Holly Porteous
Juliette Wilson
Kathy Hamilton

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The Transformative Space of the Library

Introduction

It's amazing the things that I've learnt through the library. Honestly, I used to walk through the door in the library and when I walked back out the door I felt as if I was walking on air. That's what the library means to me.
(Agnes)

This report draws on material from *Transformative Servicescapes and Consumer Vulnerability* (2020-2022), a two-year project funded by The Leverhulme Trust and based at the University of Strathclyde. Using Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) as a case study, the project examined the role of physical spaces in contributing towards transformative experiences and increased well-being for users of those spaces. Over the following pages, inspired by CILIP's #LibrariesAreEssential advocacy campaign, we bring together specific findings from the project that relate to libraries as community spaces where people can experience improved well-being and positive transformations in their lives.

Project Background

The project was guided by Transformative Service Research (TSR), a research area that aims to facilitate well-being by addressing inequities and exclusions in service provision. 'Transformative' refers to people's lives being changed in a minor or major way as a result of their interaction with a service and/or service space. We include how service spaces have the capacity to transform the lives of those experiencing vulnerability. We use a definition of vulnerability which recognises it as fluid and socially constructed rather than fixed and objective, and which broadly incorporates individuals or groups suffering the effects of social, cultural and/or economic barriers.
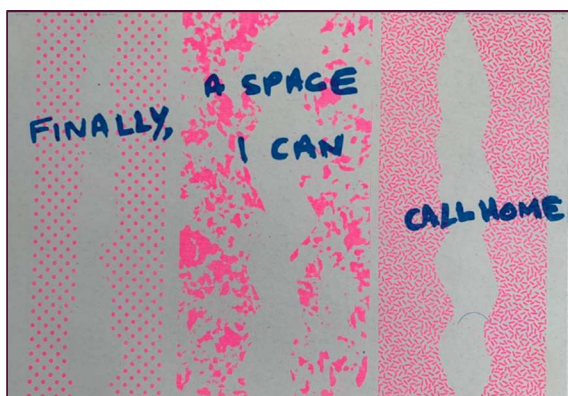
Transformative Servicescapes is an interdisciplinary project: Principal Investigator Professor Kathy Hamilton, Co-Investigators Dr Juliette Wilson and Dr Sarah Edwards, and Research Associate Dr Holly Porteous together combine specialisms in the social sciences, business studies, consumer culture, history, literature, and gender studies. We have been able to share different outlooks on methods as well as services, spaces, organisations and social inequality/vulnerability.

What did we do?

The project used a variety of methods to help us capture the experience of being in a library space with as much richness as possible:

- Interviews with 64 users, volunteers, staff, and people from associated networks and organisations;
- Material from two risograph workshops on the theme of GWL and transformations;
- Historical analysis of GWL's archives;
- Analysis of GWL website and social media analysis of Twitter, Facebook and other content to help us understand the range and type of events and projects hosted in GWL;
- Participant observations in the GWL space and of (due to Covid-19, largely online) events.

A 'visual minute' taken from one of our project events.

Given our case study organisation, the vast majority of our participants were women. We drew on stories from a diverse range of participants, including:

- Older (60+) and younger people (18-29, some of whom had been library users under the age of 18)
- People from different ethnic backgrounds
- People from different religious backgrounds
- Migrants
- People who have experienced mental health issues
- Survivors of abuse
- People who identify as LGBTQIA+
- People with disabilities, chronic health conditions, or mobility issues
- Neurodivergent people
- People from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

A risograph print created by a participant in one of our arts-based workshops

What did we learn about libraries as transformative spaces?

Books can act as a magnet for visitors and an anchor for social connection. Whereas people might have felt intimidated coming into other community spaces without a specific reason, books can be the backdrop and the 'excuse' to spend time in a communal space around others.

Face-to-face interactions are a particularly valued aspect of libraries, particularly for those more vulnerable to social isolation. Although participants appreciated the opportunity to attend online events during Covid-19, they also said they didn't offer the same informal social interactions and impact on their well-being as visiting a physical space.

Providing a diverse range of books in libraries can be vital to how people feel about the space. Seeing aspects of your identity reflected by the writers on the shelves (e.g. books by women, books by authors from different ethnic, national or class backgrounds) can make people feel included, inspired and empowered.

Appearance and layout are vital in making users feel welcome in library spaces. Providing a flexible space with different areas not only for different activities (e.g. reading, studying, community groups) but different kinds of people (e.g. introverted/extroverted; confident library users/reluctant library users; adults/children) was something highlighted regularly by participants in our research.

Library users valued small, inexpensive measures which went a big way in making library spaces feel comfortable, cosy, and informal. Things like comfy traditional armchairs, soft cushions, interesting and beautiful objects/décor, and different kinds of tables were very much valued in encouraging users to feel ownership over the space and making them feel happy regularly spending time there.

As public spaces which are free and accessible to all**, libraries can draw in people from many backgrounds**. Participants valued libraries as community spaces where they could spend time without feeling pressured to spend money. Libraries which provide and promote **support services for a wide range of people** can thus make the most of this role they play in local communities.

For many, **library spaces represented familiarity** and prompted nostalgic memories. However, it is also important to recognise that **libraries can be intimidating for many people.** Some said they had thought libraries 'weren't for people like them'. Glasgow Women's Library were an excellent example of a library which consistently strives to overcome these perceptions and make the space inclusive for everyone.

Libraries, Books and Social Connection

Our research demonstrated how books and reading were at the heart of transformative experiences for many women who took part in this research project. The fact that library spaces have a clear focus on reading and books can in itself draw in people from a range of different backgrounds: many participants were attracted to GWL by the fact that it was a library by name, and mentioned the sense of calm and familiarity they found sitting amongst the bookshelves. For these participants, library spaces represented familiarity and prompted positive nostalgic memories of browsing abundant shelves and finding comfort and escape in just the right book.

I just like libraries and books […] it just feels very nourishing, you could just go there to get some new books and talk to people. Then of course they often have exhibitions on as well, so I think it's just the fact that it feels like as a space there's so much going on potentially that that feels very exciting and warm. And also, despite all of that, it's always very welcoming for you to just spend time there not involved in those things. (Lauren)

Books were also integral to the sense of ease that many interviewees experienced in our case study space. Whereas people might have felt intimidated coming into other community spaces without a specific reason, books were the backdrop and the 'excuse' to spend time in a communal space around others. Spending time reading in a quiet corner meant that library users could feel comfortable using the space without feeling pressure to 'join in'.

At the same time, simply being in the space in this way could bring about more chances for informal conversation, which was particularly important for those who lived alone or who may have been experiencing vulnerability. Often, these informal chats could lead to finding out more about events and opportunities within the library, and people could be gently integrated into things like volunteering which had an even greater impact on their sense of well-being.

Books also represented and facilitated learning, which was foregrounded at Glasgow Women's Library as part of a range of everyday activities.

Some saw the library part of GWL as offering something that they couldn't get in their local libraries, which offered important learning opportunities.

It had fantastic books that I probably wouldn't get anywhere [else]. (Iris)

Significantly, an organisational culture which framed learning as something for everyone was vital in encouraging social connection. The boundaries between learner and teacher, between volunteer, staff and library user, were permeable, which helped build a sense of inclusion at the library and discouraged hierarchies.

I feel like all my experiences and encounters there, and with the staff and stuff, just seem to be inclusive, ready to learn, innovative, compared to what other people are doing - and especially in terms of what a library is and what a library can be. It has really transformed that: my idea of what a library is or can be. (Ola)

Librarians we interviewed mentioned being inspired by the kinds of practice mentioned in this report, highlighting the benefits of different types of libraries sharing best practice and learning from each other in developing their activities.

The Importance of Face to Face Connection

Our research took place during the global pandemic, which led to many discussions with participants about the physical space and the extent to which Glasgow Women's Library had been able to extend this into online spaces during successive lockdowns and closures.

In common with other libraries in Scotland, the online activities that GWL had provided during the pandemic had also given many people a sense of connection.

They gave me the space to be able to be productive in a time where it felt like I was just stuck at home and I couldn't do anything, and that was so, so valuable to me and so important to me. I feel almost emotional thinking about it because I don't know what I would have done without them - like genuinely […] And that was so important because I think, with this past year [of the pandemic]… It's so easy to feel very depressed and worthless in a way, because you're so stuck inside and you're isolated from everyone and, you know, being so far away from my family as well. […] So having that space was so important and valuable to me and I couldn't be more grateful for it. (Courtney)

However, although participants appreciated the opportunity to attend online events during lockdown, they also agreed that they didn't necessarily offer the same benefits as face-to-face events: Zoom was felt to have a very limited capacity for the kind of informal social interactions participants had valued when attending in-person events at the library.

I suddenly realised in it, during this [online] event, how much I actually was missing the kindness of GWL and how it has stopped me being kind - because we're sort of so isolated now, you don't get the sorts of opportunities I suppose to be kind to people. Because [my partner] and I, we just keep ourselves completely to ourselves. I don't... I mean, I haven't seen anybody else really except for people at the shops and so on. I suppose it suddenly... I got quite sort of, you know, teary. Not, you know... I kept it to myself! But just realising that this is one of the things, for me, that GWL once again exemplifies: this sense of being kind and caring, to each other and to yourself, and I think I hadn't realised how much I've been... how much I actually was missing that, until yesterday. (Monica)

In-person events were found to be particularly important for people who were more vulnerable to social isolation for various reasons (e.g. being recently bereaved; having less access to the Internet at home).

Even though the Library had kept in touch, many missed the routine and camaraderie that GWL's physical space had provided pre-pandemic.

I think people need it, physically and mentally. (Gwen)

Access to physical books was also significant for those who, due to poverty, unemployment or other reasons, might have been suffering from digital exclusion. One participant in this situation spoke about how visiting the library helped her combat feelings of depression, and how she missed borrowing books when the building was closed during Covid-19.

The lack of in-person contact highlighted the importance of the space and the effects on well-being of simply physically *being* with others - even if you didn't feel able to chat or actively take part in something. Indeed, for many of our participants, the freedom to take part in activities but also just *be* in the space and feel at home was something that had increased their well-being prior to the pandemic. For example, one woman who had moved to Glasgow from abroad spoke about how the physical library building was a vital part of finding her feet in a new country.

This library, including the building and the staff and the atmosphere: everything. Everything is like you're a family member, so I love it. […] Because when you're a newcomer in a new place, you feel homesickness and nostalgia. So I felt [that] in the start too much. After that I felt that the Women's Library was the best place for me to be[come] familiar, because my husband was at work and he had no time to make me familiar with everything. So I went and joined the Library, it was the best for me. It proved for me a learning point for everything: not only the Library's atmosphere, but also the outside. So now I am fully confident to go everywhere.
(Fatima)

The following section looks in more depth at what makes library spaces welcoming and potentially transformative places for those that use them.

What Makes a Welcoming and Transformative Library Space?

People used a variety of really positive words to describe the library space at GWL. It was seen as a space that is nourishing, empowering, safe, supportive, accepting, non-judgemental, and inspiring. Many people attributed these positive sentiments to the cosy atmosphere that they experience there.

They had cups of tea everywhere and they had blankets on every chair. It was like a mismatch of blankets, you know, like actually hand-knitted that people got from home. And people had hot water bottles and all sorts. It was more like going to a friend's house than a library, you know? […] Everybody sat there in a kind of artist's garret listening to all these readings. (Lindsay)

The appearance and layout of the library space was vital in making users feel welcome. Thinking about providing a flexible space with different areas not only for different activities (e.g. reading, studying, community groups) but different kinds of people (e.g. introverted/extroverted; confident library users/reluctant library users; adults/children) was something highlighted regularly by participants in our research.

When we moved in to the Library we spent ages thinking about the minutiae: the angles of that shelf against that shelf, and what would someone see when they first came in, and how did we create more intimate corners so that someone could be reading a book that's about, like, coming out or whatever, you know, in some privacy? So yeah, lots and lots of thought has been given to the angles of the shelves! (Jane)

People were able to pinpoint their favourite areas of the library: some talked about the armchair where they liked to sit and how having different kinds of comfortable furniture in different areas felt like a home away from home.

Participants spoke of how the various tables provide a sense of sharing, community and friendship, or mentioned how the mezzanine provided a retreat from the hustle and bustle of the main library space. Others talked about the various gallery and event spaces and the range of different exhibitions and events that were held. The fact that the library space was very open and flexible in terms of how it was used was appealing for many participants.

It had a kind of nice energy about it which I felt like I wanted to get involved in. So there was people bustling around, and people having little meetings; it didn't feel like it was very stifling. It just felt like these people were just able to get on with their stuff, and it wasn't all in closed-off rooms, basically. […] There's definite space where… at the back where people can get on with creative projects and stuff like that. At the front there's more kind of like a bustling feel where people can stand and chat and stuff like that. I do feel like they've managed to actually… not by putting walls in, but managed to have discrete spaces. (Poppy)

Clearly, the hustle and bustle could be appealing to some people we spoke to! Furthermore, participants who worked in community development or with outreach groups described how having an attractive, cared-for library space actively contributed to the success of their work.

Having that space was absolutely critical to making the [project participants] feel safe and able to start relaxing enough; and that is something that is consistently undervalued in terms of community work. There's never an understanding that you actually need a place to feel like it's attractive, and I'm not going to get anywhere with a group if we're meeting in a freezing cold, disgusting… […] And it just feels like it's been treated with care. (Eve)

Overall, the research found that small, inexpensive measures can go a big way in making library spaces feel comfortable, cosy, and informal for a range of library users. Things like comfy traditional armchairs, soft cushions, interesting and beautiful objects/décor, and different kinds of tables were very much valued in drawing people into library spaces and making them feel comfortable spending time there.

Creating Inclusive Library Spaces

Most libraries are an oasis, as well […] That sense of a home away from home, a place you can go that's not commercial, it doesn't have a big commercial goal in mind; and it is a way of nurturing yourself intellectually and emotionally. (Benny)

As public spaces, libraries are free and accessible to all, providing a community space where people can spend time without feeling pressured to spend money. Because of this, they are vital community spaces that can draw in people from many backgrounds. Libraries which provide supportive services for a wide range of people can make the most of this role they play in local communities.

However, our research found that it is equally important to recognise that libraries can be intimidating for some people. This may for example include those who may have left education at an early age; people with distressing memories of overly strict librarians in the past; those who had dyslexia or other conditions which could make it more difficult to identify as a reader; or those who just felt that libraries 'weren't for people like them'. Our research highlighted

GWL as an excellent example of a library which consistently strives to combat these concerns and make their space inclusive for everyone. For example, this was often through offering an active welcome which aimed to make people included as soon as they entered the Library.

It's just something… I think the only thing I can describe it as a warm place. The building feels warm. I don't mean just in temperature. There's a warmth there, and I mean a huge amount of that comes from the people, the staff and volunteers. (Johanna)

Participants described how becoming involved in GWL meant a reframing of what libraries had previously been in their lives:

My parents didn't take me to libraries. My parents weren't readers. My grandparents were readers, but my parents weren't readers, although I was, and it wasn't until I was maybe about 18 before I started reading. […] When I took my [elderly] mum in, she went, "I can't go to a Library, I'm not educated." I said "mum…" She said "I thought the Library was only for people that were educated", which is amazing because a lot of people who left school… like my mum left school at 13, right into a job. She thought the Library was just for people who were clever and educated. It changed it for her because she just thought "my goodness, I'm coming in here and [being] welcomed. I feel at home." (Agnes)

A key part of improving inclusivity was the library collections themselves. Shelves which reflected a wide range of readers meant that libraries could be transformed from something intimidating into something that represented visitors' and volunteers' lives, even leading to personal transformation.

Because there would be so many books about, you know, certain female writers or certain events in the Feminist Movement, and I felt by actually taking time to read those books I picked up confidence in myself as a woman. […] I was starting to pick up pieces of myself again. I was starting to be interested in things that I would have wanted to read about before. It was just an overwhelming positive experience for me. It was quite life-changing almost, I would say. (Erin)

Library collections were also vital in shaping how people felt when they were using the space. Glasgow Women's Library was an example of how seeing aspects of your identity reflected by the writers on the shelves (e.g. books by women, books by authors from different ethnic, national or class backgrounds) can make people feel included, inspired and empowered.

I think they represent the communities they are serving because they pay a lot of... they really champion Scottish female writers, which I really, really like. But also I think even then celebrating authors from other parts of the world is really important. For me, reading has always been... reading is how I've learnt about so much of the world, and for them to have this library in Glasgow where you can access those type of books is really cool. (Ola)

Seeing similar lives and stories that they could identify with represented in library collections was a very significant part of gaining confidence and a greater sense of well-being for many participants in this study. From another perspective, people also enjoyed how a diverse collection of books was a window to the world and enabled them to connect with unfamiliar cultures and contexts.

I think the fact that it just had such like amazing books - like loads of amazing art books and history books. And also just the fact that it was lovely thinking that these had all been donated by individuals. So it wasn't like somebody's vision of what what should be in a women's library; it was thousands of people who'd kind of built it and were reflected on the shelves, which I loved. (Rebecca)

The quote above also shows how including the community in building library collections could also affect the way people felt about library spaces, building a sense of ownership over the library and a sense of communal history based on grassroots activity rather than top-down decisions about which books to include on the shelves.

Overall, our research highlighted the importance of thinking of inclusivity in as broad a way as possible. GWL has a range of volunteers and service users of different ages, with diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, and experiences of health conditions and

disabilities. Many of them spoke of the power of feeling included as individuals in their own right, but importantly, not being singled out in terms of particular needs. This was done by designing spaces for everyone rather than just one group, and thinking continually about ways of including all kinds of people in events and everyday activities.

Contact us

This report covers just a small area of our project findings which relate specifically to libraries. Our wider research project highlights the transformative potential of community spaces for users. It encompasses transformative practices (i.e. practices enacted *by* the organisation) and transformative outcomes (i.e. outcomes experienced by service users as a result of interacting *with* the organisation). Transformation can be seen in terms of individual growth and encouraging users to think differently about themselves and the world around them. These transformations may be small, but they can also be life-changing. We encourage organisations to think about the various ways they can use space to support the well-being of all who interact with them.

If you are part of any organisation who would benefit from further information or collaboration on transformative services more generally, we would love to hear from you.

We are happy to present our findings formally or informally in any context, and/or provide reports tailored to your own focus (e.g. gender, age, community spaces, etc).

Email: holly.porteous@strath.ac.uk

Twitter: @HollPort or @ProfK_Hamilton