

# Building Equity in Library Architecture



Libraries have become well-versed in envisioning and re-envisioning programming to meet community needs over time. But what does equity mean for the way physical library buildings are designed? What does it mean to build equity into library architecture in a way that will serve both now and the future?

In response, **Bora Architecture & Interiors** created the **Future Library Lab**, an architectural design studio at the University of Oregon, to explore this topic with student researchers.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sophia Austrins, AIA, LEED BD+C, is an Associate at Bora Architecture & Interiors with nearly a decade of experience strengthening community and culture through design activism. Also serving as an instructor for the University of Oregon School of Architecture & Environment, Sophia is actively helping lead Bora's efforts to create a more equitable world through design.



# Space Is Not Neutral

To engage equity through architecture, it is important to understand the power of space-making. Often space is thought of as neutral, as simply an inanimate background to life. But spaces carry the ideologies and power structures of the people they are designed by and the society they are designed within. Prisons are a clear example of structures designed to exert control. Most people do not think of everyday spaces as exerting control, but the same ingredients of walls, ceilings, and floors used in all of our buildings tell us what we can and cannot do.

People who move freely through a space can experience that space as neutral, because it feels natural to them. In contrast, people who do not move freely through a space may internalize a sense of being out of place. The feeling of inadequacy lands on the shoulders of those the space was not built for rather than on the space itself.

## EXAMINING THE PAST AND PRESENT

Who have libraries been built for? While modern libraries aim to serve a diverse public, those diverse voices have not always been a part of the building process. Rather, it has been left to the perspective of designers and those in leadership to decide how a space should be.

Dominated by Eurocentric design theories and precedents, the voices in the architectural design profession are predominantly white and male, often leaving out the experiences of

communities of color. Elevating the voices of the community as key partners in the design process is critical to tackling the social inequities embedded in our built environment.

The design of libraries is moving toward extensive community engagement models to get the right voices at the table. In contrast to older models of community engagement, which often only seek community input at the beginning of a project or only ask for feedback on ideas already designed, a diverse cross-section of the community should be engaged as collaborators throughout the design process.

Beyond inviting communities to be physically present, outreach should include dismantling barriers that exist for underrepresented groups to be present and to speak candidly at events, and attention should be paid to marginalized voices. Are meeting

**Recognizing that space holds power puts the responsibility back on public buildings to be designed equitably for all.**



locations welcoming and accessible to people of color? What languages need to be supported? Is there asynchronous engagement for those who cannot afford in-person time? Who is enabled to feel safe and represented? Does the process empower the natural leaders already in the community to lead? Community voices can challenge us to see things that we may not notice ourselves, and we must listen to lived expertise that has not been acknowledged in the past.

Dr. Amara Perez is a researcher who has studied the intersection of Critical Race Theory and Spatial Theory. In a workshop with the Future Library Lab, Amara spoke about her experience working with students of color at Portland Community College to identify spaces on campus that felt white, elite or masculine. She asked our students to name the spaces that come to mind when we consider those same words. Classical architecture, sterile modernist architecture, overly quiet spaces, layers of security, and lounges with impractical Scandinavian furniture are a few types of spaces that surfaced.

In traditional library design in the United States, the expression of being civic often presents as Corinthian columns and ornate vaulted mural ceilings with white cherubs, gods and philosophers. Consider which cultures are valued by this grand architecture and which are not. We also see fortress-like walls creating protected interior realms of knowledge. The public wing of Boston's Central Library was designed with protective granite plinths, dark tinted glass, and a security bunker of an entry at the height of civil rights protests. The building was a shelter for white citizens, giving them access to knowledge kept from Black communities outside. Within the last three generations, libraries in the United States remained white-only spaces.

The Future Library Lab sought to understand how this history impacts libraries today. Sonja Ervin, Multnomah County Library's Equity and Inclusion Manager, spoke with our students about

"Othering in Libraries" and pointed out the generational impact of segregation. For example, if someone's grandfather was not allowed into libraries, that established a pattern of not having libraries as a regular destination for one's kids. This reality perpetuates the historical lack of Black access to the public library, and ultimately impacts the offerings libraries have today. Sonja asked us to consider whose version of what histories are on the shelves, or whether people can expect to see staff that look like them and speak their language.

The demographics of who a building has been designed for in the past are also baked into our architectural norms. We still debate whether we can afford inclusive restrooms in our buildings because of established gender norms reinforced by building code. Even the standard dimensions for our furniture and the set points for our temperature control remain based on the preferences of an average white male.

## MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

From 2018 to 2020, The Future Library Lab researched and proposed possibilities for the future of our libraries through case studies in our home base of Multnomah County. Though each of our students created an architectural design solution as an exploration of what a future library might be, these are not catch-all solutions for all libraries. Our future libraries' successes will be fully dependent on the perspectives of their communities in the design process.

Dr. Perez developed 11 Praxis-Oriented Questions to guide our work using a Critical Race Spatial Lens. Students were asked to understand the pressing issues facing communities of color in their library's neighborhood and city; reflect on how libraries might be reproducing those issues and maintaining systems of inequity, power and privilege; and consider opportunities to disrupt those pressing issues. In her time with us, Dr. Perez also encouraged us to reflect on how our own lived experiences, social identities and positionalities shape our process and design.

## IDENTIFYING INEQUITY

By reflecting on pressing issues in communities of color and how libraries perpetuate systems of inequity, our students moved away from solutions that try to achieve equity only through addition. Adding equitable ingredients to an existing norm potentially leaves those old norms in place which work to maintain existing inequities.

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In the underserved Lents neighborhood of Northeast Portland, over \$75 million has been invested over the last five years to promote growth. Empty lots are being filled and old buildings are being torn down and replaced with buildings that have left longtime residents feeling out of place in their own community and in fear of displacement.

In his study of Lents, student researcher Kean Tom highlighted the links between seemingly neutral or positive socio-spatial conditions and resulting issues. If you read the top row of neighborhood ingredients in the image on the next page, you are introduced to a culturally diverse town center with great public transportation which is undergoing rapid development. Digging deeper, however, those socio-spatial conditions can be connected to issues of culture clash, displacement, gentrification and wealth inequality if development is not considered through a community lens.

In response, Kean's library preserves an old building on the site as a statement in opposition to the default replacement of existing street fabric. The newly built portions of his library partner with the existing to create flexibility of use for cultural connection, and access to culturally-specific exercise space on a previously inaccessible roof.

## REPRESENTING THE COMMUNITY

When considering how buildings might reflect diverse communities, the inclusion of artwork and consideration of who is represented in images on the walls is a common and simple starting point. However, it is important that this does not become a token solution. Culture and identity do not only exist in two-dimensional planes. Libraries and library architects must also consider how various cultures, genders and abilities use three-dimensional space.

Thinking about representation of diverse community in three dimensions, the envisioned library of student researcher Veronica Villarreal includes meditation rooms which normalize multiple religious practices, as well as lactation rooms to reduce barriers for parents and their children to use the library.

In another project, Claudia Monroy and Lindsey Naganuma normalized mental health by providing counseling and services with safe rooms for patrons in crisis.



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One must consider both the negative and positive impacts development can have based on a neighborhood's unique makeup.

#### BELOW

Students Claudia Monroy-Benitez and Lindsey Naganuma propose vibrant murals by a local artist to announce Biblioteca Caminanza as a neighborhood destination in Cully.

#### OPPOSITE PAGE

Proposed Biblioteca Caminanza design by Lindsey Naganuma and Claudia Monroy-Benitez

Let's go one step even further in thinking about spatially providing representation for communities. Beyond specialized spaces and events, culture and identity exist in the everyday use of space. Representing community by supporting their everyday ways of being leads to true inclusion. How can every single space in a library meet the needs of individuals from multiple backgrounds?

For her Cully library proposal, June Bradley made her main means of circulating a grand central ramp so that people of all abilities can rise together. Inspired by Chinookan gathering spaces, the ramp creates a circular space for gathering at the ground floor, which includes a collection for zines allowing anyone's voice to become part of the library collection. June also designed wayfinding so that spatial relationships and different uses within the library will be signaled by color, texture, and pictograms, rather than within written signage, so that language is not a barrier to wayfinding. Additionally, throughout her library, a variety of spatial configurations and scales—some of them user-adjustable—allow people to use and shape space in keeping with their cultural conceptions of privacy, intimacy and safety.

The lack of knowledge on how to navigate a library if it is not built for the way one thinks or moves or has experienced spaces in the past can be a challenge for the diverse communities libraries are hoping to serve. In speaking with Silvana Santana Gabriell, a bilingual library assistant at Multnomah County Library, we



learned that the ability to explore should only be assumed for English-speaking patrons. If an English-speaking patron enters a library and does not know where to go, they can wander and come to an understanding of the pieces of the library, whereas if a Spanish-speaking patron enters a library and does not see anything in a language that helps them know where they can go, they are likely to feel intimidated.

In addition, Dr. Perez's research found that students of color perceived libraries that were too quiet upon entry as intimidating. There were unspoken rules about what they could or could not do that they did not know, and the silence made it uncomfortable for them to ask, explore, or speak in their own languages.

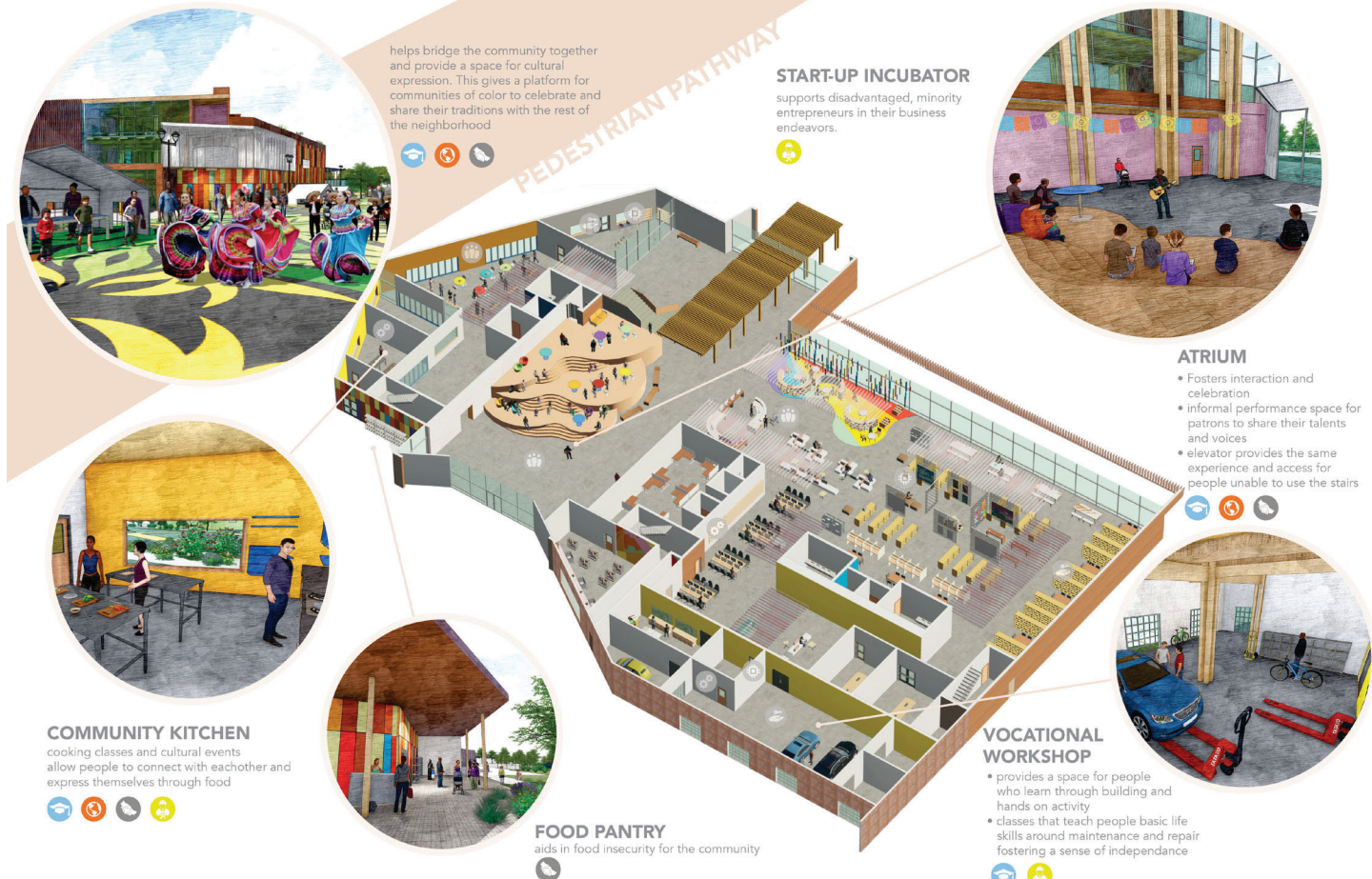
Recognizing the discomfort that greets some patrons upon entering a building, student Andrea Liu broke through the boundary of her library's exterior walls. Structural columns lining pathways

outside of her building contain little free libraries for people to easily take and give books and objects. According to Andrea, "everyone should have free access to information and knowledge." Her library also welcomes new users inside by weaving in recreational rock climbing, drawing from Troutdale's love for the outdoors, and providing access to recreation that is often prohibitively expensive for lower-income communities.

In another project, Abby Farrel created market stalls open to both the interior and exterior to welcome people in.







## EMPOWERING PATRONS

Throughout libraries, Architecture typically positions patrons in relationship to staff. Stephanie Chase, the former Director of Libraries for the City of Hillsboro, told us about plans to get rid of staff desks in the Hillsboro Libraries. She reminded us that for Black and Hispanic patrons, service desks are not places where they have historically received respect. Dr. Perez encouraged us to replace transactional interactions, like that of a bank teller counter which establishes hierarchical power, with interactions that empower our communities. At the same time, staff—particularly staff of color—need spaces within the library where the architecture provides safety, and this is one of

## Buildings themselves can communicate power rather than empowerment.

the reasons desks have remained. Down to the scale of furniture, the design of the library has social implications for creating equitable space.

Similar to the power expressed in a bank teller counter, buildings themselves can communicate power rather than empowerment. Several students sought to tackle the “institutional” quality of libraries.

In designing their Biblioteca Caminanza for Cully, Claudia and Lindsey posited that redefining the library to change institutional power dynamics into a partnership with the people leverages it as a tool for upward mobility. Their library amplifies voices, especially marginalized ones. Their design focuses on areas of learning, building and gathering via a framework for access, equipment, technology and community—ultimately cultivating diversity, education, safety and growth.

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Bora's Future Library Lab established a prototype for its Biblioteca Caminanza in NE Portland's Cully neighborhood. A temporary room for asynchronous community engagement was located at the project site to hear the community's vision and values.







## LEFT

A vision for Rockwood Library by student Madelaine Murray

## BELOW

Rockwood Library design proposed by student Alexa Thornton

Alternatively, Madelaine Murray challenged the institutional “mega structure” approach to building, breaking her library down into functions and pieces to represent the diversity of people in East County while bringing each piece together into a larger whole. Madelaine’s East County library is organized into areas for Respite, Make, Celebrate and Live, integrating housing as a part of the whole.

Alexa Thornton also played with the idea of pieces making up a whole, creating a design where everyone is a physical part of the building. Furniture modules are covered in 6”x6” ceramic tiles that are decorated by community members and can be changed or added to, empowering people to shape the identity of the library over time.



## CONCLUSION

The built environment is one piece of how we can cast the future we hope for today. By first recognizing the power of space and listening to identify inequities, we can move forward to create places that reflect their communities and give power to those the library aims to serve. Imagine a future library where a Black trans woman veteran with a disability feels represented, and welcomed to learn, share, connect, and create a future for themselves, their family, and their city. We must usher the expertise of our communities into the design process in order to create spaces that represent and empower all. ●

