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Term: Winter 2023

Lillian H. Smith Library: The Story of the House for Boys and Girls

Introduction

Public library is an integral part of the city's public realm as it provides equitable access to human knowledge, experience, and information for the community (City of Toronto, 2022). Lillian H. Smith Library is a Toronto Public Library (TPL) branch located near the University of Toronto and Kensington-Chinatown neighborhood that has over 100 years of history. Formerly known as the Boys & Girls House Library, it was the first library in the British Empire that was devoted exclusively to children (TPL, 2023). After a series of developments, the Boys & Girls House moved to its current address in 1994 and was renamed to Lillian H. Smith Library to recognize Smith's effort in expanding children library services in Toronto (TPL, 2023). The new building located near the intersection of Spadina Rd and College St consists of four floors. The first two floors are used by the Lillian H. Smith Branch of TPL. The upper floors house the special collection of Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books and the Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation & Fantasy. Although Lillian H. Smith Library is no longer exclusive to children, it continues to provide regular after school programs for them, expanding its service to visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities.

The unique history of Lillian H. Smith Library has inspired our research focus on the user experience of children within the library. To begin our research, we asked the question: how do children use Lillian H. Smith Library? We will be employing an inductive approach to identify and develop recurring or significant themes from the qualitative data we obtained to answer our research question (Thomas, 2003). From there, we hope to integrate our findings into a coherent narrative about the library and its relationship with the community. This study will offer insights into how Lillian H. Smith Library operates and is utilized by its visitors, highlighting the vital role that public libraries play in society beyond merely a physical collection of books. By conducting a series of qualitative research, we hope to uncover the diverse roles that Lillian H. Smith Library serves in the community. We hope to establish this paper as a tribute to the heritage of the Boys & Girls House as well as the memories of the boys and girls it once served.

Literature Review

Our interest in studying public library space originated from our assumption on the library's positive influence on children's school readiness and social skills. Peterson's (2012) *Preschool Early Literacy Programs in Ontario Public Libraries* featured surveys from parents/caregivers, observation of children in library programs,

and interviews with library staff to show that preschool early literacy programs have been highly successful in fostering children's school readiness and their motivation to read. *Providing Library Services for Urban Children: Challenges and Strategies* (Massey & Weeks, 2005) discussed how the library is a space that brings knowledge and helps youth become "information seekers" with the resources the library carries. The author noted how libraries may result in different experiences based on the different programs and facilities it offers. Sometimes it can result in inequalities within the library space due to its configuration (Massey & Weeks, 2005). Combining the findings from both papers, we aim to examine the close connection between Lillian H. Smith Library's branch features and the resulting children experience.

This paper acknowledges the rich heritage of Lillian H. Smith Library and is guided by a historical approach. *Believing in Books: The Story of Lillian Smith* (2015) narrated Smith's life story and her impact on promoting children service in public libraries. In the early 1900s, books, especially for children, were considered a luxury for most families. In fact, children under the age of 14 were not allowed in the library at the time. Born into a family of scholars and musicians, Lillian Smith was exposed to the magical world of books at an early age. Her passion for books motivated her to pursue a job as a librarian to share the joy of reading to other people. In September 1912, Lillian was recruited by the Chief Librarian of the Toronto Library Board and became the first children's librarian in the British Empire. In her forty years of librarian career, Lillian played a significant role in expanding children's services by improving collections, training staff, and expanding programs, including the establishment of the Boys & Girls House in 1922. The Boys & Girls House provided a broad range of services for children, including story times and puppet shows, both are still offered at Lillian H. Smith Library today. Like a gardener, Lillian planted a forest of ideas in Toronto Public Library's children services. Today, we continue to benefit from Smith's legacy, resting under the shades of her forest.

Methodology

This study relied on three methods of data collection: archival research, mapping ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. We have included visual and audio data to support our conclusion and to enrich the diversity of data.

In 2014, Lillian H. Smith Library launched the Story Project in celebration of the branch's 20th anniversary (Wong, 2014). This virtual exhibition featured stories about the branch itself, the surrounding neighborhood, the people, and the collection it houses. The Story Project will serve as the main source of data for our archival research. We will read the stories told by local users to further understand Lillian H. Smith Library's changing role in the community.

This research project is based on the three months of field work we completed as a group. During the course, we visited the site multiple times to complete ethnography

and participant observation. We took field notes and photographs to document our observations. These site visits allow us to closely examine the performance of the library visitors and the intentions behind them. We will detail one of our visits to the library on a Monday afternoon with visual and audio materials as supplements in later sections.

We proceeded with our research process by conducting semi-structured interviews with people we met during our visit to Lillian H. Smith Library. We interviewed two librarians and two parents, each lasted around 5-7 minutes. The interview transcript is attached in the appendix. Our analysis of the interview followed the recommended framework from Robert Stuart Weiss' *Learning from strangers: the art and method of qualitative interview studies* (1995). We began our analysis by carefully reading the interview transcript and highlighting words and phrases that spoke out to us. We then sort the codes into eight distinct categories (shown in Table 1). As we reviewed the codes under each of the categories, we paid attention to the repetitions and outliers. The repeated codes became main themes for each of the categories. We then knit together the themes to form a cohesive story about the library and the community.

Reflection on Methodology

In the interview process, we began our interviews by asking the interviewees if they would grant us a couple minutes to participate in an interview for our school assignment. We made sure to mention our positionality as an UofT student and that this assignment was for a class project. Our status as students from a reputable institution helped to establish credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the interviewees, making them more willing to participate in our interviews. Furthermore, all three of our group members have not used Lillian H. Smith Library prior to this study. Our examination of the library is unbiased and limited to the data we obtained through the research process.

Some limitations of this project include the setbacks we experienced during the interview process. The TPL has a long process time for any interview request, and they were not able to respond to our email on time. As a result, we proceeded with our research process by conducting interviews with people we met during our visit to Lillian H. Smith Library. Although our interviews were a bit short because they are not scheduled, we were able to acquire unexpected information that added to the diversity of our data. We also faced limitations while documenting the interior of the library. The librarian stopped us from taking pictures during our site visits, due to the presence of children.

Result and Analysis

Archival Research

The Story Project curated by Christine Wong collected stories from local users of Lillian H. Smith Library and the Boys & Girls House. The participants looked back on their memories with Lillian H. Smith Library and submitted their personal anecdotes. Some participants spoke of their own childhood memories reading books or attending programs at the library (Wong, 2014). Other speakers talked about the library's evolving roles over time as technology advances. One of the participants, Andrew Larsen talked about how the toddler time program was the first out-of-house activity he did with his son (Wong, 2014). Listening to librarian Joanne Schwartz's immersive storytelling, the experience "introduced to us new parents a new world of children's books" (Wong, 2014). Now Andrew has become a children's author under the influence of Lillian H. Smith Library's toddler time program. Wong's intention for launching the Story Project was to "encourage regular citizens to be local historians." (Brissenden, 2015) The stories served as a useful tool to understand the role of Lillian H. Smith Library in the heart of community members.

Ethnography

We visited Lillian H. Smith Library on a Monday afternoon to complete our participant observation. Upon entering, the open space at the center of the building created a welcoming atmosphere. The panopticon-like design allowed easy navigation across the library and observed people's movements across different floors. Two security guards wearing uniforms were sitting by the staircase near the children's section. These two observations contributed to a sense of surveillance and safety in the library.

During our visit, we observed a teacher leading a group of approximately ten to fifteen children at Lillian H. Smith Library for a school activity. The teacher was standing near the entrance, while other kids were scattered across the ground floor. Figure. 1 documented a group of three younger kids sitting at a table in the children's book collection, flipping through a picture book. We can see that children do not only come to the library to borrow books, but to also engage in social activities.



Figure 1. Photo of children reading at the table

After completing our observation, we took a walk around the outside of the library. The streetscape was documented by the audio recordings we captured on College St. Most of the time, the audio clips remained nonverbal. They featured sounds of footsteps and passing cars. Occasionally, snippets of conversations from passing groups were also recorded. The temporal variation of the soundscape throughout the audio clips tells a story of the vibrant neighborhood the library sits in. By situating ourselves from within the community as opposed to an outside observer, we were able to grasp the children's experience using Lillian H. Smith Library.

Interview Analysis

Table 2 showed the integration process of the recurring themes we identified in the interview transcripts. We generalized the children's activity to the four W's: where—in designated children's collections; when—after school hours or weekends; who—with parents or caregivers; and what: to borrow books or attend programs. Furthermore, we reached three key findings regarding children's activity at Lillian H. Smith Library:

1. Children's activity is choreographed by the library's configuration

Children are usually spotted at designated spaces within the library accompanied by parents or caregivers. Since the library space is divided by its function, children are not visible from, for example, the fourth floor because the materials there are not suitable for kids. Respectfully, the children's section on the ground floor is designed to be more spacious and engaging. Thus, the design of the building supports its function.

2. *Children mainly come to library for two purposes: to borrow books and to attend programs*

They just come to pick up books and leave. The two purposes are supported by the library's extensive book collection and after school programs. Both parents noted the importance of the library as a source of education but also a social space for children and for adults.

3. *The children's activity only happens on the ground floor, the upper floors are used by a range of other age groups*

The upper floors have various collections, programs, and facilities designed for visitors from other age groups. Furthermore, the librarian also noted the increased use of digital resources offered by TPL. We concluded that the library has evolved into a multidisciplinary institution that provides equitable access to information for people from all age groups. This underscores the library's ability to adapt and meet the changing needs of its users over time.

Conclusion

By integrating our findings, we attempted to answer our research question by specifying the when, where, what, who, and why of the children's activity in the library. We validated our hypothesis of the library having a close connection to children because of its past history, current branch features, and future vision. However, it also led us to new readings of the library. While the library's precedent is a dedicated children's service, Lillian H. Smith Library has become a service for all community members. Therefore, we expect Lillian H. Smith to expand and develop to include visitors of different age groups, ethnicities, and backgrounds in the future. We hope this study will be a chapter of the ongoing story of the library over time.

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