

Aging in (Third) Place with Public Libraries



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An aging population presents both opportunities and challenges for a range of community spaces and organizations, including public libraries. Rather than focusing on the challenges, as is so often done, here we position public libraries as key community hubs that can (and do) reach out to and engage with community-dwelling older adults with socially inclusive programs, services, materials, and spaces. Exploring the meaning of the public library for older patrons, we begin with an overview of two key concepts that are shaping the importance and implications of the library as a third place for this population: the trend toward aging in place and concerns around social isolation. We then provide an overview of an environmental scan of older adult programming provided by forty Canadian Urban Library Council (CULC) member library systems' websites. Findings from this study lead us to consider how the organization of programming based around age might alter experiences of the public library as a third place and prompt us to shift our conversation from an understanding of the library as third place to the library as social infrastructure.

OLDER ADULTS, PUBLIC LIBRARIES, AND PLACE

Public libraries are part of our culturally constructed space and “have an important role to play in fostering and developing varying senses of community and providing services to different communities.”¹ Whether we think about library as place as referring to its physical place (its structure and architecture) or its social place (its role as connector with other social spaces), library and community are imbricated and can be mutually reinforcing. While public libraries were curiously excluded in urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg's examples of the different public places that can be considered as a third place, public library practitioners and researchers have both used Oldenburg's notion of the *third place* as a means to highlight the value of and the many roles public libraries play in their communities.² Third places, such as restaurants, parks, gyms, coffeeshops, or museums, are places

distinct and separate from the home (a first place) or work environments (a second place), where social connection, social capital, and community building can be fostered. In further contextualizing his vision of third places, Oldenburg outlined the following eight characteristics of successful third places:

1. Occur on neutral ground: “places where individuals can come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel welcome and comfortable”³;
2. Be “levellers”: inclusive places that do not require individuals to meet particular criteria or be of a certain social rank to enter;
3. Have conversation as a main activity: places that are conducive to, value, and nurture casual and sociable talk;
4. Are accessible and accommodating: places that people can easily enter after fulfilling work, school, or home commitments;
5. Have regulars who can nurture trust with newcomers: places that foster a sense of familiarity among those who frequent them;
6. Keep a low, unpretentious profile: places that are comfortable and approachable;
7. Maintain a playful mood: places that invite people to return with their playfulness;
8. Serve as a home away from home: places that offers a congenial and familiar environment.

Research by library practitioners and scholars has demonstrated the importance of public libraries as hubs of sociocultural connection, with relationships between patrons, library staff, and the surrounding community cultivating social capital and nurturing social inclusion for people of all ages.⁴ Research in fields related to aging has highlighted the importance of sociocultural links as having a measurable, positive impact on older adults' physical and mental well-being, including bolstering feelings of social inclusion.⁵ For older adults who may no longer be participating in paid work, and thus may lose connections associated with their second place, the third place(s) in their everyday

lives may take on increasingly significant roles. This is especially so as a sense of belonging or attachment to a place, such as a community public library branch, can “help maintain a sense of identity and well-being, and facilitate successful adjustments in old age.”⁶

As a third place, public libraries can “provide a sense of place, a refuge, and a still point; they are a vital part of the public sphere and an incubator of ideas.”⁷ They are well-poised to provide inclusive support to older adults, given their distribution in high- and low-income neighbourhoods (corresponding to Oldenburg’s first and second characteristics of successful third places), their long history of social inclusion in their values and mandates, and their range of materials, programs, services, and spaces that can be used without expectation of payment or pre-existing level of expertise (Oldenburg’s fourth and sixth characteristics). For older adults, libraries are trusted third places for discovering and accessing resources, enabling lifelong learning, and fostering community relationships (Oldenburg’s third, fifth, seventh, and eighth characteristics). In alignment with the general theme of community and social inclusiveness that encapsulates Oldenburg’s conceptualization of third places, Sloan proposed that public libraries’ services for older adults can support four key areas of well-being: (1) stimulation, (2) bringing older people together, (3) cutting isolation, and (4) ensuring equality of access.⁸

Taking up the public library as a third place for older adults may, however, require a critical and nuanced lens due to two particular contexts that are shaping how institutions understand both aging and the services they provide for older adults: the trend of aging in place and the increasing incidence of social isolation among older adults.

1. Aging in Place

While Oldenburg noted that “houses do not a community make,”⁹ for older adults who are estimated to spend 80 percent of their time at home,¹⁰ their home and local community are especially pivotal in their lives and their understanding and making of community. Governments at all levels have

embraced aging in place policies and strategies to empower older adults to remain in their homes and local communities as they age, instead of relocating to more costly hospitals or long-term care facilities. Aging in place has many different definitions but generally means continuing to live in the same or a familiar place or community for as long as possible, even if health changes occur. In addition to fulfilling an economic imperative, aging in place aligns with the preference of a vast majority of both Canadian and American older adults, who intend to remain in their homes to maintain their independence and remain strongly connected to their communities.¹¹ In considering the public library as a third place for older patrons, it is critical to recognize that not all older adults benefit from often-idealized versions or visions of aging in place. Not all older patrons can age in a safe or inclusive place, and some patrons may not have a place within which to age. In such cases the library as a third place might take on a more essential role in these patrons’ lives, perhaps even blurring the lines between first and third place.

2. Social Isolation

The International Federation on Ageing has stated that the number one issue surrounding aging populations is keeping older adults socially connected and active.¹² Third places are noted for the rich social interactions and sense of community they foster. Of the eight characteristics that Oldenburg ascribed to third places, a majority center around creating opportunities for social inclusion and interaction, including conversation as the main activity, accessibility and accommodation, a playful mood, and a sense of belonging—a home away from home. This focus on social interaction is especially salient given the increasing awareness and attention paid to the prevalence of social isolation among older adults. An estimated 17 to 24 % of American and Canadian older adults experience some level of isolation.^{13,14} Social isolation has many definitions, but essentially entails a lack in quantity and quality of social contacts. Social isolation has received increased attention in the news and among researchers as it carries a variety of negative effects

on older adults' physical and mental health and well-being, including premature mortality, depression, and increased risk for falls, cardiovascular disease, and dementia. Social isolation among older adults can be a result of several factors, including physical changes (such as sickness, disability, or reduced mobility), life course transitions (such as the loss of a spouse, retirement, or geographically distant family), and social and environmental factors (such as poverty, inadequate transportation, or inaccessible communication tools). As socially isolated older adults have poorer health outcomes and more complex support needs, they therefore often require access to a complement of community-based supports and third places to thrive—including public libraries.

These two concepts, aging in place and social isolation, can be mutually reinforcing with potentially adverse outcomes. An unintended consequence of aging in place for some older persons may be increased risk for social isolation. Indeed, aging in place strategies and policies can exacerbate experiences of social isolation unless adequate, accessible, and responsive community infrastructures, including public libraries, are in place. Ultimately then, these two emerging contexts are shaping how the public library, as a third place, is or can be experienced by its older patrons. If the majority of older patrons are aging (or intend to age) in their homes and communities, they require access to inclusive and accommodating programs, collections, and spaces (both online and offline).¹⁵ Public libraries, which often play a role in serious and casual leisure time spent across the life course, can be that third space to nurture or sustain older patrons' evolving connections, curiosities, and communities.¹⁶

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

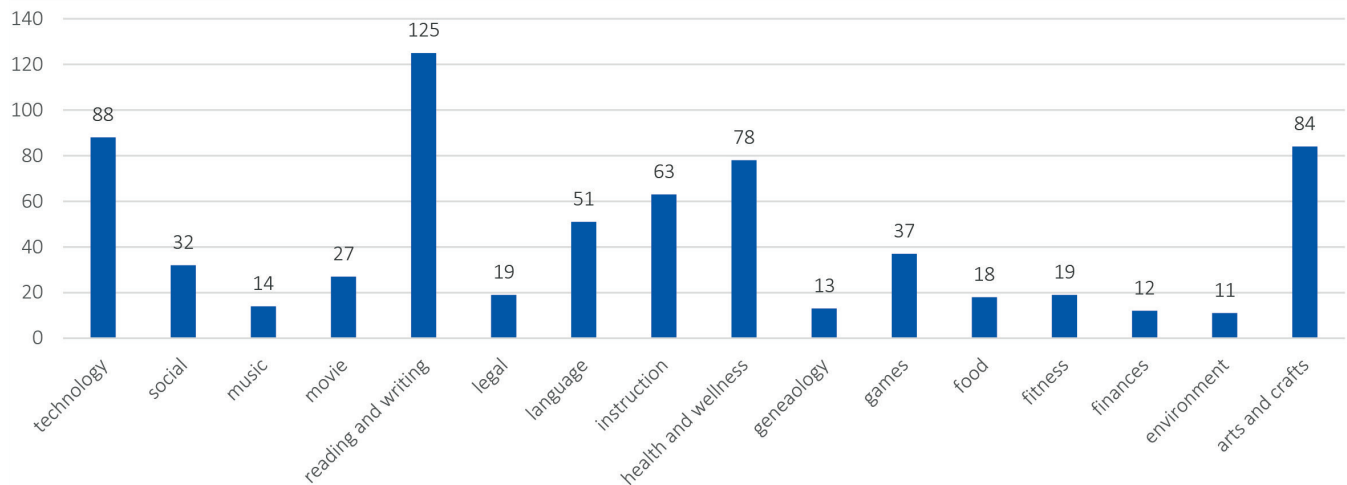
These considerations of library as third place were borne out of a larger study¹⁷ that sought to more broadly explore how public libraries are responding to an older adult population by asking: "What are the common and promising practices for and the barriers faced when developing, executing, sustaining, and evaluating programs?" As public library

programming can provide older patrons with opportunities for leisure, discovery, reflection, learning, and social connection (all attributes that contribute to the experience of the public library as a third space), as one component of this study a research team searched forty CULC member public library systems' websites for two months in the summer of 2018 and documented the different library programs that older adults may attend. Information was collected about the type of program, the age(s) designation assigned to each program, and whether the program entailed a partnership with an identified community organization. Information collected about the type of program included details regarding the program's title; the content, characteristics, or activity pertaining to the program; location(s); and time(s) offered. To gain an inclusive and broad understanding of what programs are available to older adult audiences, in addition to older adult-specific programming, both intergenerational programming (sometimes labelled as "all ages") and adult programming were included in this scan. Our team was curious in gathering information about the presence of partnerships in programming to understand the community building and community making that programs comprise, further entrenching public libraries within the fabric of a community's third places.

In total, this scan identified 691 programs across the 40 public library systems. For ease of sorting through and making sense of the sizeable amount of data, as illustrated in figure 1, these 691 programs were further divided into the following 16 different program categories:

1. Reading and writing (n = 125, 18%): included book clubs, writing groups, author conversations, poetry readings, and storytimes;
2. Technology (n = 88, 13%): included technology drop-in sessions, basic computer training tutorials, and podcast clubs, as well as overviews of online privacy, securing home wireless networks, and Google Maps;
3. Arts and crafts (n = 84, 12%): included knitting, sewing, and crochet circles, life drawing, paint

- nights, fiber art, and coloring clubs;
4. Health and wellness (n = 78, 11%): included sessions about pain management, fall prevention, cannabis, brain health, Lyme disease, stress relief, diabetes prevention, and prostate health as well as guided meditation sessions. Of the programs categorized as health and wellness, twelve were focused on topics related to Alzheimer's disease and related dementias;
 5. Instruction (n = 63, 9%): included lecture-style programs on a variety of topics, including repair cafés and lecture series on current or historical events, cultural traditions or holidays, and social justice initiatives;
 6. Language (n = 51, 7%): included programs where patrons can learn, practice, and improve their language skills in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog, French, Hindi, Punjabi, and Cantonese, among others;
 7. Games (n = 37, 5%): included programs dedicated to playing Scrabble, checkers, trivia, bridge, bingo, board games, chess, Dungeons & Dragons, and card games, as well as more general game nights;
 8. Social (n = 32, 5%): included a number of programs explicitly titled as and designed to bring patrons together to be in community and conversation with one another, often including coffee or tea;
 9. Movies (n = 27, 4%): included programs where libraries hosted a movie viewing for any interested patrons, often titled as "movie nights" or "movie marathons";
 10. Fitness (n = 19, 3%): fitness sessions included programs where library patrons would be moving their body in some way, including yoga sessions, walking tours and walking groups, Nordic pole walking, chair yoga, and Wii bowling;
 11. Legal (n = 19, 3%): included sessions where patrons could ask questions to a practicing lawyer, attend a legal clinic, learn about preparing or revising a will, and learn about the legalities surrounding end-of-life care and planning;
 12. Food (n = 18, 3%): included sessions that touched on the topic of food, including healthy eating, meal planning, understanding one's relationship with food, a celebration of strawberry season, and a workshop on preparing one's own Kombucha;
 13. Music (n = 14, 2%): included programs where patrons could listen to music, bring their own acoustic instruments to play with other patrons, learn a new instrument, meet others interested in vinyl, or join others in singing folk songs;
 14. Genealogy (n = 13, 2%): included sessions where patrons learned about genealogical research or could learn more about their ancestry;
 15. Finances (n = 12, 2%): included sessions around taxes, how to manage one's finances, investing for education and retirement, and how to create a financially sustainable budget;
 16. Environment (n = 11, 2%): included programs that touched on the environment and nature, including how to reduce waste, composting, gardening, and seed libraries.
- Nearly all of the forty library systems offered book clubs, writing groups, computer training, English as a Second Language resources and learning opportunities, knitting circles, author readings, informational sessions, and movie showings. Programming designated exclusively for older adults primarily consisted of informational sessions, fitness classes, and social hours. Such informational sessions were largely biomedical in theme, including lectures and sessions related to dementia, fall prevention, advanced health care planning in later life, suicide in later life, and safe use of medication. Libraries also offer activities specifically tailored to older adults, such as paint nights, film screenings, book clubs, and coloring afternoons. The content of these programs largely fits within the traditional categories of public library services targeted at older adults that Kendall¹⁸ outlined nearly 25 years ago: education (including technology teaching and training), community information, and cultural services.
- Programs that included participation from a partner organization or agency accounted for 107 (15%) of the documented programs. Partnerships with external organizations were especially prevalent in

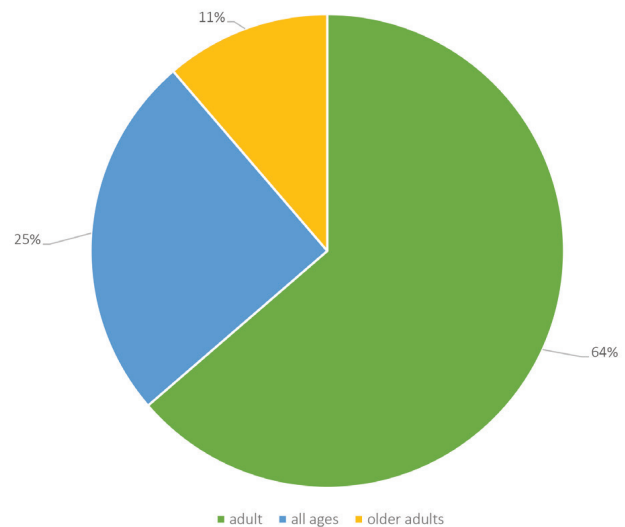
Figure 1. Public Library Programs

those informational sessions related to health and well-being, and included municipal government and non-profit organizations such as local Alzheimer's Societies, cities' Public Health or Community Health offices, and local chapters of national osteoporosis organizations and mental health associations. Other external partners included local genealogical societies, legal clinics, and police and fire services. Public libraries located in a city near a large university often offered informational sessions led by the university's faculty members or research centre staff.

Tied to our focus of considering public libraries as third places, one particularly revealing finding was the way in which age categories were assigned to the different programs. As outlined in figure 2, 440 programs (64%) were designated as either "adult" or "adult to older adult," 173 programs (25%) were categorized as "all ages," and a remaining 78 programs (11%) were designated exclusively for older adult patrons (also sometimes labeled as "seniors"). The implications of these ratios will be further discussed in the following section.

OPENING UP UNDERSTANDINGS OF AGE IN THIRD PLACES

Age is used as a ubiquitous (and sometimes problematic) categorizing tool throughout our everyday lives, and this extends into LIS theory, education,

Figure 2. Programs' Age Designations

and practice. While the use of chronological age to distinguish between our library spaces, collections, and programs affords an alluring sense of order, organization, and objectivity, prescribing what is or may not be "age appropriate" can simultaneously propagate or further entrench stereotypes of different age groups.

As 89 percent of programs were designated as either all ages or as ranging from adult to older adult (which, conservatively, allows for a range of

60 to 70 years), findings from the environmental scan of the 691 programs offer some promising points of departure in rethinking library as a third place. Whereas age groups have traditionally been kept in isolation from one another in LIS practice, education, and research (keeping, for example, children, teens, adults, and older adults separate from one another), findings from this scan indicate a potential shift in public library programs coming to value “different ways of growing rather than the linearity that age presupposes,”¹⁹ opening up opportunities for public libraries to differently explore and consider their position as a third place.

Demas and Scherer have highlighted that libraries as third places “create opportunities for people who do not necessarily travel in the same disciplinary, social, political, or economic circles to frequently meet and greet each other.”²⁰ As evidenced by the data gathered in this study, a majority of the programs documented provide the occasion to connect patrons not only with new ideas or opportunities, but also with patrons of other *ages* whom they might not otherwise have encountered. One of Oldenburg’s eight characteristics of third places is that they are *levellers*, in that social status (which we would argue would include one’s age) is inconsequential in that space. Therefore, maintaining this generous “agelessness” to library programs is a key mechanism that can contribute to patrons’ experiences of the library as a third place. As social inclusion includes not only older people’s involvement in community life, but also their social capital, their civic participation, and the nature of their social networks and reciprocity, maintaining an age inclusivity might be a means to nurture social inclusion in libraries. The high ratio of age-neutral or age-inclusive programs uncovered in this study’s environmental scan indicates the possibility for libraries to serve as a third place for reflection and dialogue on age and aging. In providing programs where several generations can attend and be in community together, libraries “can help to counter traditional stereotypes and promote awareness of the historical and cultural circumstances that determine our attitudes about aging.”²¹ The library as a third place creates and hosts programs (in addition

to collections and spaces) that invite individuals of all ages to gather and be in conversation and community with one another, opening up opportunities to challenge static preconceptions of what it necessarily means to belong to one age group.

It is important to note, though, that the decision to move toward age-neutral or age-inclusive public library programs can be a fraught process as it can be difficult to delineate programs (or spaces or collections) by age group in a manner that does not create “others.” The heterogeneity inherent within different age categories must be considered. For example, those libraries within the environmental scan that offered older adult–exclusive programming may have done so either as a means to recognize and address the unique program needs of older adults or as a means of keeping with their patrons’ preferences to participate in age-segregated programs and spaces. Those libraries that did not offer older adult–only programming may have done so as a means to ensure their programs remained inclusive to all patrons of all ages who might enjoy, attend, or benefit, recognizing that intergenerational or all-ages programming can be of benefit to all patrons of all ages. A library’s community will be a reflection of the diversity of meanings, experiences, and preferences of its patrons. Accordingly, in her in-depth survey of suburban public libraries’ information services to older adults in two American metropolitan areas, Perry cautions that the implementation of age group designations must be carefully considered based on each library’s community: “how a community chooses to segment its population of older adults depends largely on how it understands its challenges and opportunities and what its objectives are in addressing the issue of civic engagement.”²²

FROM LIBRARY AS THIRD PLACE TO LIBRARY AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Oldenburg’s third place has served as a helpful concept and framework for public librarians and library scholars to use when studying, discussing, and highlighting the value of public libraries and the many

different roles they play in their communities. Connecting public libraries within larger, dynamic social issues and contexts (such as aging in place, social isolation, and questions around age categorizations), as we have done in this article, has prompted us to consider refocusing our conversations, moving from the library as third place to the library as social infrastructure.

Eric Klinenberg's²³ recent book, *Palaces for the People*, provides an overview of social infrastructures: "Social infrastructure [includes] . . . the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops. When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours writing."²⁴ Specific to libraries, Klinenberg goes on to note that "social infrastructure provides the setting and context for social participation, and the library is among the more critical forms of social participation we have."²⁵ In conceptualizing the library as social infrastructure, there are obvious points of commonality with the library as third place in that, as per Oldenburg's eight characteristics, it is a place that engenders local, face-to-face interactions, encouraging the forging of bonds. What is different and what renders framing the library as a social infrastructure so compelling is that it draws attention to and emphasizes the changing and evolving social dynamics, contexts, demographics, and communities within which libraries are embedded. Importantly, then, thinking of the library as social infrastructure is a reminder that the library is not static; it is, as Shannon Mattern²⁶ has so eloquently posed, a "network of integrated, mutually reinforcing, evolving infrastructures," deeply and intimately involved in the development of knowledge and the nurturing of community, imbued with cultural, political, and economic values. She goes on to note that the library as a social infrastructure forces us, importantly, to consider, question, and grapple with "the larger network of public services and knowledge institutions of which each library is a part." An aging population is but one area (albeit one that is swiftly growing and transforming) in which changing and evolving social dynamics and demo-

graphics are changing the use of, the place and expectations of, and the understandings of public libraries. In closing and hopefully inspiring further conversation, as a means to responsively reflect these changing contexts and in recognition of the complex roles libraries play in engaging with and creating their communities, we are excited by the possibilities a movement from library as third place to library as social infrastructure facilitates:

- Library as social infrastructure draws attention to the multiplicity of interconnected actors, organizations, and elements that are involved in creating an inclusive community space.
- Library as social infrastructure highlights and promotes the civic engagement and social interaction that public libraries enable and foster.
- Library as social infrastructure is a means to acknowledge that the constraints and diversity among and between library branches and systems are dependent on intersecting contexts, including location, available resources, etc.
- Library as social infrastructure, as a "network of integrated, mutually reinforcing, evolving infrastructures," by emphasizing collectivity, provides a mechanism to differently contend with challenges. [PI](#)

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Library Space-Planning Guide

Library Space Planning: A PLA Guide (PLA, 2019) is a publication for library professionals to successfully analyze, plan, and evaluate library spaces. It was authored by branding expert David Vinjamuri, facilitator of PLA's Regional Workshop on Space Planning for Libraries. The guide is available for purchase in print and ebook formats. Visit www.alastore.ala.org/content/library-space-planning-pla-guide for more details or to purchase a copy. 