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On silent feet: the library and the child

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ABSTRACT

In 1966 the photographer Martine Franck was commissioned by *Life International* to document the experiences of children in a new library in Paris. The visual essay she produced illuminated the materiality, the design and the children's use of the space. In Birmingham, a recent unconnected research project, 'Libraries in Women's Lives', captured women's childhood memories of libraries. The women's 'spatial stories' (de Certeau, 1984) offer reflections on libraries in different times and places. Strikingly though, their accounts resonate with Franck's images of the library in Paris. This paper brings image and narrative into conversation with spatial theory to make sense of these similarities, and to explore responses to library space.

This paper is a comment on the materiality of the library. It reveals the haptic and visual pleasures of these sites. Through this attention to memory, the research suggests a different starting point for debates around the future of libraries. It argues that looking to the past might be a good way of thinking about the libraries of the future. Further, and by virtue of attending to the visual alongside writing on spatial theory, this research comments on the relationship between representations of space in image and in text.

KEYWORDS

Design; childhood; library; body; interiority

Beginnings

Children spend their lives in a variety of designed spaces – the home, the school, the playground, the library, the street – and all of these, as the British anarchist and pioneer of Adventure Playgrounds Colin Ward remarked, are 'learning places' (Ward, 1995). A library, for example, is a system, an infrastructure, and a relational and designed space and these assemblages 'shape, in turn, the ways we think, read and write' and behave (Springer & Turpin, 2016). Libraries, as spaces of learning, perform a rhythming role in everyday life (Spencer-Bennett, 2020, 2021). Conceived space (Lefebvre, 2004), the space of architects and planners, acts upon the child (Grosvenor & Rasmussen, 2018), shaping what is possible in our educational practice. Space is also lived, represented and remembered (Bachelard, 2014; Perce, 2008). It is the memories of libraries and the representations of libraries which are the focus of this collaborative paper.¹

The paper brings together two distinct but related cases. First, a research project at The University of Birmingham, *Libraries in Women's Lives*, has captured women's childhood memories of libraries. The women's 'spatial stories' (de Certeau, 1984), offer reflections on the haptic

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and visual pleasures of these educational spaces, revealing the materiality of the library to be charged with educational significance. Second, in 2018, an unconnected visit to an exhibition – *Martine Franck. A Retrospective* (6 November 2018 to 6 February 2019) at the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris – surfaced a connection to the Birmingham project. Displayed alongside a wide selection of Franck’s documentary photography was associated archival material which included a 1966 copy of the magazine *Life International* (Figure 1). Franck had been commissioned by the magazine to document the experiences of children in a new library in Paris designed for them. ‘First French Children’s Library,’ the visual essay she produced, accompanied by captions, captured the materiality, the design and children’s use of the space. A photograph of the displayed magazine was taken and shared back in Birmingham. The resemblance between the children’s engagements with space presented in the photographs and the women’s memories of their engagements with space was striking. A new research collaboration emerged; a collaboration which brought image and memory into conversation and generated an initial range of research questions: How do children experience the space of the library? How is the library portrayed and how it is remembered? How can theories of space and place – Bachelard, Lefebvre, Perec – help us engage with these questions? How does spatial theory connect to the visual and the narrative? In addressing these questions we draw attention to the many echoes of the visual and narrative sources within the theoretical writing and argue that these sources become tools rather than simply objects of analysis.

In the following discussion we consider Martine Franck’s photo essay, the accounts of women’s experiences of libraries, and the writing of spatial theorists, bringing image, narrative and theory together to explore children’s engagements with the space of the library and the place of the library in the memory. The reflections offered here were made before the rupture

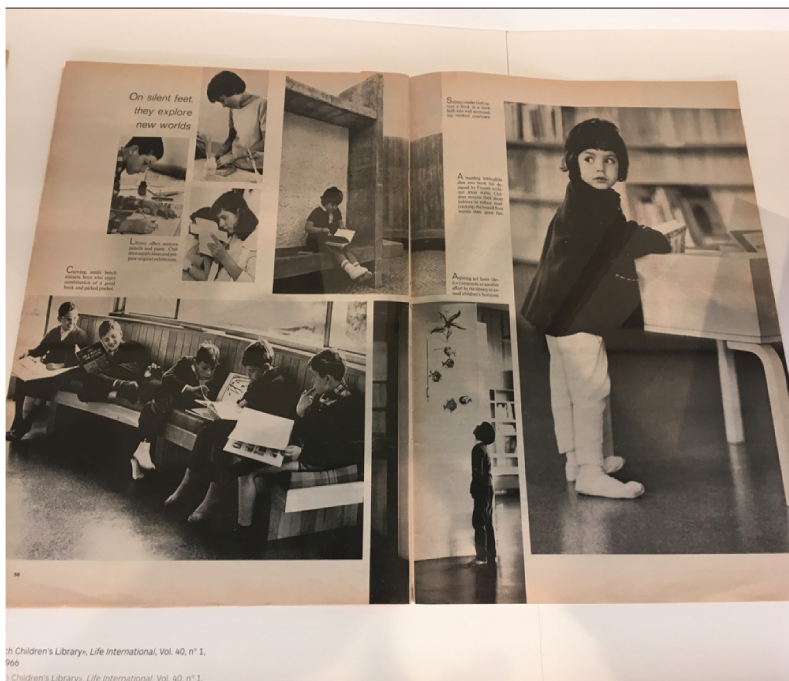


Figure 1. Photograph taken at *Martine Franck. A Retrospective* (6 November 2018 to 6 February 2019) exhibition at the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris by Ian Grosvenor.

of Covid-19. With children unable to occupy the physical space of libraries in recent times, the reflections and representations offered here take on particular poignance.

The paper is organised into five parts. Part 1, Visualising Space, and Part 2, Verbalising Space, introduce the photo essay and the narratives around which this article centres. Part 3, Corners and Nooks, and Part 4, Light, bring the photographs and the narratives together with spatial theory to reflect on engagements with library space. Part 5 concludes the paper, reflecting on the theory and methods employed, and considering the consequences of this research for debates about libraries of the future. This paper therefore looks forward as well as back. In looking to the future it is not our intention here to offer recommendations for future library design, but rather to make a particular claim: that debates about the future of libraries should not take place separately from examinations of the past.

Part 1. Visualising space

The library and the city

The children's library opened in 1965 in Clamart, a working-class suburb of Paris. It was an area of the city with a high density of children under 16 years of age, some 6,000 out of a total area population of 10,000. The library was funded by the non-profit association *La Joie par les livres* with the support of the French heiress, philanthropist and patron of the arts Anne Gruner-Schlumberger (1905–1993) and the town council. Designed by Gérard Thurnauer, Jean Renaudie, Jean-Louis Véret and Pierre Rib, its innovative use of a series of intersecting circles led to its being commonly referred to as *La Petite Bibliothèque Ronde* (www.lapetitebibliothequeronde.com). The overlapping curves and the raw concrete exterior of the design contrasted starkly with the solid six storey red brick apartment blocks that surrounded it (Figure 2). The design made economic use of space, allowed for indoor and outdoor activities and



Figure 2. Clamart Children's Library. Martine Franck/Magnum Photos.

provided plenty of interior light. The furniture inside was principally designed by the modernist Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898–1976). When the library opened over 3,000 children quickly registered as users (Marinet, 2009; Thurnauer et al., 2006).

The photographer

Born in Antwerp, Martine Franck (1938–2013) grew up in the United Kingdom and the United States and later became an independent photographer in Paris producing visual essays and reportages for the major American magazines, *Life*, *Fortune*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times* and *Vogue*. She later joined the photographic cooperative Magnum (Cojean, 2007). ‘First French Children’s Library,’ was Franck’s first commission for *Life International*. Eleven photographs are reproduced in the essay. Franck took at least another eight photographs in 1965 which are in the Magnum archive (<https://pro.magnumphotos.com>). Four of the eleven photographs reproduced in the essay are not in the archive. Four photographs which Franck did not use but are in the Magnum archive are reproduced in *Espace à lire* (Thurnauer et al., 2006). Produced to mark the 40th anniversary of the *Life International* commission by the architect Thurnauer and Geneviève Patte, who had responsibility for the pedagogical direction of the Clamart project in the late 1960s, the heavily illustrated book reproduced three further photographs by Franck which are neither in the essay nor the archive. Clearly, for the commission there were other photographs contending for attention, but it is unclear as to who made the final selection and determined the size and sequencing of the images (‘First French Children’s Library’, 1966).

Looking in the library

Where to start with what we can see in Franck’s images? Annette Kuhn in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* recommends: ‘Start with a simple description’ (Kuhn, 1995, p. 7). The eleven photographs consist of: an exterior image of the library and its surroundings; five images of children involved in the act of reading, three of children making displays, one of a boy looking at an art installation, and one of a girl choosing a book. The facial expressions of the children reading are of total concentration on the task in hand, as are those of the children involved in the making process. Heads are bent downwards, suggestive of the phrase ‘to be buried in a book’. A boy and a girl sit close by each other, faces almost touching, as if whispering intimately about what they are reading. One solitary reader is sitting outside in the courtyard. The exception to these images of the act of reading is one of five boys sitting next to each other on a curved bench each holding a book. Two of them are distracted from reading by a third boy who is picking the pocket of another. They are simultaneously connected in the act of reading (and play), but it is also a photograph of feet, legs and hands (Figure 3). Where we can see the body of the child none of them are wearing shoes. This is also the case for the lone girl reading in the courtyard. Head bowed in concentration, book on her lap, she sits in a nook in the wall, her feet with white socks pointing at an angle to the pebble surfaced ground (Figure 4). The largest image by far is of a young child standing by a book bin, head half turned to the right looking not at the camera but distracted by something out of sight (Figure 5). The way the image is positioned on the double page spread suggests she could be looking at the boys on the bench.



Figure 3. Martine Franck/Magnum.

A reading of the images is necessarily influenced by the captions which accompany them. John Berger termed the time/space between the moment captured on film and the moment of looking as an 'abyss.' However, as soon as photographs are accompanied by words/captions they have the effect of bringing certainty for the viewer. They direct looking and by doing so have the effect of anchoring meaning for the viewer (Berger & Mohr, 1982, pp. 87–89). Below are some of the captions placed alongside images. None of them were written by Franck.²

'On silent feet, they explore new worlds'

'Readers devour, compare and discuss books'

'Library offers scissors, pencils and paste. Children supply ideas.'

'Curving, sunlit bench attracts boys who enjoy combination of good book and picked pocket.'

'Solitary reader savors [sic] a book in a nook'

'A budding bibliophile dips into book bin'

'Aspiring art lover responds to another effort by the library to extend children's horizons'

These captions are distinctive in their style. If there is a poetry to the images, then the captions are poetic too. The repeated sounds ('budding bibliophile'), ellipsis ('Library offers scissors') and left-hand adjuncts ('on silent feet, they explore new worlds') lend a literary feel to the writing. The photographs are therefore paired with a kind of poetry; a feature of the photo essay which takes on further significance given the figurative style of the spatial theory on which we draw.

The captions also reveal to the reader information which cannot be seen in the photographs. We find out that the library holds 4,500 books, including foreign-

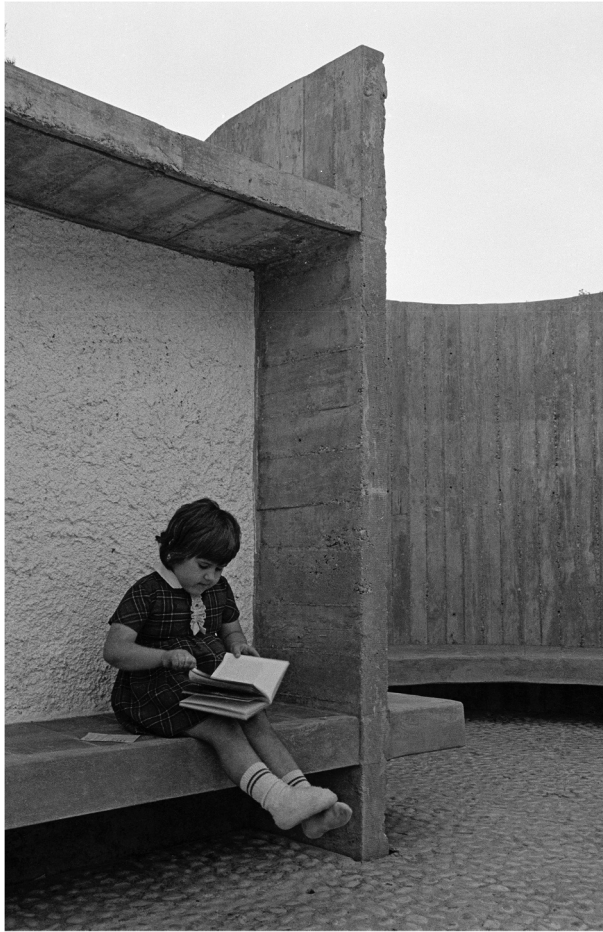


Figure 4. Martine Franck/Magnum Photos.

language picture books equipped with tape-recorded French texts, that there are illustrated lectures and classes in painting, pottery and clay-modelling, and children remove their shoes to reduce mud-tracking. The mode of telling, through the image and text, is direct.

Part 2. Verbalising space

The libraries and the city

This paper also draws on women's narratives of library use collected as part of the *Libraries in Women's Lives* project (see Spencer-Bennett, 2021). This is a project concerned with the library's role in women's education and everyday life. Narratives were collected from twenty-five women in the Hall Green area of Birmingham in 2017. This paper draws only on those women's narratives in which childhood memories are most salient. They are listed below (Table 1).



Figure 5. Martine Franck/Magnum Photos.

Table 1. Women involved in the *Libraries in Women's Lives* project.

	Date of birth
Jeanette	1967
Halima	1988
Jabbean	1977
Margaret	1936
Talat	1945
Shahzad	1956
Janice	1956
Janette	1943

A city with a history of investment in public libraries, Birmingham has catered for children since the commencement of the public library service in 1861 (Kelly, 1977) with separate children's rooms being introduced in 1919 (Birmingham Public Libraries, 1962). There are four community libraries in the Hall Green district: Hall Green, Kings Heath, Balsall Heath and Sparkhill. The libraries host a number of

groups including a women’s group and story and music sessions for young children. Hall Green is ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. There is an inner-city ward in the district as well as a ward on the southern boundary of Birmingham (Figure 6; Table 2).

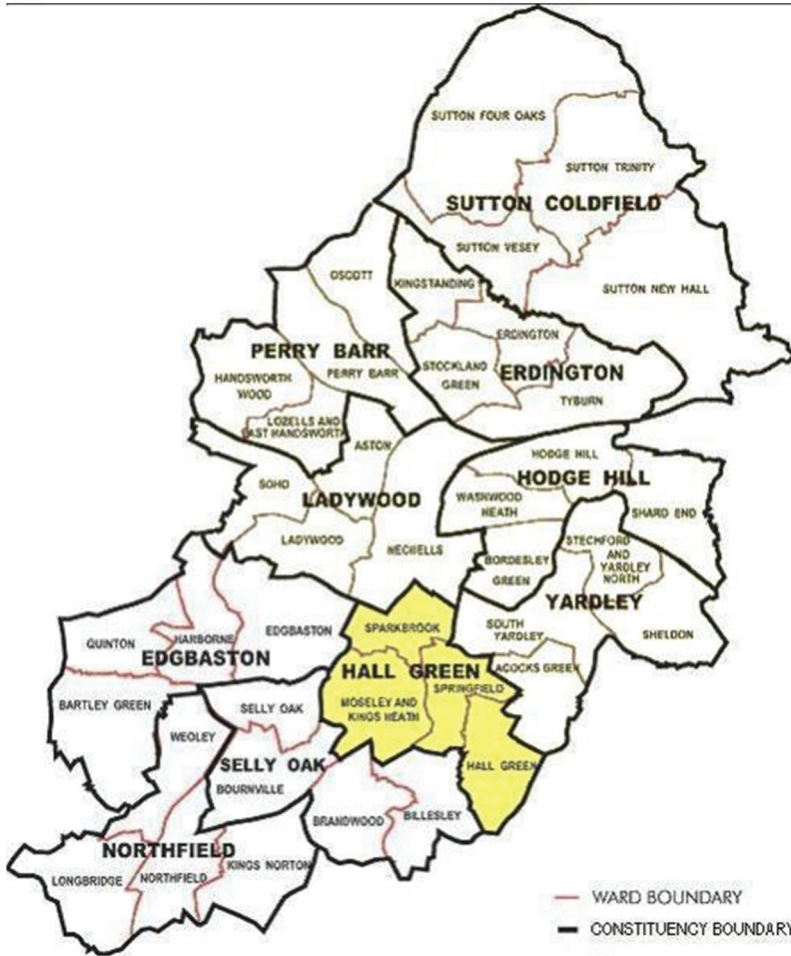


Figure 6. Hall Green constituency and wards pre-2018. Source <http://wikimapia.org/23495147/Hall-Green>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

Table 2. The libraries and their Birmingham City Council wards.

Library	Ward pre-2018	Following 2018 Boundary Review
Hall Green	Hall Green	Hall Green North
Kings Heath	Moseley and Kings Heath	Brandwood and Kings Heath
Balsall Heath	Sparkbrook	Balsall Heath West
Sparkhill	Springfield	Sparkhill

As the research commenced, Birmingham libraries were subject to a public consultation. The council's proposal was to 'reshape' the community libraries into a 'tiered system' (Birmingham City Council, 2016a), with the tier determining the hours of opening. At this time, posters advertising the *Libraries in Women's Lives* study were displayed. Some women responded to these adverts and others were introduced by librarians. The meetings ranged from just ten minutes on a single occasion, to three meetings of up to an hour.

After an initial conversation about the project, the women were invited to talk about their memories of libraries. The project took a deliberately wide view of libraries and what might constitute a library so although these conversations took place in public libraries, the women also talked about academic libraries, college and school libraries and home libraries. The narratives were recorded, transcribed and then analysed for 'emergent themes' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 553).

The women were born between 1933 and 1988. Since women reflect on library use through their lives, they remember libraries in this suburb of Birmingham but also school libraries, university libraries and public libraries elsewhere in Birmingham, in the UK, and around the world. They also, therefore, represent accounts of very different libraries built at different times, used by the women between about 1950 and the present day.

Listening in the library

In appraising the narratives, the project draws on Henri Lefebvre's work on rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 2004). For Lefebvre there is a rhythm 'everywhere there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 15). Listening takes on a particular importance. Lefebvre writes that the rhythm analyst will come to 'listen' to a house a street or a town as an audience listens to a symphony (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 22). In the afterword to *The School I'd Like*, Dea Birkett stresses the importance of listening as a research ethic. 'The challenge' she writes 'is listening and repeating what we hear' (Birkett, 2003, p. 162). In this work, listening, therefore, has a sociological and ethnographic significance.

The methodologies for research, as Pahl (2014, p. 190) reminds us, are not separate from the research. The narratives for the project were nearly all collected within a library. This has certain consequences for an understanding of the space. First, women were able to move around the library or to point to certain features. Second, if the space was quiet then the conversations were often conducted in whispers. Stylistically associated with confidentiality, intimacy or with 'ingroup' communication (Cirillo, 2004), whispering might have influenced the interaction in the direction of a shared understanding of the library space.

To reiterate then: the photo essay reports on the opening of the children's library in Paris in 1964; and the narratives represent accounts of libraries since around 1950, in Birmingham and elsewhere.

In both cases, childhood is captured not directly through children's testimony but rather through a filter; whether that be memory or the photographer's lens. The narratives look back and offer an 'insider' view on library space, where the photo essay presents, in a sense, an 'outsider' perspective on library space. Nevertheless, Martine Franck, necessarily,

approaches the task of photographing the children with memories of her own childhood experiences of libraries and existing understandings of children's practice.

The discussion which follows brings the photographs, the captions and the narratives together with existing writing on space in a search for 'common patterns' (Van Slyck, 1998, p. 203). It is arranged under two headings; *corners and nooks* and *light*. The ideas are overlapping but group roughly into those elements which have to do with the haptic or auditory, and those which pertain to the visual. In this conception, *corners and nooks* have to do with quiet and warmth – with retreat. *Light* has to do with visual geographies and with expansion. We begin here with *corners and nooks*.

Part 3. Corners and nooks

'A human being', Bachelard writes, 'likes to withdraw into his corner and ... it gives him physical pleasure to do so' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 112). In Martine Franck's photograph of a little girl reading (Figure 4), she occupies a small concrete structure which has been built in the outdoor space of the library. The caption reads 'reader savours a book in a nook built into the wall' ('First French Children's Library', 1966, p. 59).

Corners are recognised as important physical forms within educational spaces. Catherine Burke (2017) found quiet corners being designed into schools, allowing spaces for children to sit and read or think.

Jeanette, interviewed for the *Libraries in Women's Lives* project, remembers her primary school classroom:

Thinking in terms of learning at primary school, I always remember the library corner being a little bit of an escape from the rest of the really busy classroom and I don't know if it's still the case, but the bit with the carpet and some cushions and you sat on the floor and lose yourself. Because the primary school classroom... my memory of it is really massive classes and noisy and chaotic and hectic and a little bit overwhelming at times I think I was quite quiet and quite liked to go in that corner.

Echoing Gaston Bachelard's (2014, p. 36) argument that our childhood spatial inhabitations act as a template for those later in life, Jeanette remembers corners and cupboard-like spaces being important from her earliest memories of home:

When I was little I had a cushion in the corner of my bedroom where I would read.

And then later Jeanette might seek out a nook in the library:

Then at university I always used to go and work in the library – definitely at university and I'd get the little carrel.

After completing her degree, Jeanette taught English in Japan:

In Tokashimodira we did these funny teaching hours. It was meant to be from one in the afternoon to ten at night but sometimes there'd be a break of two or three hours in the middle and it was too far to go home. I'd go to the library ... there was this corner with cushions.

Moving through her education, corners and cupboard-like spaces are memorable for Jeanette. In Bachelard's idealised description of the 'dream house' he holds that 'however spacious, it must also be a cottage, a dovecote, a nest, a chrysalis' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 85).

The dream library might be the same. Jeanette sees continuity in her inhabitations of space. Gaston Bachelard writes that the house we were born in engraves within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting (Bachelard, 2014, p. 36). Bachelard is suggesting that we learn to inhabit physical spaces in the house of our childhood. What then, of the library of our childhood? Might this engrave on us in similar ways? Might the child subjects of Franck's photography have been engraved upon in Clamart's Children's Library? Memory of a particular bodily kind becomes important; Bachelard writes of 'our bodies, which do not forget' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 36).

If one might find a corner within the library, then there is good reason to suppose that the image of 'the corner' also represents the library itself. One woman, Halima, recalls her visits to the school library.

I would go to the school library ... a corner of the school where people weren't around.

'How happy the child who really possesses the moments of solitude!' exclaims Bachelard (2014, p. 38). Perhaps the girl in Martine Franck's photograph enjoys the solitude of her corner.

A corner might also suggest warmth. Franck's photograph of a girl choosing books reveals warm slippers on her feet. The caption reads 'the heated floor warms their quiet feet' ('First French Children's Library', 1966, p. 59). And libraries exist in the memory as places of warmth.

(Libraries are) literally warm. You go out of the cold (Jeanette)

Also suggesting comfort and warmth, the references to cushions underline the importance of the haptic experience and imply something of how the space is being used; this is the space of withdrawal and retreat. Consequently, women remember occupying the space of the library in particular ways with regard to the body.

Libraries are 'a place to sit and slump and be still.' (Jeanette)

Stillness is certainly suggested in many of the photographs too and Bachelard speaks of 'immobility' as 'one of the things we prize most highly' in our inhabitation of a space (Bachelard, 2014, p. 156). To 'slump' is to arrange one's body in a particular fashion. Jeanette's reflection here suggests that memories of libraries are bound up with bodily engagements with the physical environment. Martine Franck's photographs capture children's bodies in various positions. According to Georges Perec's (2008) typology of bodily postures associated with reading; reading standing up and reading sitting down and so on, the children adopt a variety of attitudes. Some read at tables, while others arrange themselves on a bench. Indeed, the photograph of the boys on the bench recalls Bachelard's assertion that 'The grace of the curve is an invitation to remain' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 165).

In a similar spirit, Peckham library in London, completed in 1999, features curved benches and desks, a 'sinuously curved reception desk' (p28) and an 'unusual circular truss' (Melvin et al., 2000, p. 27). Likewise, and echoing the 'nest' of Bachelard's description, circular shapes make up the Clamart library buildings.

Franck's photographs remind us of the more unusual positions which the body might adopt in the public space of the library. Lying on one's side might not be extraordinary in the private space of the home but would be less common, perhaps, in some public spaces. The affective dimension of the engagements with the library might also be signalled by

the position of the body. A recent study of children's classroom posture, for example, found the postures seen in Franck's photographs to be associated not simply with reading but with 'reading for pleasure' as opposed to the 'disciplined postures' of 'reading aloud, or reading for information' (Dixon, 2011, p. 102). Perhaps, in considering the experience of the body within the library we might come to see the architecture of the library as giving 'validity' to 'a sense of the self as bodily' (Fausch, 1996).

The auditory properties of the space also contribute to the potential for the library to be a space of withdrawal and retreat. The corners described above might be spaces of quiet. For Bachelard, 'when we remember the hours we have spent in corners we remember the silence' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 156). Libraries, of course, are places of noise as well as quiet. But libraries' traditional associations with quiet are sometimes represented as being about the draconian enforcement of arbitrary rules. By contrast, Catherine Burke (2017) finds the quiet spaces of schools to be less about control and more about the exercise of freedom. There seems to be a similar feeling about many libraries which feature in the narratives. Perhaps because schools are institutions in which children sometimes experience little personal freedom, school libraries and reading corners emerge as spaces in which one remembers exercising some freedom – either in opting to use that space in the first place or in the activity they undertake when there. This freedom might involve going beyond the intentions of the library designers (Van Slyck, 1998) or putting things to 'unexpected uses' (Gutman & De Coninck-Smith, 2008, p. 7).

Jeanette reflects on the freedom afforded by libraries in seeing them as a 'a bit of quiet time away from everything'. Jabbean reflected on working at the library rather than at home:

It's quieter isn't it?

Margaret has similar memories:

Where did you go for a bit of peace and quiet? To study? If you were worried about your exams? I used to go to the library.

Although silent images, Franck's photographs indicate something of the auditory geography (Rodaway, 1994) of the scenes in Clamart. On page 57, a girl, in an act suggesting a whisper, leans in close to talk to the boy by her side. The children in many of the photographs are engaged in an activity which seems to have their concentration. The captions also indicate quiet. 'On silent feet, they explore new worlds' one reads, and another speaks of their 'quiet feet'. Rather than children, therefore, it is feet here which are 'silent'. These captions refer to the children's stockinged feet; they have removed their shoes to explore the library. This is likely to have to do with discipline and with librarians' concerns about protecting the new floors, of course, and yet employing feet metonymously here seems significant. The feet are visible for eight of the children in the images. Feet might stand for movement and travel and yet so often in the photographs the children appear to be still. Feet come to represent, then, a different kind of travel; they represent exploration within the library – 'they explore new worlds' the caption reads. The children are exposed to something new, whether through their reading or their engagements with the physical features of the library. In this way, the library emerges as a site not only of retreat but of expansion.

Part 4. Light

From within her local library, sitting in her favourite chair, Talat describes her surroundings.

There is more light and beauty. and place . . . the sunshine comes from here (she gestures to the window to her left [Figure 7]), from here (she gestures to the window to her right [Figure 8]), and I love to sit here.

Talat engages with the space in a sensuous way. Light unites the haptic experience of the space with the visual. Natural rhythms (day and night, the movement of the sun in the sky) overlap with Talat's use of the library, bringing harmony or eurhythmia (Lefebvre, 2004). The architectural historian Adrian Forty draws attention to the importance of light in our experience of social spaces. 'People will always gravitate to those rooms which have light on two sides' (Alexander et al., 1977, p. 747 in Forty, 2000, p. 117). Croydon's public library, built at the end of the twentieth century, is celebrated for being 'daylit on both its long sides' (Greenberg, 1994, p. 33). Indeed, Talat experiences warmth and light.



Figure 7. Sparkhill Library: photograph of north-west facing window taken by Kate Spencer-Bennett.



Figure 8. Sparkhill Library: photograph of south-east facing window taken by Kate Spencer-Bennett.

The photographs – Martine Franck's *writing with light* – make their own comments on the importance of light within the space of the library. There is an interesting play of light as light hits the floor through the windows. The photo of the little girl choosing books (p. 59, [Figure 5](#)) offers reflections of the girl's legs and the legs of the table on the polished floors, like reflections in water. One caption also points to the light, describing the bench as 'sunlit' ('First French Children's Library', 1966, p. 58).

Within spaces of learning, light has a symbolic importance. Windows are central to Catherine Burke's analysis of the place of light within the school. The therapeutic effects of the channelling of light into a room, which Burke addresses, are consistent with Talat's description of 'light and beauty' and her typology of peaceful spaces. Associations between light and knowledge and non-materiality and spirituality (Burke, 2005) become significant given that, for Talat, for example, the mosque is the place which most closely aligns with the library.

In his writing on British library buildings in the 1960s, titled *Libraries of Light*, the historian Alistair Black adopts the theme of light to refer to structures which were deemed airy and spacious but which also ‘had the appearance of being “light” (in the sense of weight) in the design and construction’ Black (2017, p. xi).

If light stands for knowledge and understanding, then it represents a desire to learn within the library. The narratives are testament to such a desire. One woman, Jabbean, concluded: ‘I’ve been studying my whole life!’ and another, in a comment which indicates the embodied nature of the desire to learn as a kind of restlessness, reflected, ‘I did lots of courses because I can’t sit straight’.

For Shahzad and Jabbean the library was an important site for this desire to be ‘worked on’. In the photo essay and in the memory the library is therefore not only a retreat, as discussed above, but also a site for expansion. Bachelard captures the human need for these seemingly contradictory states through the metaphor of the cottage and the manor house. Expansion, in this context of library use, has to do with space, of course. But it also has to do with expanding oneself, with learning, with – to borrow Bachelard’s words – ‘the creative psyche’ (Bachelard, 2014, p. 85).

Expansion might take many forms, but what the photographs and the narrative accounts both suggest is that the spatial characteristics and the architectural elements are implicated. One of the captions in the photo essay describes a boy looking up at a mobile which hangs from the wall. It reads:

Aspiring art lover responds to another effort by the library to extend the children’s horizons. (‘First French Children’s Library’, 1966, p. 59)

If particular architectural features engender particular responses, then the features and resources of the Clamart Library are presented in a particular way. Richard Sennett writes that ‘it is possible to give space character by punctuating it just as one would a piece of writing.’ If ‘big bold monuments serve as exclamation points’ Sennett writes, then ‘What physical forms would work like quote marks, inviting people to pause and reflect?’ (Sennett, 2018, p. 212). This photograph suggests that the resources of the library might constitute the physical forms capable of this effect. Artwork within the Clamart Library is presented as something upon which to gaze – perhaps even something which might inspire wonder.

The materiality of the space is thus bound up with understandings of educational practice and the value of the library more broadly. Stuart Brand writes of library buildings that ‘time has taught them and they teach us’ Brand (1994, p. 49). Indeed, the materiality and the visual elements are not separate from the educative potentials of the spaces; the women’s reflections on the displays and the objects within libraries are illuminating in this respect.

Talat said:

I mean it’s not necessarily if I read these books or those books then I will learn – just like (she looks to a sign about language learning books and does an impression of someone thinking aloud) ‘oh books in Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati here so what about the languages?’ Subconsciously, you learn many things.

For Janice, and in a similar vein, visual elements make her childhood experiences of the library so memorable:

When we were at school we didn’t used to have colour illustrations or posters or anything because printing was expensive so ... 1956 ... yeah. [But in school] everything was in black

and white because of the cost. In libraries they had books with colour pictures in which was really attractive.

It is possible to imagine Janice enjoying the colourful books within her library just as the children 'devour' the 'picture books' in the photographs of Clamart ('First French Children's Library', 1966, p. 57). The images are transactional – the 'vector of the gaze' – the focus of the children's attention is an object of interest, whether that be artwork, an image in a book, or lines of text as 'eyes settle on the lines and travel along them' (Perec, 2008, p. 175). The children look 'at home' in the library space. It is their space of community; a space for private and shared consumption of knowledge and a space of agency, where children make decisions, acts of conscious selection, as they privilege one book over another to read. An act multiplied day by day, year by year. In doing so we can imagine the child's engagement with the process of intertextuality where meaning is produced in the process of reading through 'connectivity and interrelation' with innumerable other texts (Springer & Turpin, 2016, p. 13; Barthes, 1977, pp. 155–64). In the library, echoing Iris Murdoch's (1970) conception of a progressive education, the children turn their attention away from themselves to valuable objects in the world.

If the library is a house for valuable objects then, and as Martine Franck's photographs testify, the library also inspires the creation of such objects. The children engage in making. The 'library offers scissors, pencils and paste. Children supply ideas' a caption reads. What the library is said to offer here is concrete, practical and mundane (scissors, pencils) and what the children bring is abstract and interesting (ideas). The library is drawn as a place which acts on the children's interiority. It might, as an educational space, discipline or govern children's bodies but it offers a site for poesis of various kinds – the children fold card and draw and paste but they make themselves too.

The library is, then, a relational space, where children have physical interaction with books and, in turn, with the ordering of knowledge. And as photograph captions such as 'budding bibliophile' suggest, it is a space where the horizon is not fixed in the present but extends into the children's futures. Childhood is constructed here as a time of growth and development, and a growth in which sensory experience is important to the 'mental, emotional and physical development of the child' (Gutman & De Coninck-Smith, 2008, p. 2).

Much of the childhood library activity depicted in the photographs, whether following lines of text or cutting and pasting, has a certain rhythm. Franck's photographs arrest the flow of time and yet help us to see and acknowledge the day-to-day activities of the children and to conjure the routines of a 1960s library. Just as the activity involves certain rhythms the space itself offers particular rhythms which might be distinctive. One woman, Janette, as a teacher at Redmaids School in Bristol, remembers designing the new school library.

I became the librarian and I helped organise the planning of the library which was really nice because I organised a study room in the library which had individual desks and everything. There were very high shelves and we had plants all around them and they [the students] helped grow the plants.

In Lefebvre's spatial triad, this is the space of the conceived (Lefebvre, 1991) and yet it is conceived with the child in mind. The space of the library here is designed 'to fit the child'

(Burke, 2017). There is harmony in the description of the study room, the resources and the collaborative way of working. There is harmony too in the 'static rhythms' (Wunderlich, 2010) of the 'little desks', 'high shelves' and 'plants all around'. Plants have a eurhythmic quality in their patterns of growth and nature suggests something 'integral and harmonious' (Meyer, 2008, p. 159).

Particular spatial rhythms can also be discerned at Clamart. 'The library's design', the caption reads, is 'based on a series of intersecting circles' ('First French Children's Library', 1966). Such a design has consequences, of course, for the interior space of the library. Benches and bookshelves are curved, creating, perhaps, 'an ongoing association of titles and the absence of hierarchy' (Springer & Turpin, 2016, p. 49). Gaston Bachelard speaks of 'the arms of a curve' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 165) and writes 'for a dreamer of words, what calm there is in the word *round*' (p. 253). The significance of circular schemes in educational spaces have been commented on elsewhere (see, for example, Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). Just as for the school library described in the narrative above, these elements at Clamart bring a rhythm to the space and the echoes of the architecture in the physical features – the curved table legs, for example, contribute to a harmonious space and feeling of eurhythmia (Lefebvre, 2004).

Given these architectural qualities, it is unsurprising that Franck remembered her first impression of the building as one of being 'seduced' by the space, the 'harmony of the forms' and by the children's behaviour. Her comments are revealing of her approach to the commission:

As a reporter, I liked to let my subjects live in their frame, in this case, the library. One of the things that particularly struck me was the freedom, the ease with which the children walked in the great hall. Everything was at hand, the children went from one table to another, from one book tray to another. I had only to follow them as discreetly as possible, I did not need to question them, I saw in their eyes the pleasure they took to be without apparent supervision. I remember an absolute calm of respect for the place ...

The hour of storytelling was a privileged moment; the children were in a semicircle around the storyteller; and ... watching them ... I realized how the human voice can transmit the taste of reading and open the imagination.

Part 5. Conclusion

Martine Franck's claim, above, that, in understanding the children's engagements with the library, she 'did not need to question them', represents a statement of support for observation and documentary photography. This paper brings together both Franck's visual narrative which draws the viewer into the world of childhood as well as narratives of adults remembering their childhood and pegging these memories to their physical engagements with space. Verbal and visual narratives, like libraries themselves, emerge as containers of memory.

Luckham (1971, p. 8) reflects on the two types of library building 'which are likely to be most familiar to the citizen'. He writes, 'On the one hand is the Victorian legacy, the solid, staid, severe structures erected in many towns and cities' and 'The other is more modern, often post-war, sometimes exciting in design, the branch premises, built usually in the suburbs, adjacent to a private or council housing estate' (Luckham, 1971, p. 8). Although

the second description well captures the library in Clamart, the women reflect on diverse libraries built, and experienced by them, at different times and in different places. And yet, as we have suggested, striking resemblances emerge between the two cases.

Since space has been ‘experienced’ and because of the emotional depth (Rousmaniere & Sobe, 2018) of the experiences, both verbal and visual narratives capture the ‘fragmentary sensations’ associated with memories of libraries (Van Slyck, 1998, p. 205); they capture ‘affective space’ (Bachelard, 2014, p. 218). Although the photographs and the narratives represent ‘personal interpretations’ (Steedman, 1986, p. 6) they reveal certain shared conceptions of library space or ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977) around libraries. They suggest that libraries, although different to one another, exist, in the memory at least, as particular ‘species of space’ (Perec, 2008). If libraries are spaces of learning, then they are also spaces of memory. Their material forms and spatial rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004) are seen to be affectively and educationally significant, allowing for the development of an embodied sense of self and opportunities for both educational expansion and physical retreat. Libraries emerge, in these accounts at least, as successful places favourable to happiness’ (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 68). They thus find company in the quite idealised offerings of Gaston Bachelard’s spatial theory.

We have written to this point of the similarities between the photographic and narrative accounts, and used the spatial theory of Bachelard, Perec and Lefebvre largely as a lens through which to view these resemblances. However, what also becomes evident are the echoes of these understandings of space in the theory itself. By considering the photographs and the narratives together with existing writing on space, the paper probes the relationships between the visual, the verbal, and the theoretical. Although the spatial theorists drawn on here do not use images to explicate their ideas, their writing is filled with metaphor. Much of Perec’s writing reads like poetry (see, for example, ‘Moving Out’, in Perec, 2008, p. 85) and because Bachelard’s writing deals with ‘the poetic image’ (Bachelard, 2014, p. 2), with space as it is represented in poetry, *The Poetics of Space* is a fitting lens for an appraisal of a photo essay and the poetic captions which accompany it.

Consequently, *imagery* if not *images* becomes important in the telling of these theorists. The ‘cocoon’ and the ‘nest’, for example, serve as metaphors in Bachelard’s writing and yet they are also apt descriptions for the spaces which the children occupy in the images and the spaces which the women describe inhabiting as children. In a sense, then, the images deployed by Bachelard find their echo in the poetic captions, their ‘lived’ realisation in the women’s narrative accounts and their visual realisation in Martine Franck’s photographs.

And yet it works both ways. Theory may have more of the visual in it than we acknowledge. But the narratives and photographs might also work as theory. Indeed, Bachelard writes that ‘a poet will always be more suggestive than a philosopher’ (Bachelard, 2014, p. 73). If the value of some piece of theory is judged on its explanatory power, might visual and verbal sources occasionally offer similar powers?

Despite the apparent gulf between the three forms, they seem to inform one another; writing about space connects with the verbal and visual capture of space. Narrative, we might find, offers a particularity which distinguishes it from theory (Andrews et al., 2013, p. 13), where photographs ‘present the *significance of facts*, so they are transformed from things *seen* to things *known*’ (Weston, E., 2004). In considering the role of spatial theory

together with the narratives and images, these sources become tools for analysis rather than simply objects of analysis, affording a richer understanding of educational space.

Much of this paper could be read as an attempt to articulate what libraries have been, or at least what they have been to those that have captured the library in photographs and words.

At the time of writing, the relevance of the library is being questioned (Buschman, 2012). The current UK context of reduced public spending – what the research librarian Alice Crawford labels ‘economic stringency’ (Crawford, 2015; xiv) – reflects, inspires and perhaps reveals a questioning around the contemporary relevance of public libraries (Crawford, 2015; xiv; Birmingham City Council, 2015). This questioning often manifests itself in concerns about the relevance of libraries in an imagined future.

In much of the professional library and information science literature, debates about the future of libraries are articulated through a discourse of transformation. Libraries, it is said, need ‘reinventing’ (Worpole, 2004) so that they are ‘future-proof’ (Arts Council England, 2014). In Birmingham, the Council encouraged the public to help ‘shape the future of Birmingham City Council’ (2016a), a Birmingham City Council report prepared for Cabinet talked of a ‘future facing vision’ for libraries (Birmingham City Council, 2016b) and the Library of Birmingham was said by the architects to be the ‘Library of the Future’ (Mecanoo Architecten, 2014).

For Alistair Black (1996), there have always been debates about the purposes and practices of the library. Like all educational institutions, ideas about what a library is, or should be, are shifting, ‘temporary and contingent’ (Facer, 2011, p. 17). And this will always be the case. But the research contributes to a challenge to discourses around ‘future-proofing’.

As Rebecca Lossin in *The New Left Review* writes, ‘defending the library against the future reveals a deeply pessimistic worldview. It presumes a future necessarily hostile to libraries’ (Lossin, 2017, p. 109). Since libraries are tasked with adapting themselves to meet some imagined but fixed future in which, it is implied, in their current form they would no longer be relevant, debates articulated in these terms actually serve to bring about their demise. Further, in the context of public libraries, discourses of ‘future-proofing’ shift the responsibility from local and central government to libraries themselves who become responsible for remaining relevant. A final problem with the ‘future-proofing’ discourse, and most relevant here, is that these debates about the future rarely address the question of how libraries are valued, and have been valued in the past.

We wish to propose a different starting point for debates and research agendas around the future of libraries – debates which take on a new significance given the limitations on accessing libraries due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It suggests that looking to the past might be a good way of reflecting on the libraries of the future. This research points to certain material features – light, quiet corners, and so on – as significant and memorable for those who have encountered them. But our aim here is less to suggest that these particular qualities should be incorporated into future library design decisions – although that might be no bad thing – but rather to argue that thinking about the future of educational spaces such as the library, their design and their purposes, might be best done by looking to accounts of the past.

Notes

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2. Information from correspondence with the archivist at the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson.

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