

Becca Bender
CAML
CINE-GT 3049
Prof. Howard Besser
Observational Study
3/28/17

Brooklyn Central Library and Brooklyn Museum
A Community Space Comparison

The Brooklyn Central Library and the Brooklyn Museum are separated by a ¼ mile stretch of Eastern Parkway in Prospect Heights. The two institutions serve as foundations for an area that is often referred to as the “Cultural Heart of Brooklyn.” The Brooklyn Park Commission was first authorized to select a location for the Central Library in 1889, but the building did not open until 1941. The Brooklyn Museum on the other hand, opened its first wing in 1897, and has built on various additional structures over the past 100+ years. The library reported 1.3 million visits in 2015, and the museum has around half as many visitors—approximately 559,000 people visited in 2014.

The central idea behind this study was to observe how the *non*-collection spaces in each institution are utilized, and by whom. I visited each location on a Sunday in March in the mid-afternoon, a busy time for both. My methodology was simply to look, listen, infer, and take notes. I quickly found that any attempts at counting were thwarted by the constant movement of patrons, and my demographic assessments are necessarily limited by my ability to identify the racial/ethnic/national makeup of people by sight only.

As a resident of Prospect Heights for over 12 years, I’ve visited both of these institutions many times. Consequently, it was quite a surprise when I found characteristics of community spaces in each location to be different than “usual.” In the case of the library, the exhibition installation (of rotating artists) that’s normally in the center of the grand lobby was no longer there. Inquiring at the nearby circulation desk, I was told that it was removed a few months ago

and that exhibitions would now be displayed in the outer lobby, an area that's much more of a "pass through" space. One woman at circulation told me that many patrons had been complaining about the change.

With respect to the museum, it was the outer lobby that was unexpected. New seating had been installed, and many of the statues that normally populate the area had been removed. In addition, the coffee/snack cart that is generally present in the outer lobby had been moved to the inner lobby. The reason for these changes seemed quite clear in that the museum currently has an extremely popular Georgia O'Keefe show on exhibition which requires timed tickets—a rarity at the Brooklyn Museum. As a result, the inner lobby, which is normally a space that people pass through quite quickly, was densely populated with patrons in several long lines. Presumably the thinking was that the captive audience in the inner lobby would be more apt to purchase food or drink—perhaps true, but there certainly wasn't a lot of activity at the snack cart when I was present.

Given the current set-up and extra seating, the outer lobby seemed to be an even more active community space than usual. There were around 40 people seated at any given time, and although many only sat for a few minutes (generally waiting for companions), about an equal number had settled into the space for a longer stay. There were several pairs in conversation, and in particular, people with small children were making extended use of the area. It was clearly a preferred area for feeding kids home-brought snacks, and at one point, there were no less than 4 toddlers trying out their new walking skills. Even given the amount of child activity, the space remained quite relaxing and quiet, and never felt dominated by the kids.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the cafe and accompanying seating area of the Brooklyn Museum, which is *past* the inner lobby, is anything but relaxing and quiet. The area is

more or less located in a long hallway, one side of which is made entirely of glass, so the acoustics are terrible and the space is awkward to navigate. As a posted sign in the area announces, SONOS is “creating a unique listening experience for... our Museum Cafe,” but the volume of the music seemed higher than necessary to me, which in turn encouraged people to speak more loudly, heightening the overall volume in the space. That said, almost every seat in the cafe area was occupied, and clearly it’s a great business for the museum. A seemingly less successful food business is The Norm, the museum’s formal restaurant, run by a Michelin-starred chef. The atmosphere in The Norm was much more subdued than the cafe, but that could also be in part because it was ¼ filled at best. That said, I was not there during a traditional meal-time, so perhaps the restaurant is doing a fine business at other times.

Returning to the library, the functioning of the grand lobby is akin to a hybrid between the museum’s cafe and outer lobby. The cafe at the library, which has been run by Four and Twenty Blackbirds since 2014, was extremely busy and had an average of 10 people in line throughout my visit (checked in 15 minute increments). Cafe patrons made up a sizeable portion of the people seated at the 20 tables in the grand lobby, but there seemed to be an equal number of people who were eating/drinking outside items or not consuming anything. Among the activities taking place at the tables, it was quite balanced between people who were “working” (reading, studying or using laptops) versus people who were conversing or somewhat absently looking at their phones. Likewise, it was evenly split between people who were there alone versus those with companions.

The most striking thing about the crowd seated in the grand lobby was the incredible diversity with respect to race, ethnicity, age, and nationality. In the half hour that I sat at one of the tables, I was surrounded by people from all different backgrounds, speaking various

languages, ranging from babies a few months old to people in their 80s. A sampling of the tables (relationships, ages and backgrounds inferred) follows:

- East Asian mom, white dad, 2 young mixed race boys
- Black mom, black dad, 2 black daughters
- Completely Hasidic table – multiple adults and kids
- Completely Southeast Asian group
- Black woman with French accent giving French lesson to black boy
- Orthodox Jewish man seated with Latino family speaking Spanish
- My table: middle aged black man (alone) white woman in her 70s (alone), when they left, a Hasidic man in his 50s and teenage Hasidic girl sat down

While individual tables were frequently composed of people from different backgrounds, more often than not, that seemed to be a function of seating availability. In general, groupings of companions appeared to belong to the same race/ethnicity.

Groupings became less prevalent when I moved into the Information Commons which was more populated by single patrons. If anything, the makeup of the users in the Information Commons was even more ethnically diverse than those seated in the outer lobby. Overall there were more black and brown people, and less white people in the space. The Information Commons is essentially one huge community resource center. There are 6 meeting rooms with large monitors, a recording studio, 25 computers (half of which are designated design stations with sophisticated software), a printer and a scan station. All equipment and rooms can be reserved using a library card, and everything was in use while I was there. There's also a large open seating area that was about 2/3rds occupied, mostly by people using their own laptops.

The groups in the individual meeting rooms were generally very mixed. There were 2 single race groups, but the other 4 rooms were populated by extremely diverse participants. Per the adult services librarian stationed in the Information Commons, one of the meeting rooms contained a library-led English conversation group, but the others were occupied by patron-led

events. The Information Commons also consists of a large “lab” classroom, but it was not in use while I was there.

In contrast to the Information Commons, I also visited the community space in the Languages & Literature division which contains 8 computer stations for sign-up use and several large tables for patrons using their own laptops or reading. The atmosphere in this space had a more traditional library feel—the large room is comprised mostly of book shelves, and it was close to silent. The demographic makeup of this space was quite stark. At the time I was in there, all 8 computers were in use by black patrons, and the tables had a much higher proportion of white people than other areas in the library. This could have been coincidental, but it certainly contributed to my overall assessment that library-provided equipment was primarily used by people of color, and white patrons were more likely to be using their own laptops in spaces *other* than the Information Commons.

The proportion of white people at the Brooklyn Museum was much higher than at the Central Library. There was no discernable difference in racial/ethnic makeup among the different spaces that I visited in the museum, and overall I would guess that 75-80% of the visitors were white. Not all of the white patrons were necessarily American, as I sometimes heard different languages spoken among them, and there were definitely people of color from different countries as well. Comparing the racial/ethnic makeup of the museum patrons to those at the library, there was less variety *among* the people of color at the museum. For example, although there were several East Asians, I did not see any Southeast Asians while I was there, and in general, more of the diversity was derived from black people as opposed to brown. Additionally, while there had been a significant number of orthodox and Hasidic Jews at the library, I did not see those groups represented at the museum. In conclusion, although these two institutions are located only a

couple thousand feet apart, and both have “Brooklyn” in the name, only the library feels like a true representation of the totality of the borough.