The rules of co-reading are passed along with learning to read. Bourdieu developed the concept of *habitus* to designate "a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (1979:72). It is this practical knowledge, this set of dispositions that entitles readers to naturally expect not to be disturbed.

"I need my private space, [but] live among a lot of people," a therapeutic community. In this li-

brary, reading "is never-ending, it means finding the words for things, resting, and reflecting...very pleasurable." "If I stopped leading the life I'm used to in public spaces, I would certainly miss a true pleasure and the real harmony I'm looking for" [woman, 40 years].

The need for privacy is differently felt, seeming to vary according to housing conditions, gender, and social class: a young woman dislikes being stared at "in an unpleasant way" by men; the homeless reader does not oppose to having his screen watched while surfing, "they're not going to take any bite away from me!" The sole idea of lack of privacy in the library makes the young couple, sharing a single social-housing apartment with twelve others, laugh out loud: home was the place where they lacked privacy the most. Petit states: "[t]he absence of intimacy is perhaps the best poverty indicator, even more than income" (2001:118).

Cell phones ringing is the most annoying intrusion reported, occasionally leading users to ask for staff intervention.

Aural technology is sometimes used to reinforce those personal, individualized atmospheres (Bull 2006). Wearing headphones also signals a wish not to be disturbed.

Almost all referred to a form of relational contract (Certeau 1984) to tacitly regulate co-presence: using a public space requires concessions over the personally reserved one.

Lockers in the lobby are rarely used. Security lock chain cables for portable PCs may be borrowed

at the reception as some thefts were registered in the past.

Surveillance by security guards and cameras, which are not spontaneously noticed, are felt as protective measures. The library is sensed as a safe space, as the surrounding garden is, in general.

### *A Place for Conviviality*

Visiting the library is a social act: children are usually accompanied by adults, some adults and adolescents come in pairs or groups. At times, a certain small talk goes on, maybe around the latest news headlines, as the observed case around the sharp rise in bread prices. Co-presence is valued, even if others are not addressed to; usual faces may be memorized and discreetly followed.

The need to socialize is clearly felt by many. *Proximity without propinquity*, according to Park's expression (as cited in Tonkiss 2005), a withdrawal inherent to reading overlaps with the need for privacy characteristic of urban lives. A former typographer, nowadays a homeless person, says: "above all, I like coming here a lot when I'm feeling down, I come in and it seems I reinvigorate! Crossing that door seems like home to me, as if it was my own family, I feel superbly well!"

Some students and informal scholars declared that they look particularly for the togetherness (Bakardjieva 2004) propitiated by a collective atmosphere of order and concentration: "look, all the other people are also doing the same as I am, so [this is useful] to soften things a little [laughing] if it's something I don't like to do, that's what I try to think about" [male student, 34-year-old]; "there are

some behaviors that are more or less predictable and there is a certain intrinsic order here that is motivating" [female student, 40-year-old].

The apparent social diversity is appreciated, senior readers like watching younger people and children, "different faces every day," the homeless reader declares to enjoy the social and age diversity.

### **Differences and Inequalities**

The most economically dispossessed revealed a unique capacity to reflect on (and cherish!) the opportunities offered by a public library, revealing also that these perspectives were closely tied to their social positioning, what Haraway (1988) named the *vantage points of the subjugated*. They also expressed great concerns about probable budget cuts within the ongoing privatization of public services.

Some users referred to what they considered to be the legitimate practices (Bourdieu and Darbel 1966:60) within a library. They sometimes complain if other readers do not meet these standards, informally prescribing what they assume to be the adequate behavior. Which is clearly correlated with the predominating class status: manual workers are seldom found here, the average user is the student or the more educated, intellectual worker, as usually occurs at a national level (Freitas, Casanova, and Alves 1997; Fortuna and Fontes 2000).

I could not find evidence from field observation to support the generalized assumption on feminization of library spaces. However, a clear gender difference was perceived in the absence of

middle-aged or elder women: gender differences within illiteracy rates do not seem to explain their absence; unlike men and younger women, their leisure is still most likely confined to domesticity. The single exception was a woman who became a frequent library visitor during her long residence abroad.

Nor did I find evidence of ethnic segregation in spite of the regular presence, then, of a noisy and large group of African adolescents.

The spot for the visually impaired is appreciated, though underused.

In spite of positive staff attitudes regarding social inclusion, some aspects call for improvement. The urban figure of the homeless person may embody subjective insecurity feelings, leading to fantasizing and amplifying real insecurity situations (Fernandes 2003). Symptomatically, no real danger situation was ever reported on the premises. As they began entering in groups to watch films, homeless readers were targeted as a problem by some users who complained about couches being used to sleep on, and TV sets being occupied for too long. Subsequently, one TV set was removed, one was assigned for documentaries, only two were left for feature films. I could observe that some normal users do sleep in the (comfortable!) couches upstairs, which is ignored by staff and other readers, generally.

The architect planned to avoid discrimination in the allocation of space, associated to floor status. Still, signs of social differentiation could be traced, attached not to space but to document physical support: multimedia, in the lower floor, requires

less cultural capital than books (Bourdieu 1979), relaxed attitudes and bodily postures developed in this area are clear markers of a corporal *hexis* tied to class (Bourdieu 1977).

### **Readers' Profiles of a Public Library**

With this vision of a library inside a wide park in the back of my mind, some metaphors arose as a meaningful way to communicate the characteristics of profiles. Leaning on Haraway's use of metaphors (1988), these devices were used to add more sense to the features of profiles, intending to rely on common situated knowledge (as characteristics associated to animals in folk tales). Simultaneously, they were used to rely on the perspectives of those observed, their values and meanings. These profiles were an original result of this case study, while showing some similarity to others previously published, as referred.

#### **Bees**

The purpose of *occupational users* is to actively occupy their time in a useful way, whether they presently have a paid work or not. Their stronger motivations: to benefit from an environment favoring study and from free resources. Tasks may be organized and planned in detail, from subjects to schedules. They may stay for the whole day, several days, a week: "I leave when the lights go off, [when] I have no choice! ... Now that my day has ended, I may focus on something else" [male reader, 34-year-old, unemployed]. A female assiduous reader belongs to the so-called *residents*, the local librarians' nickname for the regulars. "The day goes by more quickly, it's more productive" [female, 28-year-old, unemployed].

They research and write on matters according to their education or curiosity, they train for job competitions. Unemployed or retired are words avoided in personal narratives, surely for the common social stigma; but their disposition and a work ethic, adapted to their present situation, all seem to shape their practices. Were they at an office or university, we would not hesitate to state they *are* working.

Some of the adults, all holding degrees, come to enjoy the company of others and the togetherness of the like-minded, which help discipline their work; some are elderly citizens: one man, strolling from one continent to another, benefits from the Internet access to update his biographical site; another one needs “something to occupy his time;” a woman comes mostly to use computing facilities she can’t personally afford. For half of the interviewed, using the Internet is the main purpose of the visit, two brought their portables and listened to music with headphones; another two referred to the Internet as a secondary resource.

Other main activities vary, reading newspapers is the most frequent; a female reader is a multiple user (varied resources in diverse supports); one studies; another borrows books and trains computing and language skills, benefiting from an environment she considers more stimulating for studying than the therapeutic community she lives in; another one writes notes on the city’s history.

Their activities stay anchored to the tables and become visually noticeable when writing, plugging laptops, changing belongings from one place to another. They occupy the same regions as *students* and *scholars*, further on referred to.

### Butterflies

*Strolling readers*, unlike occupational ones, have no specific activity or purpose, just want to stroll around and spend time in a pleasant and accompanied way, although generally not interacting – resembling Wirth’s (1964 [1938]) urban strollers. While strolling they glance at newspapers and magazines, music or video CDs, Internet pages, books, eventually picking items regardless of support. Less qualified (secondary school or less), they are manual workers, retired, unemployed people of different ages, some are children.

Most used areas are multimedia, couches, circulating zones. The mentioned homeless reader comes for one or two hours every day. His street companions persuaded him: “you watch a movie and when you go out you feel quite another person!” He enjoys age diversity, watching new faces, but, above all, reading the newspaper, especially – and most ironically – the one he got fired from. He appreciates closed spaces where he can feel safe.

Another 50-year-old stroller, a former car mechanic, acknowledges that others come in seeking “not to be alone,” which he himself does not admit to be doing. Having used to read intensely, “maybe it was a refuge,” he nowadays has an eye condition, reason he declares for preferring the Internet which he can’t afford at home.

A 9-year-old girl comes every Saturday in the company of an adult sister and an elder brother. Regretting she can’t stay longer for the Story Hour – her sister must cook lunch – she reads a little at home; her brother, 12-year-old, reads a lot, especially before falling asleep, and always borrows a film before leaving.

And yet, another interesting case: a very young couple comes in pushing two baby prams. Both 22-year-old and under the minimum educational level, the mother is enrolling as a reader, he guides her as an experienced user (here and abroad where he was raised). They live in a single room, sharing a single social-housing apartment crowded with unemployed or under-qualified relatives. They plan to come with the children and use the Internet every Saturday, which they value for the information on baby care, “more than the doctor says” during consultations, to look for baby games, and to send SMSs. She reads very little, but she reads aloud for the babies. He prefers films and music. They value this wide, clean, ordered space, quieter than a cybercafé, where they can finally find some privacy.

### Sparrows

For *recreational readers* the library is mainly a recreation and conviviality space. *Sparrows* gaily engage in flock flights, peeping, and playing all the time. Most of the multiple readers interviewed occasionally bring their own toys in, they attend events, including reading aloud. They may meet and join other children in games, or participate in school visits.

Most used regions are the children’s and the multimedia areas. Almost all of them also take a walk in the garden or go to the children’s park.

“I read grown-up books about trucks, at school I only read teaching books, I borrow some and play with the computer [here].” As a regular player, an 8-year-old boy, created a user profile in a PC. He comes from an adjacent city with his parents.

“Here above it’s more for reading, down there [multimedia] it’s more for leisure, to be more relaxed” – an African immigrant, in his forties, comes to the library to enjoy several rest days. An international truck driver added another library card to those issued in European cities where he occasionally lived. He intends to email friends and relatives, scattered all over the world, and to spend time enjoying whatever documents are available. He is the only adult in this group. It’s worth noting that, in spite of the dreams of a *leisure society*, and in spite of a growing number of people without paid work, leisure activities still carry the burden of a stigma under a dominating productivist ideology. While consumerist leisure activities are well-envisaged, that may not be the case of others, more tolerated than supported – as a user said, you should not do in a library “things libraries aren’t meant for.”

All the others are children who burst in accompanied by relatives and teachers. The interviewed are aged from 4 to 8.

They draw, play computer games, read books, or attend reading sessions. Almost all of them have books at home. They use chairs, cushions, or lie on the floor. They know what they’re not allowed to do: to scribble on books, to step on top of tables. Laughing and moving at ease, sometimes they run. Some are scolded by the staff for using the ramp to get to the top of stacks.

On Saturdays, during Story Hour, the room becomes too narrow to accommodate all the children and their relatives. As the temperature rises, books and sheets of paper are used as fans.



The majority prefer to play with the computer. A 7-year-old boy, a multiple reader, draws a library grasping several crayons at the same time: “books are multicolored;” using several small squares, he orders the sheet’s blank space in a fashion similar to the computer game he played with; he depicts himself and inscribes “I read” in the space signaled as *Library*; the external context is a smiling bright sun, stars, and his football club symbol.

### Ants

*Student readers* come to study, sometimes in groups or dyads. Some of the interviewees are still attending their degree classes, one is taking a Master’s course, they come to study themes in their specialty domains, their ages range from 24 to near 40.

They are motivated by conviviality, and by a relaxed environment, joining others equally occupied. The choice for this library and their reading are instrumental, as many university libraries don’t usually allow group study. The library’s bibliographic resources aren’t much used.

They come mostly after lunch, carrying their own books, sometimes laptops, some use mobile audio to create aural privacy.

They mainly occupy individual tables, workstations with Internet access on ground or inferior floors, and, eventually, the vacant tables at the extreme end. Sometimes they use tricks to create extra space: clothes, bags, books are scattered, signaling they are not willing to share the next coupled table; they sometimes frown at people chatting, making clear that their labor is being disturbed. As Certeau signaled, these *tactics* are “a calculated action deter-

mined by the absence of a proper locus” and “[t]he space of the tactic is the space of the other” (1984:36-37). *Students* compete for space, silently, but actively, common-sense assumptions on adequate uses and users appear to legitimize their presence, taking their occupation as a *natural* and sufficient credential. Some express their contentment for an environment that has no complete silence and state a preference for a light background murmur.

### Owls

*Scholar readers*, a small group in this library, indulge in researching some favorite theme – frequently local history – or to complete a formal education, studying autonomously, at their own pace. They are also drawn by conviviality. As experienced users, they know every corner. They frequently take notes from readings and write essays. Their presence, quite discrete, is highly regarded both by other users and staff. They’re very likely to be *residents*.

An elderly scholar states how it pleases him to find answers in the library’s collections for the “doubts that trouble” him, and how he enjoys watching younger people at study. He also made a point of declaring that such a cultural good should not be measured only according to financial standards, considering both its importance to the “cultural yield of the population” and its contribution to citizenship.

### Cats

To keep up with the news, to read newspapers or magazines, is the purpose of *informed readers*. Elder users predominate; it is an almost exclusively male group. Usually, they do not use other media,

just a few use the Internet for that purpose, their readings are instrumental, although perhaps, as detailed below, in surprising ways. Coincidentally or not, several disclosed to be reserved persons and declined to be interviewed. No significant social interaction with other users or staff was observed.

They occupy the press corner, sitting on sofas. Their attitude is discrete, not so relaxed as in the multimedia area. Places remain occupied all day long with a high rotation, readers sometimes having to wait for their turn.

An elder male reader admits that, although he likes to read, he sometimes has short-memory issues. “Knowledge, it simply makes you grow, [but] that’s not for me, not anymore,” so reading simply became a part of his exercise to stay mentally healthy.

A man in his thirties searches the Internet, which he appreciates a lot, since it is free. He looks for a job and reads several newspapers, especially sports papers, compares the news, and sends e-mails.

### The Residents, a Subgroup

Resident readers are the regulars, tending to concentrate around the mezzanine. It is a privileged spot to visually control the whole place. This was my first assumption, which the interview with the architect confirmed as very plausible.

This subgroup is mainly composed of scholars but also of *occupational* readers.

Some elder male readers benefit from the special care of a very attentive librarian: noticed absences may trigger her need to be further informed about

their health. In her own words: “this is their second home,” “they get accustomed to us, and we to them!” An anecdotal case may, in spite of its singularity, depict how they feel entitled to this special care: an elderly male reader once knocked at the staff entrance door, carrying his own sofa, and asking to have it placed beside his usual table.

They use the complaints book, a resource scarcely known to other users.

This familiarity, the frequency and duration of visits, their competition for personal attention, all facilitate their acting as a pressure group. They have a noticeable role in the tacit regulation of conducts, as in the production of a reading atmosphere (complaints on noise levels, on inadequate behaviors). Counteracting this, we may still hear some commentaries from less skilled personnel, judging them for “not doing a thing in life, besides going there,” associating negative values to this form of leisure.

A single note on a particular kind of reader: the loners – I could trace numerous lonely people, people to whom a collective, common space like this is probably the only opportunity to feel accompanied and to be inserted in a lively atmosphere.

### Conclusions

The adopted methodology proved to be adequate to support an in-depth, prolonged, and committed approach to understanding this social reality.

Conceptually, the comprehensive analysis of relations among public reading practices, space use, and readers’ practices allowed for an integrated

vision of the usage of resources, associated to emotions and meanings. It also afforded clues as to a social analysis of those relations, according to the selected dimensions of class, gender, age, ethnicity, power relations, education, et cetera. Space appropriation proved to be a relevant dimension to analyze reading in a public library and to construct meaningful users' profiles. The consideration of spatial social relations rendered the *butterflies'* activities visible, space appropriation being essential to this profile, not previously documented, to my knowledge. The same occurred with the association of social inequalities and power relations to the usage of regions, as was the case of the removal of TV sets in the multimedia area.

The architectural program's concepts were translated into the building's design, they were perceived, even if communicated through linguistic devices, and appreciated.

Almeida Garrett's urban location is convenient, although probably not determinant, judging from the number of readers drawn from neighboring localities; easiness of public transportation is appreciated. The library building is finely integrated in the surrounding garden. Rather than a traditional library, it is being used as a civic centre. The library provides enough differentiation and flexibility for personal or group appropriation of space and resources, receives readers from different social conditions and with diverse expectations, propitiates different gradients of intimacy and publicness, and assures accessibility for some disabilities. Reasons to visit it, besides reading, are diversified and sometimes more relevant than reading: from conviviality (togetherness, not being alone, low-interaction and non-consumption, social diversity) to

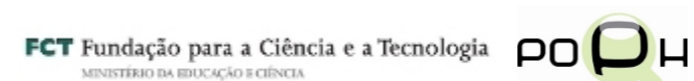
a self-fulfilling occupation, to enjoying a space of quality and safety, to gratuity, to playing, to having a place to study, to relaxing, to collecting useful information for everyday-life purposes, or to enjoying privacy.

Social and usage diversity must be deepened and cherished to stimulate the participation in a democratic space that fosters the co-presence and the connection of these differences. The reading atmosphere is welcoming for its scale, spatiality, materials, and social interaction, but should be extended to absent or under-represented social groups. This reading atmosphere should also be nurtured by the institution as a value to preserve.

The analysis of the different reading and social practices categorized above, and of their connection to space appropriation, may inform the management's decisions to improve services and to provide space. It might foster a clearer vision of a public library's role, of what readers appreciate the most, in general, and what particular groups value and need.

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