The image of an institution: politicians and the urban library project

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s people have questioned the need for physical library collections—and by extension, physical library space (Chad & Miller, 2005; D. Johnson, 1998; Nicholas, 2012; Rothman, 2011). Thus, in periods of recession, the library's position, along with other public services, is uncertain (Nicholas, Rowlands, Jubb, & Jamali, 2010). Since the 1980s, liberalization and periods of recession have caused reorganizations and cuts in public budgets, affecting public libraries (Bundy, 2009; Flagg, 1991; Goulding, 2009, 2012). Escalated by the 2008 recession, further cuts and local government reforms have contributed to reducing the number of physical library units. In Denmark, a structural reform of municipalities in 2007 contributed to reducing the number of library units[1] by almost 100 from 550 to 466 in 2013 (Andersen, Kvist, Sewerin, Skov, & Pors, 2007; Statistics Denmark, 2013). In Norway, the number of closures is similar during the same period, with 807 reduced to 715 (ABM-utvikling, 2007; Nasjonalbiblioteket, 2013), while the UK has almost 400 fewer public library units, from 4567 in 2007 to 4191 in 2013 (LISU, 2014). In percentage, the reduction for Denmark is 15.2%, Norway 11.4% and the UK 8.2%, respectively.

While the library closures in Denmark were mainly due to structural changes (Johannsen & Pors, 2010), the service point decreases in the UK and Norway were caused by local government cuts (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2012; NOU 2013:4, 2013). Although the reduction in percentage and real numbers are different, it is significant for all three cases because the time span in which it happened was relatively short, and the frequency much higher than in previous periods. Moreover, in Norway and the UK it demonstrates a political unwillingness to prioritize libraries in local communities.

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[1] Library units include service points with collections, not mobile libraries

At the same time, many of the world's major cities put considerable resources into the physical library by raising library buildings substantial in both budget and vision, such as in Seattle (Washington), Amsterdam (The Netherlands), and Newcastle (UK). This apparent paradox in local library development is intriguing and inspired this study.

This study was done under the auspices of the PLACE (Public Libraries as Arenas for Citizenship) project at Oslo and Akershus University of Applied Sciences and is an exploration of urban libraries in multicultural and digital contexts (PLACE, 2011). The main focus of PLACE has been on the use of public library space, and the subsequent outcomes (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010; Audunson, Essmat, & Aabø, 2011; Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Vårheim, Steinmo, & Ide, 2008). This study, however, explores how city politicians perceive public libraries in an urban setting, and the value of those libraries to the urban community.

2. Problem statement

A number of studies have explored attitudes of politicians towards public libraries (Gazo, 2010; Pearce, 2003; Stenström, 2012; Usherwood, 1993, 2003), however, none has done so in a context that included library building projects or sought to investigate how such projects are legitimized. Libraries are generally not among most politicians' top priorities, and such building projects constitute a major investment on the part of the city. Understanding the attitudes of politicians who have decided to fund library projects is crucial for librarians and citizens seeking to increase library funding. This study provides a preliminary exploration of how politicians perceive and legitimize public libraries, in general, and new library building projects in particular. Increasing knowledge about why and how certain cities have succeeded in their library building projects will yield important insight and offer valuable strategic information to those who wish to increase the presence and importance of local libraries. Another new component added by this study is comparing library perspectives from politicians in different cities with the same parameters. By adding these components this study intends to give additional insight into how library projects in different contexts affect politicians, and how politicians' library perceptions can be broadened.

The following research questions investigate how local politicians involved in library building projects perceive and legitimate the public library:

- Which norms and values are conveyed in politicians' notions of the public library and what, to them, constitutes an "appropriate" library?

- How are public libraries in general and library building projects in particular legitimized by politicians?

3. Literature review

The complexity of the public library mission and operation sets it apart from other public services. Greenhalgh and Worpole (1995) and Leadbeater (2003) are among those who argue that the multitude of tasks and operation areas is a problem for public libraries, because their focus could appear unclear, both to internal and external actors. Jochumsen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen (2006) note that changes in cultural policy have led to increased competition. Libraries now contend with other cultural institutions for public funding. Local priorities and library service standard vary. But public libraries are not only service institutions, they began as, and remain, political instruments: tools for enlightenment, integration (Jones, 1999), social control, and stabilization (Harris & Spiegler, 1974) and channels for spreading national values and ideas, as well as being of practical use to the general public (Byberg & Frisvold, 2001).

The public library's value and societal contribution have been thoroughly explored (D'Elia & Rodger, 1994; Edwards & Hall, 1996; Eigenbrodt, 2008; Goulding, 2004; Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, & Danmarks Biblioteksforening, 2000; Leckie, 2004; Rooney-Browne, 2009; Vårheim et al., 2008). Recent studies on libraries' community building capacity have shown their ability to promote integration and social capital (Aabø & Strand, 2004; Audunson et al., 2011; Bourke, 2005; Hillenbrand, 2005; C. A. Johnson, 2010; Scott, 2011; Vårheim et al., 2008). A study by Jochumsen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen (2000) showed how Danish public libraries are used differently according to life phase, and consequently give value to people in different life stages. The library's contribution to urban development has been addressed by Danish researchers who found that libraries have the potential to influence the image and identity of urban areas, contribute to urban diversity, and respond to social and economic issues (Skot-Hansen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, & Jochumsen, 2013). The economic value of libraries has been examined using different approaches, most commonly the contingent valuation method (Aabø, 2005; Chung, 2008; Lee & Chung, 2012; Stejskal, Stranska Kotatkova, Matatkova, & Heajek, 2012). Although perspectives and

methods vary, these studies exemplify how libraries are perceived to add value to their communities.

Although public libraries are a valued service, perceptions of them vary according to stakeholder group. Estabrook (1997) was one of the first to show discrepancy between what library professionals and the public perceived the library's role to be in the US. A number of international studies have focused solely on politicians. One of the first UK studies of politicians' views of libraries was conducted by Usherwood (1993), who headed a project for the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), investigating the attitudes of governments towards public libraries (Smith & Usherwood, 2004). Although never completed, the project yielded insightful results from several participating countries, including Norway and the UK (R. Audunson, 2005; Smith & Usherwood, 2004; Stadsmonitor Vlissingen, 2003; Usherwood, 2003). A common theme that emerged was that politicians tend to emphasize the more traditional aspects of libraries, such as book lending and dissemination of cultural heritage.

Another issue that has emerged is in regards to what influences the politicians' opinions about libraries. Pearce (2003) found that media and public opinion could be influential. She also found that party affiliation mattered, contrary to results from other studies, which have been inconclusive (R. A. Audunson, 2001; Fox, 2005; Usherwood, 2003). Generally, public libraries feature little on the political agenda and the correlation between party affiliation and library perception will vary greatly depending on situation and topic. Stenström (2012) studied library funding decisions at the state level in Canada, finding that "authority", "consistency and commitment" and "liking" influenced increase or decrease in library funding.

The lack of agreement or passion on the part of the politicians regarding libraries is one of the common features in studies of political perceptions. Pearce (2003) described UK politicians' library views as primarily "elusive", Gazo (2010) described her Quebec (Canada) respondents' views of the library as "passive", while Hedemark (2009) found "limited" views when exploring political library debate. Hedemark points out that those indifferent or vague perceptions of libraries might over time damage their legitimacy as it reflects that library issues are not a primary political concern.

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Previous research studies have rendered valuable insights into both what the library add to communities, and how it is perceived by those funding it; however, none has examined the underlying causes behind or effects of "success factors" such as library building projects. The cases in this study were selected to explore if and how a library building project influences library perceptions.

4. Conceptual framework and research questions

This study explores the instrumentality and legitimization underlying public library efforts by using institutional theory, an approach investigating the formation, proliferation, and reformation of institutions (Nielsen, 2005; Peters, 2005). Institutions are products of social structures, needs, and processes, and function as ever developing organisms (Selznick, 1957). Institutional theory studies how changing economical, demographic, and technological conditions affect institutions, which include libraries. These changes can be global, regional, or local. Additionally, institutions are influenced by values, norms and practices set in the field to which they belong. In this theoretical context, libraries make particularly interesting study objects as they are both physical and digital spaces.

Several Nordic studies have used institutional theory to explore and explain organizational change or development within libraries (R. Audunson, 1996; Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Hansson, 2010; Kann-Christensen, 2009; Kann-Christensen & Pors, 2004; Nilsen, 2007). These studies have mainly addressed how the attitudes of those in library organizations affect change. This study, on the other hand, applies the theoretical framework to data offering an outside perspective, that of the politicians, on the public library. Local politicians are important stakeholders in the public library's environment since they allocate funds over local government budgets. Their attitudes towards the public library and its role will therefore affect the local library organization, and this theoretical approach will help discern those attitudes.

There are two central concepts used to study and analyze the research subject. First, the existence of norms and values is central. March & Olsen (2011; 1989, 1994, 2004) emphasize how norms regulate institutions and institutional actors. The international public library community has used the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) to formalize a set of common norms and values that describe what the library is and should be. March and Olsen's

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"logic of appropriateness" (1989; 2004) suggests that people act within institutionalized boundaries when applying a contextualized set of values and norms. Institutionalized boundaries are also maintained by expectations from the environment, which, in the case of public libraries, would include library users and local politicians. Such norms help maintain the stability and identity of the institution, both internally and externally. Therefore, the first research question is:

- Which norms and values are conveyed in politicians' notions of the public library and what, to them, constitutes an "appropriate" library?

The other central concept is legitimacy. Based on the existence of norms and values, Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of any entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574). Because legitimacy includes both cognitive and evaluative aspects, this understanding of legitimacy is relevant for this study. Legitimacy is vital for any organization or institutions' survival. A high degree of legitimacy rests on the organization or institution's ability to act according to the norms and values ascribed to it and to fulfill external expectations. If libraries fail to meet these expectations, in other words failing to act within the institutionalized boundaries, they lose legitimacy. In this study, legitimacy is applied to analyze how politicians explain and justify public libraries and the construction of a new library building.

Suchmann (1995) identifies three categories of legitimacy; moral, pragmatic, and cognitive. The first implies that legitimacy is normative, created when an activity or entity is considered proper or good. The second is utility-based, meaning that the activity or entity is considered useful and value-adding. The third category is based on taken-for-grantedness, the extent to which our built-in image, for example that of the public library, legitimizes it.

In order to strengthen the discussion of legitimization, Vestheim's (2009) model of instrumentality is included to add dimension. The model rests on the assumption that all culture policy is instrumental, and only the motives behind it vary. Economic instrumentality justifies public spending on culture because it promotes economic growth. Aesthetic instrumentality supports "good" art based on its intrinsic values. Social instrumentality

supports culture to create social development and integration, while political mobilizing instrumentality supports culture to contribute to enlightenment and community involvement.

Paired with legitimacy, these categories provide a fruitful basis for discussing both which argumentation politicians use to justify public libraries or library construction, and, in turn, how they legitimize the institution. If politicians justify library building economically, suggesting that libraries indirectly support economic growth, it shows pragmatic legitimacy, perceived utility to attain a goal. Consequently, the second research question is:

- How are public libraries in general and library building projects in particular legitimized by politicians?

5. Research design

5.1 Triple case study

This study supposes there is a close link between politicians' viewpoints towards public libraries and the library projects in which they are involved. According to Yin (2009) a case study investigates "phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (p. 13), and is well suited when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. The three cases have been selected to investigate whether public library commonalities transcend national and local priorities and characteristics.

5.1.1 Aarhus

Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark, has a population of more than 300,000 people. It is known for its computer and technology-focused business and industry. Aarhus is the only Danish city with a magistrate governance structure. Every fourth year, there is a city council election. Based on the result, the new council elects a mayor and five councilors. The magistrate consist of the mayor and the five councilors, each heading a magistrate department. The Culture and Service Magistrate considers cases regarding cultural affairs, including libraries (Aarhus kommune, n.d.). In 2009, there was a social democratic majority in the city council, which continued after the 2013 election. The city's library network consists of a main library and 18 branches. The current main library is situated downtown in a building dating from 1934. Built in a different media and library age, it is now described as "under-

dimensioned" for the library's current activity level. As a result, a united city council decided to build a new main library in the city's harbor area, where it will cohabitate with Citizen Services. The building project has enjoyed broad political support in the city council. Construction began in 2011, and the building, named Dokk1, will open to the public in 2014 (Hapel & Ostergard, 2007).

5.1.2 Birmingham

Birmingham is the second largest city and urban economy in the UK, with over one million inhabitants, a multitude of nationalities, and a young population. Its manufacture and engineering industry has given the city a distinct profile, but after the 1980s recession, the city's profile now relies more on retail, business events, culture, and education. Birmingham is currently regenerating several of its central areas, and the ambition is to transform it to a "world class city centre" (City Centre Development, 2010). As for governance, Birmingham is the largest local authority in Europe, with a city council counting 120 councilors from 40 different wards[2]. Since 2001 the council has had an executive cabinet model of local government (Birmingham City Council, n.d.). This means that the executive leader, from the majority party or coalition, appoints his own deputy executive leader and cabinet, not unlike a parliamentary government structure, with each cabinet member (CM) responsible for a broader policy area like "health and well-being" or "leisure, sports and culture", to which library issues belong. Overview and scrutiny committees oversees that the CM and Cabinet perform their duties; they develop and review policy and make recommendations to the council. Decisions are voted on in full council meetings.

The library network numbers 41 branch libraries in addition to its main library built in the early 1970s. For years, conditions for staff, collections and patrons at the main library have been unsatisfactory. The previous Labour majority wanted a new central library in the Eastside area, using it as a generator to develop and expand the city center. After the 2004 election, a Tory/Liberal Democrat (LD) coalition shelved the Eastside library, and instead placed the new library a stone's throw from the old building downtown, next to the Repertory Theatre. The process ended in September 2013, when the New Central Library opened in Centenary Square (Bradley, 2013).

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[2] A ward is a local geographical area, where the constituents elects 1-3 councilors

5.1.3 Oslo

Oslo, the capital city, is the political and commercial center of Norway and an important hub of trade, shipping, and commerce. It is parliamentarily governed, with a city government, a city council, and standing committees with different responsibilities (Oslo kommune [City of Oslo], 2013). Politically, the city has been led by a conservative-liberal coalition for over a decade, with social-democratic and left-wing parties in opposition. The cultural (standing) committee, consisting of representatives from all parties in the city council, considers cases regarding public library matters, and then makes recommendations to the city council.

Oslo's library system, Deichman, counts 17 branches and a main library, which together serve the 600,000 inhabitants. For two decades, politicians have discussed funding a new main library in Oslo. Like in Aarhus, Deichman library resides today in a building from 1934, providing difficult working conditions for the staff and limited areas for public use. In 2008, it was decided to place the new library in Bjørvika, a harbor area in rapid development, next to the new opera house. After a period of debate and political compromise, the city council decided to start building in 2013. The construction of the new main library began in 2014, and will be completed in 2017 (Oslo kommune, 2013).

5.2 Empirical data

The data consists of 17 interviews with local culture politicians. The informants were recruited based on their membership in a culture committee, or similar, and to achieve variation in party affiliation. Due to differences in political organization, the number of available candidates varied in each case, which affected the total number of informants: four in Birmingham, three in Aarhus, and eight in Oslo. A more even distribution of informants would have been preferable. The main weak point of a small sample in a qualitative study is that the range of perceptions becomes narrower; a larger sample would add to the data. Consequently, there are perspectives this study might have missed. However, there is ample material for analysis, and the informants represent different political parties, from both those in power and those in opposition.

In preparation, informants received an e-mail with information about the research process as well as the main interview topics. To protect their anonymity, the informants have fictitious names in the text, the first letter corresponding to their cities (e.g., "Olav"). Interview guides were made separate for each case, focusing on personal library experience, views on the

library's role and operation in general, the local library situation, and the library building project.

Each interview lasted between 50 and 75 minutes, and was taped, transcribed, and categorized using Nvivo software. Some categories were predetermined in accordance with the questions (for example "urban development", "library building project", or "library services for youth/children"). Others categories emerged on an ad-hoc basis, from the content of each interview. Nvivo tracks the correlation between the topic categories, which makes it easier to navigate and see patterns in a large body of text.

6. Findings

6.1 Freedom, democracy, and knowledge

To elicit data on how the informants prioritize the library's role and function, they were asked to name the most important reason for having a public library service. In all three cases, the library as a place for knowledge and learning featured most often. This is apparent among the informants in all three cities, and was seemingly not connected to party affiliation or ideological stand. In Aarhus, the connection was drawn to how Denmark has developed, and how the library is one component of the knowledge society. Similar sentiments were expressed by the Oslo informants. In Birmingham, the informants focused on literacy. They expressed concern over the fact that illiteracy is still a problem in England, and believed libraries to be important counter-actors.

Furthermore, people's free access to this collection of knowledge was linked to democracy and human rights by several informants from all cities. Olav recognized the library's role as an access point to knowledge in the information society, and said it was as important as ever. Both Olav and Oliver also described the library as a guide in the jungle of information. All informants ranked these two aspects as the most important features of public library service. Bob and Alex both used strong wording, saying a fee-based service would "undermine and kill the library idea". Oscar stated that democracy rests on the principle that all citizens have equal access to knowledge. They felt that free access to information and knowledge was a direct reflection of a democratic society. "I don't think you get free library services in countries that like to restrict information," Bob said.

The informants acknowledged the public library's multiple roles. They mentioned how the library was a place for culture, knowledge, technology, conservation, integration, and social interaction, and how the interplay was unique and important. "The library has an array of functions in society" Oscar said. "It is wrong to regard it as a place for just reading." The informants had few reservations regarding the scope of library activities, with the exception of Olivia from the Norwegian Progress Party (PP). She was also the only one who expressed any desire to intervene in library operations "Let's not forget that politicians manage the taxpayers' money, which makes it a political question".

Although reporting a personal relationship with public libraries in the past, the informants' first-hand knowledge at the time primarily stemmed from their role as cultural politicians. Some had had that role for many years, while others had only recently started this work. Several explained that their image of libraries had changed while working with library issues. In Aarhus and Birmingham, informants expressed the importance of close cooperation with the local library administration. There had been political consensus regarding the Aarhus project throughout, and the city's strategic library plan was developed in cooperation between library administration and local government. For Barry, the individual cooperation had been vital, in a more informal manner. He admitted being skeptical about the building project at first; he was unsure whether the investment was right for the city. When interviewed, however, he spoke plainly about the value the library would add to downtown Birmingham. This change of heart, for which he credited the library director especially, made him realize that the purpose of libraries was "much wider than just a place to get books". In Oslo, Ophelia, a new committee member, was candid about her limited knowledge of libraries, explaining it by her recent affiliation with library politics.

While most of the informants readily explained their political party's library policies, some were more hesitant. The two LD politicians from Birmingham said they were not sure that their party had any clear position. The library policies described by other informants include securing the free-of-charge library; strengthening the local library network; securing competence building among librarians; supporting local cooperation, especially concerning education; and developing digital services. There was no clear pattern in any of the cases as to who deems what to be most important, although the younger politicians were more interested in digital services, and left-wing politicians in Oslo talked more about strengthening the

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library network. The library policies of the Norwegian PP stand out, as they actively supported a fee-based service and a limited media selection.

The library building projects, it seems, had especially been a source of influence as they had brought the politicians to libraries in different parts of the world, adding to their experience and knowledge. They described these study trips to libraries as sources of inspiration. About American libraries Albert said:

> My expectations […] were not high, but this library in Queens actually inspired me. It was educating people, offering cultural insight, and arranging cultural events for children as well as adults of all ages. It was truly a citizens' center.

Bob visited the Singapore public library, and was not only impressed by its design, but also "the innovative ways in which they bring people to the building". Olivia was impressed with the new libraries in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, especially because of their fee-based service, something her party wanted to introduce. Olav talked about the London-based idea stores, which in his opinion "expanded the library idea", and he wanted to see a similar approach in Oslo.

When asked about the library's most important service, the answers varied. Informants in all three cities talked about books. Some stressed that book lending has been and would be the core service in libraries; if not, they cease to be libraries. The younger informants were more inclined to acknowledge digital and other media forms. Orson said:

> You can have many different access points to texts depending on persons. A modern computer game is definitely a story. […] I do believe though, that a library primarily deals in books. […] Other media clearly has its place in the library […] but I regard text as the central thing in the library, it seems unnatural to make something else the focus, or juxtapose something with texts. I find that unnatural.

Olivia was the most book-centered of all informants, and wanted to restrict the media types on offer,. She doubted whether public libraries could be a principal digital service provider. Others were less concerned with content, and more with users. Among these, services to children and young people were mentioned most frequently. By and large, the informants were reluctant to pick only one task or only one service, and some say the different operations of the library were connected and were difficult to "separate".

6.3 Civic center or city symbol?

There is no doubt that all three cities need improved conditions for employees, visitors, and collections. The informants are clear on the practical justification of the projects: an outdated building in Aarhus, concrete cancer[3] in Birmingham, and unwelcoming and crowded surroundings in Oslo. However, the building projects did not materialize solely because of practical needs. In all three cities the need coincided with a city development plan (as in Birmingham) or a city developing area (as in Aarhus and Oslo). The results were different but similarly spectacular, as each city built a new library landmark.

Building conditions aside, the informants described common features inside the new libraries. .When talking about his vision for the new library, Alex immediately said a meeting place, a place for gatherings and events, and that a new building would render that possible. Albert and Aron wanted the space to be flexible, adaptable, and cutting-edge. The Birmingham informants appreciated the architecture, but stress how the content would be the attraction, by finally displaying the cities' valuable collections of manuscripts and photographs. They also talked about the activity inside—the "life" of the library. Barry's vision for New Central Library included "a library, yes, but equally—a civic center." Bernard, Baird and Bob also talked in similar terms, saying that they thought that meeting place offered in the new library would become increasingly important, likewise the library's role as a public activity arena. The Oslo informants also agreed to a large extent on what the library should be and do. Descriptions included "an inviting meeting place" and "creating the best library in the world". Why do these city politicians all share this ambition? Albert explained that Aarhus, as a city that wants to be connected with knowledge, vision, and drive, needed a library they could be proud of. This was also a sentiment expressed by Omer. At present, he said, Oslo resembles a "developing country in terms of libraries".

However, the library vision goes beyond creating pride among city residents. Albert said:

>   For many years, [the library] has been an icon for knowledge, for acquiring
>   knowledge. And this, to me, is a very good way of branding a city.

As the topic moved on to city development, all but one informant described it as an important aspect of the library-building project. Birmingham, Barry believed, "underperforms when it comes to art and culture." He compared it to Manchester, a city that has grown into a cultural

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[3] "concrete cancer" refers to a deterioration of aging concrete, often caused by water penetration, causing cracks and crumbling.

focal point, and he wanted Birmingham to go in the same direction. In the current Big City Plan, the library is also a step in the direction towards becoming "a world class city center". Barry said:

> Birmingham is a global city, an international city. And we want [to] attract the headquarters of national and international companies, which in turn will bring jobs.

Oscar talked of the mutual benefit from the location, as the library attracted a multitude of people, while the central location increased accessibility for the library visitors. He added:

> "The culture profile we establish in Bjørvika is likely to attract business and commerce to the area".

Ophelia said:

> You should always think in terms of city development. Anything else would be a waste of money".

The informants were asked about branch libraries, and the possibility of closing branches as the new main library was being built. As explained in the introduction, library closures have been a common occurrence in the three countries, and it is conceivable that the financial strain of a new building might require cutbacks in other areas. In Aarhus, the informants did not want a reduced number of branches. Aron emphasized the importance of a widespread library network providing civic spaces:

> That's been important while I've been involved [in local cultural politics], that we can maintain as many libraries as possible because many places they are the local culture centers. And according to our policy lines, we should increase the number.

The Birmingham respondents did not want closures, but acknowledged that the economy could force unwanted prioritizations. However, they would rather cut budgets and staff than reduce the number of libraries. In Oslo there was some dissent among informants from different parties on this issue. The two younger informants representing the Conservative and Christian Democrat party were more willing to discuss closures. The informants from the Labour, Socialist, and Liberal parties opposed any closure, and instead wanted to increase the number of service points.

7 Discussion

7.1 Values, norms, and "the appropriate library"

The informants were asked to choose the library's most important role, and their answers centered on the library as a knowledge disseminator and educational institution. *The*

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appropriate library, then, is given a traditional role: from the outset its purpose was to promote enlightenment and education. However, the three public libraries in this study are by political and administrative measures considered cultural institutions, being the responsibility of cultural committees or some corresponding body. Thus, it is surprising that few politicians emphasized the library's role as a cultural institution. Still, it underlines the complexity of the that role (Greenhalgh et al. , 1995; Leadbeater, 2003). Another factor might be democratic societies' valuation of knowledge and education. For a politician, endorsing a service focused on learning is perhaps easier than endorsing one mainly connected to culture and literature. This could trigger a discussion regarding public libraries' political placement: would it be advantageous to be considered as a more distinct component of the educational policy field instead of culture and recreation?

Another aspect frequently mentioned by the informants was the library's social role. It seems as though the public library community's focus on the library's social role had made its way into politics. Informants in each case emphasized the library meeting place, and its growing importance as an urban community space. In the context of these cases, it seems *the appropriate library* has an important social and civic component. Why the informants shared this vision could have several explanations. One is that there had been an increased focus on this aspect of the library in recent years, expressed in library service development. Also, as the literature review reveakled, European and North American scholars have built new knowledge about library usage, user perception of libraries, and how libraries contribute to community building. When library projects like these are being developed, the local library staff and administration cooperate more closely with politicians, thus transferring knowledge and insight into the operation and potential of the institution. The informants have also travelled and visited libraries both in their respective countries and abroad. This interaction disseminates institutionalized images, values, and norms from the field of libraries to the local politicians. Since the library as a civic space perhaps is the aspect they are the least familiar with, this could also be where they see the greatest potential, both in terms of library and city development.

Another explanation for politicians' focus on social and civic space could be found in library leadership. Individual library leaders could play a very important role in influencing politicians. Barry is an example of the latter; he reports being influenced a great deal by the

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library director, who has managed to convey the potential of a new library in Birmingham. Barry is no longer skeptical, but is instead convinced that the gain will outweigh the cost.

A third main component of *the appropriate library* touches the core system of public library norms, namely that it should be free of charge. This practice reflects values concerning citizens' free access to information and right to knowledge, and links the library directly to how a democracy works and to citizens' rights to establish informed opinions. Different as the cases are, the general sentiment conveyed is that the no-charge policy should continue in the foreseeable future. Several informants, both on the political left and right, spoke clearly in favor of it, and strongly opposed membership fees. This attitude shows that the free-of-charge principle is institutionalized among external stakeholders, like politicians, and goes beyond party affiliation. Still, there was one exception in Oslo, where the PP informant wanted to introduce membership fees in libraries. This attitude reflects this party's aversion to publicly funded services.

Concerning library policy in general, none of the informants could describe their party's position in any detail or with real clarity, again with the exemption of the PP informant, who produced the party program and read the bullet points aloud. In Birmingham, the two LD informants were open about their lack of such guidelines. However interested and knowledgeable the individual informant might be about libraries, the interview data on this point established an impression of libraries as a secondary issue, much in line with previous studies showing inconclusive patterns of library party policy (R. Audunson, 2001; Fox, 2005; Usherwood, 2003). A similar view concerning public health, schools, or commerce would be unthinkable.

Judging from how the informants talked about library tasks and operation in general, they reaffirmed a mainly traditional view of the library service, which corresponds with previous research (R. Audunson, 2005; Smith & Usherwood, 2004; Stadsmonitor Vlissingen, 2003; Usherwood, 2003). However, the data from Oslo and Aarhus showed that the informants were more concerned with content and less with media type. They saw the library as a facilitator of knowledge production, by providing books and other media types. Quality is a factor—to a certain extent. Some, like Olivia, upheld quite strict quality controls where "entertainment" had little value, while others believed this is matter that should be dealt with by the library professionals. Emphasizing books as the key component indicates a certain divide between

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the professional field and the non-professionals. While the professional library community focuses more on content and less on form, it seems that this is a mind-set not completely adopted by the these informants. While the informants seemed to willingly embrace the library's social role, they were less inclined to regard other media types as equally important as books.

7.2 Legitimizing the public library

The public library is legitimized in different ways, depending on the aspect. When talking about public library service in general, there were traces of cognitive legitimacy, a taken-for-grantedness when referring to it as an obvious part of a democratic society. The democratic significance they gave the library is closely linked to how they described the library as a knowledge center. They spoke of the library not only as a democratic right, but also as a symbol of a well-developed democratic society. Also, all but one of the informants supported the autonomy of public libraries, which suggests that the library's democratic role requires an independent, open, and democracy-supporting position. This type of argumentation is political mobilizing when discussing libraries in general**.**

When the topic turns to library building projects, the informants use different argumentation. On the one hand, they justified the projects as meeting practical needs, as the current library buildings all were ill-fitted for their purpose. However, the main motivation seemed to be a need or desire for city development. With few exceptions, the informants described the library projects as part of a larger agenda:. In Aarhus and Oslo, they were seen to bring city life and activity to expanding areas; in Birmingham, the new Central Library is an investment, part of the process to transform the downtown area to a *world class city center*. The Birmingham project's prestige suggests that the economic aspect is visible not only in terms of intangible future figures, but perhaps more importantly in terms of a bigger development project—the city itself. Here, there are no traces of cognitive legitimacy, not argumentation supporting political mobilization. It seems like pragmatic legitimacy was most clearly present when the informants discussed the building projects. The buildings were viewed as useful for the city, not only to improve conditions, but also to enhance an image, or to trigger investments. The projects were clearly justified using economic argumentation, which perhaps is unsurprising considering the current economic climate, and the informants' role in the projects.

In Birmingham, the library was part of a bigger project of reinventing Birmingham as a metropolitan cultural hub, attractive to both inhabitants and investors. Keeping the 2008 recession in mind, the library-building investment needed to be executed without losing legitimacy in the city council and in the city of Birmingham. An economic argumentation captured the spirit of the time, promoting economic growth while giving the residents a better library. Executing this project without thinking about city development would make a weak case. However, the economic argumentation echoed through all the three cases. The library stayed a public domain, but the process and result can have an impact on business and commerce, as well as the city's image.

One thing that could hurt the library building's legitimacy among the public is if it negatively affects the rest of the library network. The main library is important, but important user groups, like children and seniors, would have easier access to their local branch. If the projects caused branches to disappear, the building project might seem less appealing to voters. In Birmingham, where the ward-system links each councilor to a geographical area, this was particularly evident. It might also explain the informants' reluctance to discuss branch closures even in a difficult economic climate. However, the problem of keeping underfunded branches open is that this too could harm the library's legitimacy in general. Short opening hours, inadequate collections, and staff lacking proper training might in time harm the general view of public library services.

The projects themselves are part of a larger trend in the public library field. Several big cities around the world have invested heavily in library projects, drawing attention to both façade and content. In addition, the informants seemed to harbor expectation regarding the libraries' contribution to urban reinvention. The interview data, together with how the projects appeared and were presented, gave reason to say that cultural investment is tied increasingly not only to city development (as in developing the inner life of a city), but also developing the city economically, bettering its image, and "selling it" to tourists, inhabitants, and investors. Libraries are less "just libraries" and more part of a larger city scene. On this matter, the cases resemble one another.

Although having been library patrons, the politicians' knowledge of the library at the time stemmed from being elected politicians, specifically working with library building projects. The "elusive", "passive", or "limited" library perception found in other studies (Gazo, 2010;

Hedemark, 2009; Pearce, 2003) was not evident among informants in this study. On the contrary, the data showed a clear link between the building projects and the informants' perceptions of libraries. When politicians, projects staff, and librarians interact, and visit innovative libraries, the chances of creating a common library vision grows, and the process becomes self-reinforcing. This suggests that the planning process also had been a learning process for the informants, an eye-opener regarding the public libraries' role and potential. The process itself influences the legitimacy of public libraries.

7.4 Limitations

This study produced insight into politicians' perceptions on public libraries in three cities with ongoing library building projects. The results do not necessarily translate to other contexts, but could still carry relevance for other cities or communities, with or without similar plans.

One limitation concerning the data collection was choosing informants from a population of culture politicians only. An important topic addressed in the interviews was the relationship between library policy and city planning. Including informants involved in city planning or related policy areas would have given more insight to this aspect of the study. The different political systems also made comparisons challenging, however all three systems are based on party majority, and include committees working with particular areas and topics.

8. Conclusion

The findings suggest that the politicians in the study share many of the same views regarding library roles and missions, as well as core values such as equal access to knowledge and culture. Also, the social role and impact of the physical library space was deemed important, and these factors are all hallmarks of *the appropriate library* as seen by the informants. However, when it came to the actual tasks and services, then they were more oriented towards traditional library services, such as book lending. As the planning process appears to have been important for establishing and broadening the politicians' vision of the public library, managers of future joint projects between library communities and politicians would be well-advised to engage in activities such as strategic planning.

When the politicians legitimized public libraries in general, they primarily connected them with citizens' democratic rights and their country's democratic practices. However, when they legitimized the local projects, they used a different argumentation connected to city development and a desire to make visible the city's knowledge and culture profile. This argumentation is economically oriented. Designing library buildings as urban generators and arenas for experiences is a growing trend; the question arises as to how this might affect the institutions legitimacy over time. Will it make libraries more relevant to more people, politicians included? Alternatively, will it dilute the basic values on which the public library rests? The paradox of library closures on the one hand and major library building projects on the other, could be particularly relevant in this context. For users of branch libraries, close proximity might be more important than an impressive main library, situated too far for casual visits.

The intersection between the knowledge role and the cultural role encompasses both the strengths and the weaknesses of the public library's position—its broad appeal and potential far-reaching effect contrasted with its many contenders and lack of a clear profile. This study suggests that although politicians have struggled with "placing" the public library in the past, library building projects secure not only a new library site, but also a new library perspective on the part of the politicians. The fact that economically oriented argumentation is used to support such projects adds a new, more unfamiliar dimension. The library is not only promoting learning, culture and arts, but also the city's economic and social development.

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