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## Review Essay

# From Secular Temples to Information Warehouses

By Nick Thurston, University of Leeds

***Libraries of Light: British Public Library Design in the Long 1960s.* Alistair Black. New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 242. \$160.00 (cloth); \$54.95 (eBook).**

***The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History.* Edited by Alice Crawford. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xxix + 300. \$37.50 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).**

***Fantasies of the Library.* Edited by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 148. \$24.95 (cloth).**

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The infamous Birmingham Central Library was opened in January 1974 to replace its Victorian predecessor, the Birmingham Reference Library, which had been opened in 1882. This update was first declared “an urgent necessity” by the civic council in 1938.<sup>1</sup> When it finally happened, the city swapped a revivalist neoclassical building for a concrete vision of the future with exterior walls stacked outwards like a four-sided upturned staircase. Loved by enthusiasts of British brutalism and loathed by many others, the 1974 library was the result of decades of frustrated planning. It was finally built during a period of great financial difficulty for all of the country’s city councils. In his studious new book *Libraries of Light: British Public Library Design in the Long 1960s*, Alistair Black points beyond his period of inquiry to the irony surrounding Birmingham’s latest refresh: the £188 million Library of Birmingham. Conceived before the 2008 financial crash and now the largest public library in the United Kingdom, it was opened in September 2013, roughly three months after the 1974 building was closed and scheduled for demolition. By February 2015, the newest library’s opening hours were cut from seventy-three per week to forty



186 (then increased in 2016 to sixty-six), and around half of the 188 staff members initially employed had been made redundant.<sup>2</sup>

These three incarnations of Birmingham's central library service exemplify three crucial phases in the history of library design that, in turn, formed, re-formed, then outgrew commonly held modern understandings of what a library should be and do. Black's book is one of three recent volumes on the topic of library history (and futures) that merit broad and comparative attention because the crises facing their subject are so multifaceted, so pressing, and so commonly misunderstood. Alice Crawford's edited collection of guest lectures from a 2009–13 series held at the University of St Andrews, *The Meaning of the Library*, offers a polyglossic long history of "the library"—that symbolic and practical pillar of civility and learning, which is presumed to be necessary and necessarily good—through twelve chapters of scholarly address. More discursively, the mix of essays, interviews, images, and an open letter in Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin's co-edited collection offers future-oriented foci from a mix of curators, media theorists, librarians, and artists on their titular topic, *Fantasies of the Library*.

To understand the relevance of their shared subject—the ever-changing status of libraries from a principally Western point of view—to this journal's focus, I have to beg leniency of *Modernism/modernity's* editors. The history of the modern library bridges modernism, so I need to stretch both ends of this journal's periodic frame, backwards to 1845 and forwards to the early 1970s. Bookending this elongated frame are two important political changes in British library history, which echoed in, and were echoes of, international changes in library culture. At one end was the UK Parliament's 1845 Museums Act that paved the way for the 1849 Select Committee and then the 1850 Public Libraries Act, by which Parliament empowered council boroughs to open their own public libraries that collectively formed a national network. Architect Michael Webb called such libraries "secular temples for the worship of learning," which neatly describes the confluence of agendas that propelled their development.<sup>3</sup> Historians including Thomas Kelly (1966), Fred Lerner (1998), and Matthew Battles (2003) have all noted that in Britain this network was instituted in the climate of Chartist reforms and in the spirit of Utilitarian political visions.<sup>4</sup> Yet its development ever since has been entwined with movements around the world, from the nineteenth-century pressure applied by workers' guilds to widen access to so-called "public" libraries, to the influence of midcentury Scandinavian design on British library furniture and architecture, to the transnational peer-to-peer file-sharing libraries like ARG.ORG that serve as radical and illegal library-making tools for dispersed publics. At the other end—my other bookend—is the beginning of the institutionalization, in 1970s Britain, of a relatively conservative version of the potentially radical community librarianship model, which Alistair Black critiqued elegantly in Foucauldian terms in his seminal 1996 study, *A New History of the English Public Library*.<sup>5</sup> During the era of my second bookend, on the cusp of the digital revolution, Webb wrote his 1969 book *Architecture in Britain Today*, in which he describes the rumbling transition of libraries-as-temples into "information warehouses" (*Architecture in Britain Today*, 191). This transition is the ancestor of the organizational rationale that is pressuring our libraries today.

The three books under review jointly map the spectrum of possibilities and responsibilities that libraries marked out for communities of readers, publishers, and information scientists during the modern era, as well as the forms of publicness that those legacies have played a part in enabling ever since, ranging from literacy development to disseminating countercultural material. What should a twenty-first-century library provide? No answer currently under discussion in general, specialist, or activist circles that I know of diverges completely from the spread of library types refined during the modern era, even if digital databases are the libraries that we now use most often, every time we activate a computational device. Who, and what principles, should govern the formation, development, or preservation of libraries in the twenty-first century? Despite the digital revolution we are so often reminded about, answers to this question, too, have modest and radical precedents in modern library history that could inform rather than inhibit our collective decision making.

The championing of libraries' sociocultural import that runs through Alice Crawford's Introduction is typical of much literature in the field, which is largely written by users (for example, novelist Ali Smith) and professionals (for example, librarians like Crawford) who are on a mission to restate the case for libraries in general.<sup>6</sup> More pragmatic and technical library studies might

talk about service redesign, economic contribution, and multiservice locations, but few experts dedicated to the topic ever really entertain the counterargument that libraries might no longer be needed, or at least not in a form that we would recognize as “the library.” That reticence is understandable when a culture—library culture—is so constantly under attack, especially on use-value and access terms within municipal politics, but also on space and cost-benefit terms within spheres like higher education. Yet theoretically speaking, this reticence does foreclose the fundamental horizons of the conversation about libraries’ futures, especially those dimensions of that conversation concerning libraries that function in public or semipublic spheres. In turn, this leaves a blind spot for their detractors to argue that libraries are only now defended for one or another nostalgic reason.

What if we do not need actual-world libraries any more? Recent closures of small-to-medium council libraries across the UK point towards the dismantling of that service type, as do the job losses faced by librarians, and the misplaced good will of volunteers who keep open community-run premises but devalue paid labor in the process. More generally, the infectious contemporary obsession with digitization being driven by various (often contradictory) ideologies—in addition to the neoliberal fascination with efficiency streamlining and the compression of services—make a strong case for the central role that dislocated databases of library holdings should play in our future. The costly upkeep of brick-and-mortar places and codex objects is hard to justify on those terms of comparison. Fundamental challenges to the very existence of libraries are nothing new, even if the rationales for those challenges mutate. That is why we need a mutually inclusive movement of responses that combine speculative action with historically informed debates. Considering how those two modes of response can work together is the most important stake of books like the three under review.

Crawford’s collection is arranged chronologically and pivots on John Sutherland’s excellent exposition of the “enfranchising impulses” and new industrial wealth that drove the nineteenth-century growth of public and private libraries in Britain (*The Meaning of the Library*, 136). This is preceded by five contributions, two of which are particularly relevant. Edith Hall presents a lively account of ancient libraries and their infrequent mention in the literatures of antiquity, ranging from Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*, first performed in 425 BC, to the *de bibliothecis* written by Varro, whom Julius Caesar appointed as the “public librarian in Rome in 47 BC” (1, 3). Hall discusses the value of papyrus, the variety of collection types held by ancient libraries, and ruminates on why it was the successors of Alexander the Great who established the first mighty libraries of antiquity, including the Ptolemy family’s so-called Royal Library of Alexandria. Yet her most insightful points relate to the role that such grand libraries played in imperialist and dynastic projects, and how libraries’ promotion of the scholarly practice of prose writing likely had an underdiscussed influence on the waning of oral traditions following the period. Richard Gameson picks up this thread of writing and reading as embodied practices with his whistle-stop tour of the interior design, functions, and surviving representations of medieval libraries, where the precedent for increasingly decentralized forms of access was set and—as print historians like Paul Saenger have claimed—silent reading likely began.<sup>7</sup>

So as not to dwell on the nineteenth century, suffice it to say that Sutherland’s essay does well to remind us of two general points about library history that were carried forwards from that century into the modern imagination, with mixed consequences. Firstly, that the still-common fantasy of “the library”—as somewhere that symbolizes and serves permanence, knowledge transfer, and the territorialization of bodies of knowledge—is a neoclassical spin on the purposes of the great libraries of antiquity. Secondly, that events like the 1850 Act tend to get singularized for the sake of historical narratives at the expense of less convenient historiographic approaches that could recognize constant change. Library culture has always been a social mechanism for coping with impermanence. Libraries and their users can help things last longer than they otherwise might; they cannot make things eternal. The manifestations of library culture, in communities, ideas, and buildings, are always impermanent.

Black’s book takes all of this forward through the twentieth century by riffing on the polysemic meanings of “light” in the context of modernist design and social change: enlightened, open, illuminating, bright (as in, the future and electrified bulbs), and functional. The irony of brutalism’s aesthetic heaviness is not lost on him. Yet the commitment to simplicity inside

188 such architecture and the extraordinary new structural balances made possible by concrete are taken to be more significant. He starts with two chapters of prehistory that cumulatively situate the radical shift in modern public library design amongst the postwar drive towards a brighter future, one anchored by the founding of Britain's welfare state and its ethical principles, not just its institutional limbs. He then considers the civic planning procedures involved to appraise the debates that raged at local and national levels about the siting of new libraries, the style that their buildings should take, and the interior spaces they should create.

I have made Black's research sound incredibly dull; it is anything but. These practical questions of commissioning and managing the renewal of Britain's public library stock serve Black as a fascinating lens for analyzing the shifting social and political priorities of a former empire and waning global power, one that eventually seemed to blossom in the "swinging sixties," only to contract in conservative fear thereafter. This milieu contextualizes four chapter-length case studies that complete Black's book. Each one focuses on a different time and type of public library, concluding with the legend of Birmingham Central Library.

The international resonances of this niche history, in the wake of 2008 and in the midst of Brexit, are severalfold. That Britain was not alone in struggling to guess what kind of future it should be rebuilding its civic structures for, at the tipping point of the computer revolution in the 1950–70s, is attested to by the final two contributions to Crawford's collection. John P. Wilkin and James H. Billington cap the third, forward-looking section of the book and couch that future in very American terms, given their datasets and pragmatism. Both speak as eminent leaders of well-resourced research libraries. Both pitch digital tools and digitized collections as positive extensions of the age-old base model—a specific place with specific holdings and specific purposes.

Wilkin calls this synthesis "working at scale" (244–49), which should include libraries taking responsibility for academic publishing, as well as repositories of all types combining their digitized collections for online access via shared platforms, like the HathiTrust.org Digital Library for which he previously served as executive director. As Librarian of Congress Emeritus, Billington's aim is both grander and simpler. He asks whether the "Jeffersonian ideal"—that "if more people can have more access to knowledge to use in more ways, then, whatever the problems of today, tomorrow can still be better than yesterday"—is still viable in our era of digital networked communications technology (256). Rather predictably, his answer is yes. He mounts an eloquent case in a libertarian mold: "Libraries have historically been unifying gathering places for disparate people and interests in a given locality" and should continue to be "temples of pluralism" where contradictory ideas can co-exist, from amongst the tensions of which a brighter future can be dreamed rather than simply found (262, 263).

Billington recounts a speech to an audience of indigenous Americans in which he praised librarians as "gate keepers," after which one community elder taught him that librarians are really "dream keepers," a description Billington has preferred ever since (263). Retold as an anecdote, it feels patronizing in at least two ways: rhetorically, it is a clichéd way of reminding readers of forgotten spiritual wisdom; politically, dream-led innovation is a luxury increasingly denied to librarians as their profession becomes more and more standardized. Unlike the native American Indian community where that wisdom may be instituted in practice, bastions of the modernized library, like the Library of Congress, set our library culture on the path to paywalls, neoliberal compliance, and the deathly grip of corporate procurement processes. How else, then, could we collectively invent a better future for libraries? Starting with our fantasies would be one leftfield answer. Marina Warner points to just that in her contribution to Crawford's collection, "The Library in Fiction," transposing the idea of stories-within-stories from the narrative structure of *The Arabian Nights* to the scenario of holdings-within-libraries and the meta-context of writing-within-a-culture. Like Billington's fable, the lessons remain abstract. How could we act upon our fantasies and apply the approaches they enable us to imagine?

*Fantasies of the Library* is a clunky but inspired survey of artists and artisans who are already trying. Together, the examples clunk because they are disparate in method and field—ranging from Mark Dion's 2012 material encyclopedia of trees to the new media idea of "living books" championed by the Open Humanities Press—and because the main body layouts are organized like a newspaper with articles starting side-by-side and running-on to different pages (70–3,

116). The effect of these twin factors is disorientating. It is meant to simulate the partial coincidences that turn library shelves into constellations of unexpected connections magnetized by alphabetization and cataloguing conventions. Typographic differentiation helps manage the jolts, and they do montage odd combinations of ideas across double-page spreads, but they also read like a form-over-content gesture.

The real strength of Springer and Turpin's collection is its respectful refusal of certain conventions in library practice that became normative expectations during the modern era of library development. It draws on the no-holds-barred impulse of the Free Culture movement to share free digital clones of everything, on the idiosyncratic utopia André Malraux envisaged in his *Le Musée imaginaire* (1947–69), and on the curatorial idea of reassembling non-linear physical connections between items that can break away from the sequential shelves and classification systems, to which libraries default. It offers speculative answers that stretch the horizons of how we can think about what a library could be and do. In a rangy interview with the editors, media theorist Joanna Zylinka describes the predicaments of book culture and of library culture as twinned—limited in both cases by kinds of “species nostalgia” (116, 118, 120). Her remedy is premised on making cuts and new bonds—*découpage*, in Deleuzian terms—and prescribes contact with non-book and non-library cultures respectively, in much the way that strategic responses to the Anthropocene often lean on renewing connections with non-human species (connotations about extinction are overt). The non-culture Zylinka proposes that the struggling twins, books and libraries, embrace is the one opened up by distributed forms of publishing: the ever-changing public life of living books, which are constituted by rhizomatic connections between media platforms. What this fluid model of publishing can show library and book cultures, I presume, is that our idea of what constitutes publicness in the age of capitalist realism needs to constantly mutate, as do its mediating units and institutions.<sup>8</sup> We have to help them change in reciprocal effective relationships with the world around them.

Running throughout Springer and Turpin's collection is a conviction that readers can experience breaks from the conventions reinforced—even symbolized—by the modern library and its dogged forebear, “the library,” without abandoning books and libraries as such. This all sounds very postmodern; many of the icons of French post-structuralism are cited. Yet the editors' conviction seems to be driven by a spirited pleasure in the practices and ethics of reading freely, which I take to be high modernist, and the editors remind us that Virginia Woolf was a great exponent of. Anchoring the whole project are Springer's contributions, in particular her framing essay “Melancholies of the Paginated Mind” and her visual essay on “Reading Rooms Reading Machines.” In theory, and then through illustrations, the two make a case for an alternative history of nonlinear reading and archival practices, from Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* to the People's Library at the Occupy Wall Street encampment in 2011.

Like Black and Wilkin, Springer and Turpin take a double-edged view of the problems/opportunities faced by contemporary libraries. They advocate curatorial responses, as does Wilkin. But the different limits that Wilkin and Springer and Turpin put upon curating shows the widening gap between the traditional pan-arts notion of the curator's job, as keeper of a collection, and the project-based revision of that job, towards creating things, which has been normalized in contemporary art. By the former model, for Wilkin, the curatorial response means keeping a collection in use and compiling one's own selection of cloned digital copies. By the latter model, for Springer and Turpin, a curatorial response could include a limitless re-invention of library, book, and reading structures, be those structures actual or virtual. I am unsure where the latter curatology would lead the future agenda for libraries. However, I am adamant that we should not be blinded by the fashionability of contemporary art to the very significant consequences of reducing speculative library-making to the aestheticization of library culture. Such a reduction to the surface of representation would privilege structure over holdings with a stylishness that holding-oriented and community-oriented alternatives could never compete with on the short-term terms that increasingly dictate public and philanthropic funding. My contention is that meta-understanding should play a role in changing libraries, but self-interested libraries would privilege the wrong kind of introversion. In artistic terms, they would create a formalist fetishization of library culture, as we see happen all too often with “the book” in the book arts.

The visual series *ScanOps* by Andrew Norman Wilson, which punctuates *Fantasies of the Library* as single-page interventions, is a great example of one way that contemporary artists are already helping us to ask new questions about the changing status of books and libraries: by revealing ignored aspects of those processes of change with a series of images wherein form and content are mutually expansive. The scale of Google Books' project and the dehumanized interface via which we can search its databases conceal the fact that its mission relies on digitization factories staffed by low-paid workers, presumably in developing nations. The scanning equipment is innovative and fast, but surprisingly few of the tasks in the workflow can be done without human labor. Wilson collects pages from Google Books that reveal unintended evidence of the human workers involved. These glimpses are like human glitches in the illusion of a painless and perfect transition from the actual to the virtual. We see warped text when a book page is still being pulled into place as the rapid-fire camera goes off; or we see workers' fingers and thumbs accidentally left in frame, sometimes sheathed in latex and almost always with non-white skin, lingering like manicures and confessions. Wilson's appropriated image series is an index and allegory, in the vein of the best post-conceptual art.

The shocking rate of public library closures and staff redundancies across Britain is a blunt reminder of why one of our most common, inherited, modern assumptions about public libraries is mistaken. The idea that they are, in a Victorian sense, somehow a fundamental pillar of civic society and always there, available in the background of civic life, is proving a costly misinterpretation of their historic role as symbols of (false) permanence. The reactionary criminalization of bit-torrent and file-sharing platforms reminds us, too, that all types of libraries are soft targets when power and profitability are threatened. The unique social value of libraries and their weakness is that they are not self-interested—they are carriers and context givers, facilitators. In response to all this, the growth of reader- and librarian-led, overtly political activist networks like the Radical Librarians' Collective need urgent support.<sup>9</sup> As Zylinska, Wilkin, and Black all stress in different ways, the struggles faced by public libraries are not theirs alone. It is likely that their fate will be tied up, in Britain at least, with the continued marketization of public services with cost-saving exercises rationalized in the name of austerity, and in "light" of unpayable public debts.

Where this macro-context will lead other types of libraries in the future is less clear. For example, the co-opted vision of Open Access being standardized by British universities is supposed to allay complaints that spiraling student fees and extraordinary accommodation tie-ins are breaking the social contract between higher education institutions and citizens. In reality, it is creating shadow libraries of free content that unfairly deflate the value of the products and services developed by publishers who are not subsidized, thus flattening out the opportunities for researchers and readers. It also further discourages academic libraries from purchasing academic literature. All library types need to constantly mutate or suffer as instruments and victims in the lag of social change, as the city of Birmingham seems to keep reminding us. For libraries to grow positively and not just expand hollowly, in their transition from "secular temples" to "information warehouses," they need Billington's dreamers and Springer and Turpin's fantasists as much as they need Crawford's specialists. One of the most urgent things both of those parties need to do in collaboration is to develop solidarities with those vulnerable and devoted practitioners on the frontline, the librarians, in their collective struggle away from the weak vision of community servicing set in motion by the 1970s and the organizational rationales such a model helplessly perpetuates.

## Notes

1. Andy Foster, *Birmingham* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 77.
2. Coverage of the topic has been voluminous and heated. The headline statistics have been widely reported; see Susana Mendonca, "Birmingham Library Opening Hours Nearly Halved," *BBC*, February 10, 2015, [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-31354592/](http://bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-31354592/).
3. Michael Webb, *Architecture in Britain Today* (Feltham: Hamlyn Publishing, 1969), 191.

4. Thomas Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain Before 1850* (London: The Library Association, 1966); Fred Lerner, *The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age* (New York: Continuum, 1998); Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (London: Vintage, 2003).

5. Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850–1914* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 193–224.

6. Ali Smith, *Public Library and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015).

7. Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

8. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

9. For more information, see “Radical Librarians Collective Forum,” *Radical Librarianship*, [rlc.radicallibrarianship.org/](http://rlc.radicallibrarianship.org/).