

Julia Nevárez

# The Urban Library

Creative City Branding  
in Spaces for All



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Dictionary in the New York Public Library (Nevárez 2019)

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Creative City Branding in Spaces for All

 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-030-57964-7      ISBN 978-3-030-57965-4 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57965-4>

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*To my dad for his respect and civil  
conversations*

## Preface

Public libraries remain one of the few genuine democratic institutions in contemporary societies, globally. Public libraries are public spaces that provide access to all and cater to their communities' needs in buildings that connect cities to people and knowledge. Libraries have been an intrinsic part of my life. The “Biblioteca Lázaro” in the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras was a refuge and source of myriad encounters and intellectual conversations that merged into the “Placita de Humanidades” where engaging conversations was a praxis. At the beginning of my Ph.D., the New York Public Library was located across the street from the Graduate Center, City University of New York on 42nd street. In the late 1980s, I was told not to visit Bryant Park because drugs were rampant and women were assaulted. This was a very different New York City from the family entertainment district that characterized Bryant Park and the Times Square area right before the pandemic in 2020. It was the New York of fiscal crisis before the city was branded for the entertainment of the global professional class, tourists, and investors.

After visiting many libraries throughout my academic life, the Salt Lake City and Seattle Public Libraries as well as the Vancouver Public Library changed my view of them. Their exquisite spaces, where talented architects designed buildings that are awe-inspiring as well as practical, evidently placed people first to elevate their experience through iconic architecture. My interest increased after recognizing that the Salt Lake City and Seattle Public Libraries were intentionally positioned to alter the urban fabric of the areas under disinvestment in which both of these libraries were located. More intriguing was the transformation that both places underwent where libraries, among other cultural institutions, became key players in the branding and revitalization of both cities. In Medellín, Colombia, thanks to an invitation to present my work at the Universidad Nacional, I was able to visit many branches of the public library system including the Spain Library Park (Parque Biblioteca España) and many library parks in Medellín and Bogotá designed to embrace access to books and cultural activities in different neighborhoods with iconic, interesting, and beautiful buildings strategically positioned in neighborhoods challenged by social and economic opportunities. New libraries integrate urban development, community support and iconic buildings to be recognized for

their signature architecture that renders unique their location, for instance in Chicago, San Francisco, San Antonio, Paris, Amsterdam, Sweden, Norway, or Tianjin Binhai, China among many others as well as those included in this volume. They create a remarkable legacy of public libraries around the world.

The Vienna Public Library and their collection of world globes and the Institute of Esperanto now translated into the new language of computers impressed me with its beauty. And by thinking about libraries, I could not help but remember the ship full of books that used to visit Puerto Rico in my childhood years, nor the small community library in Port St John, Transkei, South Africa, or the public library in Durban, South Africa, where my friend and I borrowed and took turns to simultaneously read “Magister Ludi: The Glass Bead Game” by Herman Hesse or the desperate attempt to obtain reading materials by exchanging books among travelers in the remote corners of Africa where libraries were impossible to reach or were non-existent. Today’s small libraries where free books are available in Asbury Park or at a beach town in the coast near Palermo, Sicily, offered a different kind of access to books in a small scale, surprising and unexpected. Nor can I forget how I witnessed the evolution and growth of the People’s Library in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street in Lower Manhattan. All different kinds of libraries, under different circumstances, are open to all.

Many thanks to those who inspire this work; among them, are books and inviting spaces as well as friends, colleagues, students, and institutions. A heartfelt thanks to Kean University for a sabbatical leave that helped conduct interviews with staff members at the Seattle, Salt Lake City, and New York City Public Libraries. The Urban Affairs Association in which many chapters of the book were first presented at their conferences provided invaluable feedback to a work in progress. The Wertheim Study in the New York Public Library provided support with a space from where to conduct research and write the book at its early stages. The Universidad Nacional de Colombia for their invitation to present my work and visit many of their public libraries in Medellín and Bogotá. And to all those who within the information overload of the urban and digital places we inhabit can find a space of respite, connection, and transformation in the beautiful libraries of our world.

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