

## Reimagining the moral economy of the ‘people’s university’

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New media technologies, the digitisation of information, learning archives and heritage resources are changing the nature of the public library and museums services across the globe and in so doing the way present and future users of these services interact with these institutions in real and virtual spaces. New digital technologies are rewriting the nature of participation, learning and engagement with the public library and fashioning a new paradigm where virtual and physical space, educative and temporal environments operate symbiotically. It is with such an assumed and creatively disruptive paradigm that the £193million Library of Birmingham Project (LoB) in the UK is being developed. New and old media forms and platforms are helping to fashion new public places and spaces that reaffirm the importance of public libraries as originally conceived in the nineteenth century. As people’s universities the public library service offers a web of connective learning opportunities and affordances. The importance of community libraries as sites of intercultural understanding and practical social democracy is reaffirmed through the initial findings in the first of a series of community interventions forming part of a long term project, *Connecting of Spaces and Places*, funded by the Royal Society of Arts.

The public library service in the UK is undergoing what interior designers and business pundits often refer to as a makeover and often, it seems, the public library is becoming less about people and less about books. In some ways this is simply a recognition that the public library, as an established institution, has to evolve and ‘move with the times’ in order to survive. New media technologies have certainly transformed the function and spatial organisation of many public, private and academic libraries. Professional library staff are becoming user facilitors rather than gatekeepers of approved knowledge and worthy texts with the service ethos becoming privatised as value for money, relevance to the economy and modernization challenge the universalist values that informed the establishment of the public library service in the UK in the mid nineteenth century as a “people’s

university” (Black and Hoare, 2006) . Public libraries were, and to an extent still remain, spaces and places where users can freely develop their interests, ideas and knowledge. They offer safe, neutral, caring and genuinely public opportunities that are valued by their users but remain relatively unsupported by political and business elites despite rhetoric to the contrary that is blind to the political and practical realities. The ruling value syntax of neoliberalism sees freedom as market opportunity, development as economic growth and the public sphere as a burden and constraint on private enterprise and initiative (McMurtry, 1999).

The public sphere and the public sector, as the latest economic crisis has shown, has prevented the capitalist economic system from imploding, from consuming itself, in its relentless need to secure economic growth and maintain profit margins. The private sector rests on the foundations laid down by the State and relies on the public sector to undertake those tasks and activities that it is unwilling to engage with - public health, public education and so on. The private sector actually needs public libraries beyond the current re-articulation of their primary purposes as business support, knowledge management and skills development. However, the public library service has the potential to offer far more than this functionalism suggests but in doing it may open out all manner of possibilities that take the freedom and lifelong learning rhetoric into areas that were once charted by radical thinkers such as Ivan Illich (1973) and Marxist sociologists such as Henri Lefebvre (1996) and geographers such as David Harvey (2008). Harvey writes (2008: 23),

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by

changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is (...) one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

Briefly, if conceived, developed, governed and financed to facilitate the formation of a network or web of deinstitutionalised learning hubs, of thirdspaces and tools for conviviality, and if harnessed to the challenge of realising 'the right to the city' for all citizens, then libraries have the potential to prefigure social arrangements that could be genuinely democratic, socially liberating and culturally creative. For this to occur the book will not only have to be rewritten in the glow of new and emerging media technologies and affordances but the lived space within, and the real places that are actually physical libraries, will need to be re-imagined, re-formed and re-connected. As Illich (1975: 37) writes,

What is fundamental to a convivial society is not the total absence of manipulative institutions and addictive goods and services, but the balance between those tools which create the specific demands they are specialised to satisfy and those complementary, enabling tools which foster self-realization. The first set of tools produces according to abstract plans for men in general; the other set enhances the ability of people to pursue their own goals in their unique way.

A corollary of this right to the city and the reimaginging, or return of the public library to its original conception as a 'people's university', can be found in the ideas, values and actions of less revolutionary thinkers and in fairly establishment bodies. The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA for short) was established in 1754 and has recently drawn on its enlightenment heritage in a series of articles, lectures, projects and civic interventions that constitute a desire to initiate an enlightenment for the twenty first century. These aims were

outlined in some detail by the RSA's CEO, Matthew Taylor, in a speech and a published essay (Taylor, 2010), *Twenty-first century enlightenment*, in which he argues that within the West, and certainly the UK, there exists a social aspiration gap and what is needed to bridge this is more pro-social action and behaviour, trust, caring and co-operation. We need a more self-aware, socially embedded, model of autonomy and an empathic universalism that must somehow [successfully] challenge structured inequality at local and global spatial scales. The RSA however, wishing to maintain its distance from any specific political programme avoids endorsing doctrinal ideas that relate to economic redistribution suggesting instead, that "a stronger recognition of empathic capacity as a core capability for modern citizens would also influence the design of institutions – public, commercial and civic – and public places, including the online world" (Taylor, 2010: 20). The end in view, as pragmatist philosopher John Dewey might have put it, is a retrieval of the Enlightenment principle of humanism referring to, "the basis for social arrangements should be what increases human happiness and welfare" (Taylor, 2010: 22). With a firm emphasis on social connectivity, social capital and social networking (Ormerod, 2010), the RSA pragmatically acknowledges the relationships of its ideas with some of those of the dominant Conservative Party in the UK Coalition Government namely the "Big Society" together with the echoes of New Labour's Third Way communitarianism. Consequently, the role of the State is minimised and with it the public sector and public sphere is variously transposed into a support for voluntary action, charity, philanthropy, the development of "capabilities" (Sen, 2001) and free enterprise but not that "of the dessicated economic atomism of the Chicago School" (Norman, 2006). Indeed, Conservative MP Jesse Norman's idea of "compassionate conservatism" is now the Big Society (Norman, 2010). Norman writes (2006),

It has a distinct vision of society, as a "connected society" which stresses the links between people and the institutions that give their lives point and purpose. It does not regard individuals as mere economic agents, or as composing groups or segments of society, which must be successively wooed and bought off with favours from government. (...) It insists not merely that we are all in this together, but that all of all of us is. A political viewpoint that ignores human dignity or energy or creativity in the name of a sterile economic calculus, impoverishes itself to that degree.

Similarly, Maurice Glasman's 'blue' Labour ideas focus on the social where reciprocity, mutualism, solidarity and the common good are retrieved to become essential elements of a Good Society that sees a radical (non Marxist) past as a key constituent of a radical future. For Glasman both the free market and the state are the servants of justice, "the primary end of politics", and fairness, "its operative principle" (Glasman, 2011: 26). In some respects there is also an affinity to the ideas of radical educator Ivan Illich whose concern to overcome the stultifying effects of professional self-interest, institutionalization and organisation paralysis had its moment in the the 1970s and seems to be re-emerging in political contexts as diverse as Dougald Hine's counter-cultural Dark Mountain project (<http://www.dark-mountain.net/about-2/the-manifesto/>) through to the dessicated paternalism of 'compassionate Conservatism'. However, unlike Lefebvre, Harvey and McMurtry, the central importance of capitalist relations of production and capitalist/neo-liberal values as the major causes of economic exploitation, structured inequality and globalised environmental degradation, is definitely occluded in these otherwise progressive discourses. Although the *New York Times* may have announced the return of Marx in 2008, contemporary Marxists have yet to crack open the ruling value syntax of neo liberalism. Consequently, it is in this cultural, ideological and policy context that the public library service, the idea of lifelong learning as

something other than technical and vocational training and the relationship between virtual spaces and real places in our increasingly mediated world, will be discussed.

### **On Real Places and Virtual Spaces**

The philosopher and architectural theorist David Kolb (2006: 2) writes, “places in my special sense are those areas that are places-where-we-do-something, rather than just stretches of places-where-something-is”. For Kolb, they require social norms which delimit cultural expectation, behaviour, conduct and action. There are often strong personal or historical associations with particular places accompanied by a thick embodiment and psychological investment. Public libraries, by this definition are clearly places. However, if place entails social movement, performances and certain cultural proclivities there is little reason to oppose the idea that an actual, real, place can be located in a virtual space. For Kolb, the often presumed ‘thicker’ nature of real world interaction belies the fact that most everyday encounters are actually quite superficial and, arguably, at least as ‘thick’ as those in a virtual world. One important issue worthy of reflection is the relationship between virtual space and the real places within them and with other real (and virtual) spaces and places ‘located’ elsewhere. Actual spaces can become part of the virtual world thanks to the webcam. Your avatar can also fly as well as walk. You can purchase real objects in virtual spaces, read books, hypertext documents, watch movies, create cities, wage wars, have sex or retrieve and rearticulate the actual pasts of real peoples and communities from the digital archives of libraries and museums. You can travel to a new central library which has yet to be built without physically leaving one’s home or neighbourhood. You can travel in virtual time but, as Wilson (2003) notes, with the

growth of the internet and cyberspace the importance of different (actual) places has increased because distance has disappeared and time has shrunk. Increased accessibility enhanced by new low cost technological innovations and infrastructures brings different spaces and places, different cultures and communities, into a common realm that is both fluid and constantly evolving. We can enter virtual space imaginistically, enter a virtual building as if it were there and we can learn about its form and structure and see what is or may go on within it. The still and moving images of virtual spaces also have significant temporal and affective dimensions. Guiliana Bruno (2001) notes 'cinema' has its etymological origins in the Greek words for 'emotion' and 'motion'. The moving image is a lived space with tangible haptic, sensory and affective qualities. They can 'move' us, trigger and even create memories and knowledge that have a felt reality.

### **On the Meaning of Time and Place**

These haptic visual spaces and places are environments and just as electronic media offers different affordances to those of print media so electronic media environments invariably alter social norms, behaviours and perceptions in different ways (Meyrowitz, 1986). For Gustafson (2000), a physical or symbolic environment acquires meaning in its relationship to either self, others' identity and/or history or to other places. For geographers such as Doreen Massey (2005) this relational aspect also involves the temporal processes of continuity and change. The same place may mean different things at different times and will inevitably change over time. Time becomes a succession of past, present and future possibilities. The present and its accompanying spatialities are consequently laden with virtualities that extend beyond

themselves, that open up and are in a continual process of becoming. “The ballast of the virtual past”, Grosz writes (2001: 119), is sufficient “to propel an unpredicated future out of an uncontained and endlessly ramifying present”. The past and present co-exist. They are effectively contemporaneous. The present is an infinitely contracted moment of the past. Memory takes us to where the past is and “we must place ourselves in it if we are to have recollections, memory images” (Grosz, 2001: 122). To remember is to occupy, to experience, time and space, to admit that both are always movement and action. Thus space is a moment of becoming, a movement of one space to another, a space of change which alters with time. “The present is that which acts and lives, that which functions to anticipate an immediate future in action” (Grosz, 2001: 121). Thus utopias, understood as “the spaces of phantasmatically attainable political and personal ideals, the projection of idealized futures” (Grosz, 2001: 130), or good places that have yet to be created, are sometimes presented through architectural CGI flythroughs of proposed new buildings or places and spaces that need to be reconfigured, reused or regenerated. The imagineering of new media technologies may communicate design ideas, learning opportunities and social intentions to wide and diverse publics via a myriad of formats and devices - smart phone, iPad to the IMAX. As McQuire (2010: 7) writes,

Neither home nor street nor city can now be thought apart from the media apparatus which redistributes the scale and speed of social interaction in their domains.

McQuire speculates that questions like where is your home has become transformed in our increasingly globalised, networked and mobile world into what is the *meaning* of home, locatedness or cultural belonging. Future spaces become relational and



social because they are created as part of an ongoing stream of activity across different dimensions and are imbricated in face to face, 'real life', virtual and other, largely impermanent, interactions. These relational spaces are necessarily other orientated, open and porous, accommodating increasingly varied information flows and velocities. For Urry (2005), in addition to social capital, individuals and families, communities and groups must also develop forms of network capital that is, "the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit" (Urry : 5). This is clearly apparent in the socio-cultural practices of many diaspora communities who maintain contact with friends and families who may be either spatially and temporally proximate and distant (Eade, 1997). Elliot and Urry (2010) also suggest that increasingly those lacking network capital become less connected and progressively disadvantaged socially, culturally and economically.

Relational spaces, including those which have emerged in a number of virtual environments, offer both actual and potential opportunities for many formal and informal creative, deliberative, exploratory, social and connective learning opportunities (Kalay, Kvan & Affleck, 2008). The emergence of complexly linked but self-aware places act as cultural counterweights to the flat places offered by corporate malls and other non-places. Social, cultural and ethnic identities may become spread among numerous groups that may not be located in, or associated with, any one fixed geographical territory. New media may direct attention away from local connections as links to activities, information flows and formerly separated social situations become increasingly possible and common. For Kolb (2008: 15), the city can support many parallel and "intersecting networks of places" each developing

their own peculiar social norms. The urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues the possibility of human beings creating their own spaces on the model of an artwork is waiting to be realised. Indeed, professionals and lay community members frequently work in tandem to recreate, re-image and redefine the potentialities of museums and libraries in a complexly textured and networked manner. The library and the city are, as Lewis Mumford (1991: 640) recognised, networked media environments “and the best organ of memory man has yet created”. Indeed, the English inter-library loan system prefigured a social connectivity that enabled smaller peripheral units (community libraries) to become a significant and meaningful parts of a larger urban constellation while returning autonomy to localities and simultaneously encouraging universal processes. He writes (1991: 644),

In a well ordered world, there would be no limits, physical, cultural, or political, to such a system of co-operation: it would pass through geographic obstacles and national barriers as readily as X-rays pass through solid objects. Given the present facilities for telephotography as well as fast transportation, such a system could in time embrace the whole planet.

Kolb (2006: 11) suggests that a local library, school or church “could expand and connect into a larger shared virtual/physical facility”. New media technologies can enhance public libraries as educational, social and cultural complexes offering creative opportunities and flexible possibilities that can shape a whole range of new social roles, interactions and interventions. They may help fashion and connect new spaces and places and go some way towards nurturing those long sort after policy goals of social connectedness, community empowerment and lifelong learning. For Illich it would also necessitate significant deschooling, deinstitutionalisation and deprofessionalisation. Writing before the computer and internet age he suggests (1973: 86),

If the goals of learning were no longer dominated by schools and schoolteachers, the market for learners would be much more various and the definition of 'educational artifacts' would be less restrictive. There could be tool shops, libraries, laboratories and gaming rooms. Photo labs and offset presses would allow neighbourhood newspapers to flourish. Some storefront learning centres could contain viewing booths for closed-circuit television, others could feature office equipment for use or for repair. The juke box or the record player would be commonplace, with some specialising in classical music, others in international folk tunes, others in jazz. Film clubs would compete with each other and with commercial television. Museum outlets could be networks for circulating exhibits or works of art, both old and new, originals and reproductions, perhaps administered by the various metropolitan museums.

These various centres or hubs would form a web of learning activities and opportunities and the professional personnel involved, continues Illich, would be facilitators such as museum guides, reference librarians and custodians rather than pedagogues. In many ways, the new job roles public library staff are presently developing could have been written by Illich himself.

### **The Library of Birmingham Project**

The Library of Birmingham (LoB) Project is a £193m initiative to replace the existing Central Library in the city of Birmingham (UK) with a new iconic structure that combines place marketing with a desire to change the nature of the public library service. Birmingham, a sprawling city of over a million people, is the most ethnically and culturally diverse in Europe with a road network constructed to display the once dominant automobile manufacturing industry. It is relatively young due to recent waves of immigration from Africa and Asia. It is economically depressed and underperforming with relatively high levels of unemployment. In this context the LoB project appears to some critics as a phantasy remote from the practical realities and vernacular culture of the city. However, this would be to misunderstand the

generative possibilities that the LoB, and the many local community libraries offer, because although the service is underfunded and threatened by cuts, public libraries frequently remain vibrant hubs of community activity, informal and social learning, civic engagement and intercultural understanding. The LoB idea represents an enlarged space incorporating numerous real and virtual places, times, cultures, memories, artifacts, dreams, possibilities and relationships (Blewitt & Gambles, 2010). The marketing flythrough and the virtual LoB, built within Second Life, are elements of the grounded possibility of creating a future of networked public spheres open to everyone at a moment when neo-liberal economic and political policy making presents the public provision of public goods as things ripe for transfer to private sector management companies (Dutta, 2011). The rhetoric of management efficiency, service culture and public-private sector partnerships sometimes displace or obscure the relevance of the nineteenth century conceptualisation of the public library service as a people's university and the enduring enlightenment values of light, education and happiness (Darnton, 2009). Expensive new media technologies are changing book cultures and perhaps facilitating the privatisation of public knowledge. They are also redefining the notion of literacy and fashioning the virtualities clearly evident in the physical design of the new library (and internal redesign of many others) - fluid spaces, multi user touch screens, 3-D visualisers, digitised local archives, digital wayfinding resources, real and virtual performances, exhibitions, readings, meetings, public discussions, social connectivity and so on. Although the LoB will not to be a library devoid of shelves, as Marshall McLuhan may have envisaged, the integration of digital culture into the fabric of everyday usage will most likely lead to a kaleidoscopic mozaic of possibilities. Bookshelves will be used

for books but also as a symbolic reminder to users of that in the past public libraries were key constituents of an enlightened social democracy.

Real and virtual dialogic spaces where community groups may explore, mediate and seek creative solutions to issues that might otherwise divide and antagonise communities are envisaged. Underpinning this spatial entitlement is a commitment to fostering an empathic universalism that appreciates social similarities while respecting cultural and ethnic differences. A related creative thinking space or Innovation Hub is also planned where library staff will adopt solution based thinking, mentoring and coaching approaches to help those with limited socio-economic opportunities to realise individual, community or social enterprise goals. The intention is that sections of the LoB may be temporarily repurposed for events, talks, health fairs and exhibitions bringing virtual and physical users into close contact with library resources without spatially segregating them. An array of learning opportunities and cultural attractions for those entering the library for specific purposes and for those entering out of curiosity and interest but with no specific goal in mind will also be provided. The theory of free choice learning (Falk & Dierking, 2002) and the notion of the library as a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1989) with “loose spaces (Franck and Stevens, 2007) has influenced the vision that the LoB must become an environment where heterogeneous social practices thrive and where spaces are sufficiently relaxed to allow cultural freedoms to emerge and generate new political, commercial, educative, intellectual and experimental possibilities.

Such a heterotopic space may empower if it takes the form of network of relations among different sites each functioning in different ways ‘in accordance to the

synchronicity in which it is located' and where seemingly incompatible spatial uses are effectively juxtaposed (Foucault, 1993: 423). As Lees (1997: 344) writes, 'the heterotopic power of the library lies in the accessibility of its knowledge to all publics'. It is through the enabling of various forms of behaviour and user-constructed interaction that the roles, functions and meanings of, and within, the library are culturally produced and socially reproduced (Lees, 2001). People learn socially because they are social beings. Human beings continuously learn things in different ways and in different places. Formal and informal, face to face and virtual learning are likely to be blended in new forms and combinations depending on need, experience, opportunity and access. Thus local history or heritage groups may meet in local libraries to access digital archives or to contribute words and images to the socially mediated construction of neighbourhood, family or cultural heritage narratives. Birmingham's People's Archive project and online Local History forum are two examples of technologically enabled social and cultural heritage initiatives that have counterparts in many other towns and cities (Kos, 2008) offering considerable, albeit as yet unrealized potential, for social interactivity and dialogue on urban history, place, culture and memory. Such digital heritage projects need to extend beyond the confines of a single location for, as in Birmingham, the cultural memories of many communities are not rooted in the spatiality of the city but elsewhere in different places and spaces. If cultural urban identity is becoming more informational and relational than place based then public libraries can offer facilities and possibilities for networked social, cultural and historical engagement that traverse if not transcend time and space, duration and distance. Local libraries are important places that help build social capital by providing opportunities for social learning, intercultural understanding, pluralistic integration and often offering sanctuary to

those who need to escape the pressures of poverty, unemployment, immigration, asylum, social isolation, racism and domestic abuse (Berger, 2002; Gong, Japzon & Chen, 2008; Aabo, Audunson & Varheim, 2010).

### **Connecting Places and Spaces in South Yardley**

With modest funding provided by the Royal Society of Arts, members of the public library service in Birmingham and the Lifelong Learning Centre at Aston University (Birmingham) created an opportunity for local people to visualise, articulate, debate or otherwise express their ideas and feelings about the LoB and the future of major public service. For the RSA, the project is an articulation of a wider national strategy to catalyse localist civic engagement and participatory democracy whose lessons and achievements may be shared with, and possibly replicated by, other regional networks. A community engagement event was held in March 2011 in South Yardley community library, a predominantly working class district four miles from the centre of Birmingham. It was conceived as the first in a series of linked research and development interventions undertaken in partnership with community public libraries each of which having a distinct social, cultural and ethnic profile ranging from the predominantly white to the predominantly Asian (Indian, Pakistani, and Chinese). It explored how real places and virtual spaces could develop as new public arenas for civic engagement and lifelong learning. The theme of the event was advertised as *Connecting Splaces and Places* focusing on connecting individuals and communities with the LoB. It was comprised of a number of related activities including a screening of the animated flythrough of the LoB, a demonstration of the virtual LoB in Second Life, opportunities to blog comments and upload images onto a

specially created site on Posterous.com or to create a digital graffiti design using free software uploaded onto library laptops located and fixed PCs in communal library areas. A community artist helped facilitate adult and children's understandings through the creation of a collage composed primarily of annotated circles of coloured paper, mimicking the external design of the new library, a 'Big Brother' style video booth where participants were invited to express their views and concerns direct to camera and 'fun' activities such as face painting and balloon tricks designed to entertain 'children of all ages'. In this way a free and 'fun' environment was created by staff and volunteers that avoided the top down approach that characterises so many community engagement events. Library users were invited to express or develop their ideas or views in ways that were most comfortable to them. The result was that the event was a shared experience, jointly owned by users and organisers, with participants frequently referring to it as "ours" and the activities as being organised by, rather than for, "us".

A group of Asian women who use the library on Saturdays as a place to learn skills of Mehndi design contributed to cultural richness of the event. The hundred or so participants were all local including whites, Asians, Afro-Caribbeans, Africans, children with their parents, seniors, long term Birmingham residents and recent migrants. They symbolised both South Yardley and the community public library as a space and place where new virtualities, heterotopic non-hegemonic and u-topic learning environments and significantly "the multicultural question", an ongoing issue in city, can be addressed. Stuart Hall (2001: 4-5) writes,

The multicultural question is, in my mind, the question of how we are to envisage the futures of those many different societies now composed of



peoples from very different histories, backgrounds, cultures, contexts, experiences and positions in the ranking order of the world. Societies where difference refuses to disappear. That is to say, where an unspoken social and cultural homogeneity cannot be assumed to provide an implicit consensual horizon of action, practice, policy or interpretation, but where nevertheless there is a determination to build a common and, if possible, a just life together. So the question, to reduce it, is: how is this commonness in difference to be imagined and constructed? (...) [T]he multicultural question, in my view, concerns the nature of society as a whole, and thus addresses the changed conditions of everyone.

Culturally diverse cities like Birmingham see boundaries shift and change over time which connect life-worlds and temporalities and condense difference “in a double rhythm of involvement and exclusion, proximity and separation, fixity and fluidity” (Hall, 2006: 25). In many places, including community public libraries, a new multiculturalism is being negotiated in a variety of real and virtual everyday encounters perhaps facilitating the emergence of a vernacular cosmopolitanism, an intricate network of differences marrying new and old social norms.

Local community libraries may therefore prefigure a future where diversity can find expression in a commonness of difference and where a library can be seen as a place to learn, to read or connect with a different ethnic group or culture, contribute to the collective and everchanging heritage of the city, comment on or participate in civic affairs and in so doing build a just life together. New media technologies allow diverse communities in separate physical places to interact, engage, share, learn and for the centre to become part of the periphery. As a children’s librarian and part time development manager on the LoB project noted,

Although the library is not to open until 2013 we have created a space online where people can walk round it now and that means people can actually think

about how they would like to use the service and what they would actually like to do in there and how they would like to use the space (Video Interview 19.3.11).

New media can enable citizens to curate public digital exhibitions using digitised artifacts and images from the city's public archives. The RSA *Connecting Spaces and Places* project is fashioning an intricate urban learning network based around the public library service and its prestigious new LoB development. It offers a new architecture of hope and a utopian imagination that identifies connectivity as key to an effective urban social and physical infrastructure. As one event blogger put it, "I don't want the Library of Birmingham just to be in the town centre - I want it to come out to me as well". As well as being third places libraries are also "ecotones" that is, areas of high productivity and creativity stimulated by the close proximity and interweaving of different social (lifelong) learning, cultural and media environments. At South Yardley it was their role as a site of social engagement, intercultural understanding and community interaction that was most valued by participants.

The library is for the community and it brings people together and there is a lot of people on their own. There is no reason for them to be on their own. It's not just about books. It's about people. (...) A lot of people in the older age group are scared of computers and they can come and have a go and learn and find out how interesting it is. And it doesn't cost you hundreds of pounds to get a computer. We like our library. We don't want it to go. (Video booth comment, 19.3.11)

As Maro Luis Small (2009) has written, many traditional forms of socialising have declined and many people are either already too busy or too tired to become more involved in setting up, organising or leading community activities and building an environment in which connectivity and social capital may grow. For Small it would be far wiser for policy makers and commentators to reconsider the role of those

organisations who already structure everyday life such as charities, private companies, childcare centres etc., rather than individuals, in generating a greater sociality and sociability. Of course, the managers and directors of these organisations will not get involved simply for the common good but will need to see that something is in it for them which perhaps raises a question mark over the RSA's endorsement of "empathic universalism" as a key principle. Indeed, Small suggests that the more volunteers are involved in the running of those organisations and attendant activities upon whose services they draw upon the more routine forms of interaction, sharing, social reciprocity and learning will result. In other words, those institutions that touch on the everyday realities of citizens are likely to create that social connectedness the RSA and others espouse. Such institutions are therefore enabling and generative rather than exploitative and structured to dominate. The current but threatened freedoms of the Internet and public role of the "people's universities" could conceivably help create a more egalitarian, learned, generous and socially connected society. For instance,

When someone reads a book they should be able to blog about it and talk to others who have read the same book. You could create this online through the library website. This would be a great way to meet people. (...). It would be amazing to have a charity project to link the new Library of Birmingham with places around the world that don't have libraries. For example, my village in Bangladesh - Badal Kote - debating or discussion group to share ideas. Students do this all the time but this would be for everyone of all ages. [event blogger 19.3.11)

Connected public libraries adequately equipped with new media technologies offer networked safe social spaces and places where different cultural, class and ethnic communities can develop translocal community learning activities enabling different lifeworlds and temporalities to interact in a new configuration of spatial and placed

based relationships. If reconceived as places where the real and virtual entwine, as exemplified in the idea of the LoB, public libraries may be able to revive and redesign their founding purpose as people's universities for a very different 21st century. To do this, they will need to remain part of a collective commons and a genuinely public asset, publicly funded, civically engaged and socially democratic.

Where else could people of all ages come along and share an experience - and all for free! People feel safe here, they have fun, they meet people, learn new things and more! [event blogger 19.3.11]

## **Conclusion**

In all the discussions, hopes, visions and exhortations a major contraction remains unresolved and to a large extent unaddressed. The ruling value syntax does not allow for a questioning, challenge or a direct contestation of the key fundamentals of the market capitalism. As McMurtry has cogently argued, the capitalist system, particularly in its present neo-liberal manifestation, palpably fails to deliver the public goods and benefits that are its ideological purpose and moral justification. Big Society advocates and 21st century enlightenment enthusiasts have not fully acknowledged this as the case and neither are they likely to. So, if the radical implications of Ivan Illich and the reinvention of the "people's university" is to be part of a political project realising "the right to the city" there needs to be a much wider process of socio-economic reimaging that extends beyond the immediate, the geographically local, the socially accommodating and politically meek. Glasman's turbulent blue Labour interventions with his emphases on developing a sense of place and his warranted hostility to the dictatorship of Finance Capital is a search for yet another new way, a good society rooted in a familiar process of reinventing

traditions. The Connecting Spaces and Places event at South Yardley community library suggests that a certain moral economy that pertains to a logic other than that of market capitalism is still alive and well. Although this moral economy, like the one E P Thompson (1971) eloquently discussed four decades ago, has its roots in an earlier period then so do the ideas of a public library being a public good, production being for use rather than for profit and learning being for personal growth and social development rather than the narrow instrumentalist goals of “employers”. However, history is perhaps neither linear nor cyclical for the old and the new constantly play on, and off, each other. New media technologies and the Internet are increasingly important elements in everyday life, work and learning. Virtual worlds are, or at least can be, real places too but many have a purpose more to do with marketisation, commodification and control rather than Enlightenment humanism, free choice learning or genuine sociability (Dahlberg, 2005; Rushkoff, 2010). The old moral economy of which the last section is but a glimpse needs to be transposed to the digital age where direct and proximate human interaction is more important than ever. To get a political grip on this would ensure the twenty first century enlightenment, the right to the city and its new tools for conviviality becomes more than just another phantasy but a means towards shaping a social world and life we can all truly value.

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