

Beyond the Books: An Ethnographic Exploration of How Libraries Mirror and Mend Inequality in the City of Boston

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines how libraries in Boston reflect and respond to the communities they serve. Using participant observation at four sites, Boston Public Library's Copley Branch, the North End Library, Roxbury Community College Library, and Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library, my research documents the physical environment, patron demographics, social interactions, and available services at each location. My findings reveal that libraries function as more than repositories of books; they are dynamic barometers of community need, identity, and inequality. While public libraries are often celebrated as equalizing institutions, they remain deeply intertwined with the social and economic disparities of their neighborhoods. Yet, they can also challenge these inequities through targeted programming, community outreach, and inclusive design. Academic libraries, meanwhile, reflect their institutions' cultures, resources, and student populations, often prioritizing academic support over broader community engagement. Across all sites, this study underscores the role of libraries as both mirrors and potential agents of social change. Transforming them into instruments of equity will require systemic reforms, including equitable funding, supportive policy, and a rejection of the myth of institutional neutrality.

Keywords: library social infrastructure, urban inequality, third space theory, cultural capital, Boston, USA

Libraries have always been more than repositories of books; they are living reflections of the communities they serve. While their origins date back to ancient Mesopotamia and the clay tablets of the third millennium BCE, and later to monumental institutions such as the Library of Alexandria, their role has continually evolved in tandem with societal needs (Jiménez and Frahm 2013). Over the centuries, libraries have evolved from elite private collections that reinforced class divisions to public institutions designed to expand access to knowledge, now serving as multifaceted spaces that offer not just literature but also technology, social services, and community programming.

In the United States, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the transformation of libraries into cornerstones of public education, literacy, and civic engagement (Wiegand 2015). Social libraries, spaces where people once gathered to exchange political ideas and participate in communal learning, are embedded in the DNA of today's public libraries. Yet, as accessible as they are in principle, libraries remain entwined with the social and economic inequalities of their surroundings. They often mirror the demographics, resources, and cultural norms of their neighborhoods, becoming both a reflection of and a response to local realities.

This ethnographic study of four Boston libraries, two public and two academics, was designed to explore this relationship not only along the axis of well-resourced versus under-resourced libraries, but to explore the contrast between the categories of academic versus public libraries. Libraries were selected to explore the economic and multicultural variations within Boston and to be representative of the city's diversity, despite the limited scale of this study. Through participant

observation, I examined the physical environment, patron demographics, social interactions, and available services at each site to understand how these spaces both reflect and shape their communities. The findings reveal that libraries are not just collections of books; they are barometers of community need, identity, and inequality. Public libraries, though often idealized as equalizers, are deeply embedded in the same structural inequities that define the neighborhoods they serve. At the same time, they possess the potential to resist these forces, particularly when they integrate social work practices, expand outreach, and design programming that acknowledges rather than erases difference (Kelley et al. 2017; Shepherd 2025).

This paper seeks to accomplish three goals. First, it highlights how the same institution is perceived differently across settings, architectures, rules, and user demographics, which shape the available "realms" and the type of Third Space that is possible (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Tatham 2025). Second, it ties meeting-place patterns to social-infrastructure stakes: whether branches produce transformative, bridging, or complexity-reducing spaces matters for equity (Philbin et al. 2019; Tatham 2025). Third, it centers on lived use, who studies with whom, who seeks help from whom, and how patrons move between high- and low-intensive activities as the evidence of bonding/bridging capital. Policy and program design can shape user interactions when forging the epicenters for change that we call libraries (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Rodriguez 2019).

For libraries to truly fulfill their democratic promise, not as mirrors of inequality but as tools to dismantle it, systemic changes are essential. Equitable funding, supportive policy frameworks, and a willingness to challenge the myth of institutional neutrality are critical. By documenting patterns across Boston's diverse library settings, this study sheds light on the larger sociological themes that shape not only these institutions but also the communities and urban landscapes in which they exist.

Literature Review

Libraries can be understood through a sociological framing that treats them as diverse civic arenas. Lyn Lofland (1998) identifies libraries as operating across a triad of social realms: public (characterized by civil inattention between strangers), parochial (neighbors chatting after children's programming), and private (families or friends sharing time), with norms shifting across these spheres. Oldenburg's (1999) theory of the "third place" further situates libraries as spaces that exist between the public and private, serving as informal community anchors. This role is reinforced by research showing that libraries function as low-threshold hangout spaces that foster community without requiring purchases (Aabø and Audunson 2012). Together, these theories explain how one building can host studying, childcare, civic discussion, and quiet respite without contradiction.

Wiegand (2015) asserts that libraries are not neutral spaces. The myth of neutrality obscures how libraries reflect dominant ideologies, reinforce norms, and reproduce hierarchies. Programming decisions, staff demographics, collection curation, and spatial design all express values and often align with dominant cultural standards. Throughout the past decades, research has steadily reframed the public library from a quiet "book place" into a flexible social institution—one that people actively shape through their daily use (Troll Covey 2002, 99–100). The rapid integration of technology has further accelerated the transformation of libraries, making technological access essential in efforts to remain relevant and to attract patrons who are unable to access technology personally (Pauget et al. 2024).

Ethnographic and observational studies further reveal how patrons toggle between intensely personal tasks, such as studying with a sibling or meeting a friend, and lighter, drop-in uses, such as reading the paper or returning books, often within the same visit. Libraries integrate books and technology, and thus function simultaneously as high-intensive and low-intensive meeting places (Zickuhr, Rainie, and Purcell 2013). A case study by the Urban

Library Council demonstrated that libraries need to become increasingly versed in redefining socialization to remain relevant in urban settings that set them far beyond locations of renting books (Urban Libraries Council 2024). Within this context, social capital becomes central to understanding what libraries make possible. The resources and other forms of social capital within a community can influence what libraries look like and what they can offer. A library may facilitate bonding capital while also fostering bridging social capital across different groups within a community, supporting both tight networks and thin connections across difference (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Williams et al. 2024).

Recent scholarship has also examined libraries through a public health and equity lens. A recent study of the UK and Philadelphia have demonstrated that in a post-COVID-19 world defined by new social norms, libraries provide communities of connection on the basis of public health as repositories of information on forms of healthcare support. This is particularly important as healthcare becomes increasingly compounded by complex bureaucracy (Karki et al. 2024; Hughes 2024). A public-health scoping review argues that libraries operate as meso-level infrastructure that address key benefits correlated with positive life outcomes, including early literacy, social support, job search, benefits navigation, and disaster response. These functions are especially significant because libraries are ubiquitous, free, and trusted environments that support healthy socialization across age groups in an increasingly polarized and socially isolated society (Klinenberg 2019). Understanding libraries through this public health lens highlights their role in advancing population health, particularly in high-disparity neighborhoods, and underscores the community benefits of supporting these social determinants (Philbin et al. 2019).

Howard (2019) similarly highlights libraries as "everything for everyone," from story time in the morning to research help at noon and overdose reversal in the afternoon. This narrative contributes to the broader "social infrastructure" framework, which views libraries

as platforms that bind communities together. If libraries are understood as social infrastructure, then their diverse programming, from naloxone centers to senior arts programming to voter registration, is not arbitrary, but rather central to maintaining the local safety net (Howard 2019; Klinenberg 2019).

Libraries have also gained prominence as resource providers and centers of immigrant belonging (Branyon 2017; Bausman 2016). Rodriguez's mixed-methods study of a library-school district partnership demonstrates how asset-based programming, including citizenship help, legal navigation, and civic awareness, can counteract subtractive, assimilationist attitudes and increase newcomer youths' sense of belonging. Rather than equating belonging with assimilation, Rodriguez theorizes belonging through the lived experiences of newcomer youths and shows how libraries function as democratic hubs for that work (Rodriguez 2019). Collectively, this scholarship positions libraries as modifiable and investible institutions with the capacity to influence population-level outcomes.

Theoretical Foundations

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2008 [1848], 67) famously argued that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This insight remains pertinent when applied to public institutions such as libraries. Although libraries offer services freely, they do not operate outside capitalist structures. Wealthier communities generate higher local tax revenues and attract private donations, resulting in well-resourced libraries equipped with advanced technology, expansive collections, and robust programming. Conversely, libraries in economically disadvantaged areas often struggle with outdated materials, fewer programs, and underpaid staff. In this way, material inequality becomes directly visible through institutional infrastructure.

Max Weber's (1987) tripartite model of stratification, class, status, and party, adds further nuance by showing how economic capital, social prestige, and political influence

interact to shape access to resources and patterns of consumption. Communities with greater social capital and political engagement are better positioned to advocate for funding and policy support for cultural institutions. As Howard (2019) explains, wealthier communities are often able to sustain thriving libraries, whereas under-resourced areas may rely on libraries as their only accessible and safe public space. In this way, access to power and status operates alongside wealth in shaping institutional capacity.

How individuals appear in public through behaviors such as food consumption, dress, and leisure activities also reflects class and status distinctions. Veblen's (1889) theory of conspicuous consumption explains how individuals display wealth through public displays of expensive technology, clothing, and recreational practices. Pierre Bourdieu's (2021) concept of cultural capital further deepens this analysis by emphasizing that individuals and groups possess uneven distributions of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized knowledge and taste that shape social mobility. Libraries are repositories of cultural capital, yet the ability to navigate and fully utilize their offerings is not evenly distributed. Middle- and upper-class patrons often arrive already equipped to maximize library resources, while working-class patrons may rely on libraries as sites for building that capital. A librarian's example of shifting outreach as neighborhood demographics became more Hispanic, prompting the library to engage more with daycare centers as more women entered the workforce, illustrates how institutions adapt to evolving forms of cultural capital (Wheeler 2025). This reflects Bourdieu's insight that social structures both shape and are reshaped by the institutions that sustain them.

In addition to "third place" dynamics (Oldenburg 1999) and street-level discretion (Lipsky 1980), Homi K. Bhabha's concept of Third Space offers a lens for understanding how identities and practices are negotiated within libraries. Third Space refers to the in-between zone where cultural boundaries meet and blur, enabling new hybrid identities and knowledge to emerge through negotiation (Tatham 2025). In educational contexts, Third

Space has been applied in three ways: transformative, bridging, and complexity-reducing, ranging from spaces that disrupt dominant hierarchies to those that help individuals navigate existing institutional norms (Tatham 2025).

What this study adds—and the questions it advances

This ethnographic comparison across four Boston libraries (a downtown flagship, a neighborhood branch, a community-college library, and a research-university library) directly addresses the gaps above in three ways. First, it offers a within-city, cross-setting analysis that operationalizes the call for place-sensitive comparisons by linking observed uses to neighborhood demographics, building design, and local rules—evidence the health/equity literature explicitly says is missing (Philbin et al. 2019).

Second, it extends meeting-place theory by testing not only how the same institution navigates between public and private realms across different missions (public versus academic) but how inequality permeates the dimension of well-resourced (Copley flagship and BU) versus under resourced (Roxbury and North End branch) libraries; in doing so, it modernizes Lofland's three distinct realms in the context of libraries in a U.S. urban setting (Aabø and Audunson 2012).

Third, it complements program-centric accounts by focusing on lived use: who studies with whom, who asks for help, and how patrons transition between "high-intensive" and "low-intensive" activities in real time, micro-patterns that make bonding/bridging social capital visible and comparable across sites (Aabø and Audunson 2012).

Formally, the contribution is a place-based, cross-institutional ethnography that (a) operationalizes the idea of meso-level "social infrastructure" with comparative evidence, (b) adapts meeting-place/realm frameworks to divergent library missions, and (c) surfaces patterns relevant to equity investments and service design. It answers two guiding questions that current literatures leave open empirically:

- 1) How does the same institution operate in different settings with different access to resources?
- 2) How do different demographic groups use the same institution?

Methodology

This study employed participant observation, a qualitative ethnographic method in which the researcher enters a social setting not only to observe behavior, but also to participate in the everyday rhythms of the environment while documenting interactions, norms, and patterns of meaning-making (DeWalt 2011; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Unlike detached observation, participant observation requires the researcher to become physically and socially present within the setting being studied, engaging with the space as a temporary member of the environment while simultaneously analyzing it. In this project, I entered each library as a patron by sitting in common study areas, walking through the collections, observing public interactions, reading posted programming materials, and, in some locations, engaging in brief informal conversations with patrons and staff. This allowed me to understand not only what activities occurred in the libraries, but also how these spaces felt socially, how patrons navigated them, and how institutional norms shaped behavior.

The goal of participant observation in this study was to examine how libraries function as social infrastructures that both reflect and respond to neighborhood inequality. More specifically, I observed how patrons used space, interacted with one another, engaged with staff, accessed technology, and moved between different forms of activity such as studying, socializing, childcare, recreation, or resource-seeking. I was particularly interested in identifying visible differences between public and academic libraries and between well-resourced and under-resourced institutions.

Participant observation was conducted at four library sites across Boston during single 45–60 minute visits on the same Saturday afternoon: the Boston Public Library's Copley

branch, the North End Library, Roxbury Community College Library, and Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library. These sites were intentionally selected to reflect differences in institutional mission, neighborhood demographics, socioeconomic context, and available resources. Two were public libraries and two were academic libraries, allowing for comparison across institutional types.

Field notes were recorded immediately after each observation session to minimize disruption and avoid drawing attention to individual patrons. The observations focused on several recurring categories: estimated demographic composition (age, gender, race, and perceived socioeconomic status), use of technology, social interaction patterns, visible staff roles, noise level, spatial organization, use of public resources, and the relationship between the library and its surrounding neighborhood. I also documented moments that appeared sociologically significant or unexpected. These moments were analyzed as indicators of how libraries mediate community belonging, exclusion, and social support.

As with all ethnographic research, this study has limitations. The observations occurred during a limited timeframe and represent only snapshots of activity at each site. Patron demographics were estimated visually and may therefore contain subjective bias. Additionally, because observations were conducted during a single afternoon, they may not capture variations across weekdays, evenings, or seasonal programming. However, ethnographic methods prioritize depth of contextual understanding over statistical generalizability, making participant observation an appropriate method for examining how libraries operate as lived social environments (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

Academic Libraries

Mugar Memorial Library, situated in the Fenway neighborhood, was selected to represent large academic institutions and the substantial student population in Boston, where over 150,000 college students reside among a city of approximately 650,000. In Fenway, the majority

age group is 20–34 (64.6%), and nearly 40% of residents speak a language other than English. Approximately 39.3% of individuals live in group quarters, such as dormitories, and the median household income is \$47,500, with 27.6% of households earning less than \$14,999. The neighborhood reflects the concentration of younger, transient student populations, with high participation in educational and health-related industries (45.9%). Refer to Table 1 for a more detailed demographic breakdown.

Roxbury Community College Library represents the experience of smaller academic institutions serving local communities. Located in Roxbury, a historically Black neighborhood with a lower median income (\$42,500), the area has a plurality Black population (41.2%), and over 40% speak a language other than English. Only 9% of the population are college students, and approximately 74% have some college education but no accredited degree. This location provides insight into how libraries cater to nontraditional students and families in a working-class, racially diverse area with limited resources. Refer to Table 1 for a more detailed demographic breakdown.

Neighborhood	Roxbury	Fenway
Major Age Group	20–34 yrs (31.9%)	20–34 yrs (64.6%)
Largest Racial Group	Black (41.2%)	White (52.3%)
Native Born	74.1%	72.8%
Language Other than English	40.5%	39.1%
Major Educational Attainment	Some College (26.9%)	Some College (38.6%)
Labor Force Participation	58.1%	59.6%
Group Quarters %	9.0%	39.3%
% of Boston's Impoverished	12.5%	6.8%
Median Household Income	\$42 500 (24% <\$14,999)	\$47 500 (27.6% <\$14,999)

School	Roxbury Comm- unity College	Boston University
Institutional Ranking	Bottom 80%*	Top 9%*
Total Enrollment	2 447	17 590 (Undergrad)
Full-time Tuition**	In-state: \$416 Out of State: \$624	\$69 870
Socioeconomic Status	83% on Pell Grant	18.2 on Pell Grant
Demographics	Asian American: 19.6% African American: 4.1% Hispanic/Latino: 10.8% White: 34.4% International: 22.3% All other: 8.9%	Asian: 3.1% Black: 54.3% American Indian / Alaskan Na- tive: 1% Hispanic: 24.4% White: 8.7% Pacific Is- lander, Alaskan Na- tive, Indige- nous Per- son: 0.04% Non- resident

Table 1: Comparison of neighborhoods and institutions for academic libraries, Roxbury (Roxbury Community College) and Fenway (Boston University). Data from (Boston University Student Aid Profile 2021), (City of Boston Planning Department), (Full Tuition Figures | Admissions), (Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges 2019), (Roxbury Community Fast Facts 2025).

* (U.S. News and World Report 2025)

**12+ credits, without fees, other expenses, or health insurance.

Public libraries

The Boston Public Library (BPL), located in Copley Square, a neighborhood in the Back Bay, serves a diverse public audience and is Boston's flagship library being the main branch of all public libraries in Boston. Being the flagship, BPL supports its constituent branches with its extensive resources of both literature and community related items to encompass both

the responsibilities of being a library and ensuring the wellbeing of the connected branches. Back Bay is a wealthy area with a median household income of \$112 500; however, it has also experienced growing inequality, including a 20% increase in homelessness in 2023 (Roscoe 2024). The neighborhood's population is 72.1% White and largely native-born (78.2%), with 37.9% holding graduate degrees or higher. As such, the BPL represents the intersection of affluence, accessibility, and visible disparity in Boston's public life. Refer to Table 2 for a more detailed demographic breakdown.

The North End Library was selected as an example of a smaller, community-oriented public library in an exclusive and less transient neighborhood. The North End has a high median income of \$112 500, a predominantly White population (86.4%), and high educational attainment, with over 50% holding at least a bachelor's degree. The neighborhood is characterized by a high concentration of working professionals in business and management (over 40%) and a largely native-born population (86.9%). Over half of households are single-person dwellings, and the dominant age group is 20–34 years old (53.1%). Refer to Table 2 for a more detailed demographic breakdown. (Neighborhoods, Bostonplans.Org).

At each site, the observation period began with a survey of the library space, followed by unobtrusive participant observations from a vantage point that provided a view of the largest area of the library. This included being seated close to the entrance of the libraries to track the patrons entering and exiting the library. For the BPL and Mugar, I was seated on the second floor of the library to have a sense of the activity occurring throughout the space. This did limit me as I could not understand the entire ecosystem of the library as I was not moving around to see different patron interactions with resources. Regarding these spaces, I was able to see the entrance, people studying, interacting, utilizing community computers, and accessing the resource desk. For the libraries of Roxbury Community College and the North end, they were quaint, single

Neighborhood	Roxbury	Fenway
Major Age Group	20–34 yrs (41.0%)	20–34 yrs (53.1%)
Largest Racial Group	White (72.1%)	White (86.4%)
Native Born	78.2%	86.9%
Language Other than English	25.1%	18.9%
Major Educational Attainment	Grad+ (37.9%)	Bachelor's (52.5%)
Labor Force Participation	66.0%	80.4%
Group Quarters %	10.4%	1.8%
% of Boston's Impoverished	2.1%	1.0%
Median Household Income	\$112 500 (42% >\$150 000)	\$112 000 (27.6% >\$150 000)

Table 2: Comparison of neighborhoods for public libraries, Back Bay (Boston Public Library at Copley) and North End (North End Public Library). Data from (City of Boston Planning Department).

levels where I had the opportunity to seat myself in the center of the space to see patron interactions, resource usage and much of the library's full functioning due to its small size. Environmental features were recorded, including seating types, noise levels, access to technology, and the number of staff present. Demographic characteristics, such as patrons' approximate age, gender, race, and perceived socioeconomic status, were noted, as well as behaviors like working individually, engaging in social interaction, or using public computers. Library services, including after-school programming, language learning, and employment resources, were also cataloged. Unique or unexpected observations were recorded separately. After completing observations at all four sites, the notes were synthesized to draw comparisons and identify patterns in how these libraries serve their distinct user bases.

Emmanuel College's Committee for the Protection of Human Participants was informed of the project; however, no formal application or permission was required, as the data collection method was observational. No personally identifiable information was included in the data collection.

Observations

Boston Public Library-Copley Flagship

McKim Building

The McKim building exudes 19th-century grandeur, featuring marble staircases, mahogany shelves lined with leather-bound first editions, and the iconic Bates Hall, complete with embossed ceilings, marble busts, and wooden study tables. While the historic aesthetic dominates, discreetly placed outlets hint at modern adaptations. A security guard patrolled regularly, enforcing a no-food-or-drink rule.

Outside the building, tourists and students bustled past, while security discreetly moved homeless individuals toward the Boylston side of the building, often remaining outside the building but not entering the McKim building. Some of the patrons of lesser means who were sitting outside and either struck up conversations with the security guards or were socializing in large groups, indicating that this was a popular meeting place for these community members as there were 3-4 pockets of these patrons talking outside. Inside, approximately 170 patrons were young adults (ages 20–25), many of whom wore college merchandise, and the majority used Apple laptops. Around 20 older individuals, primarily white men in professional attire, were also present. Of the younger group, roughly 120 individuals appeared to be white, 50 were Asian, and 10 were Middle Eastern; approximately 75% were women. Many worked quietly in small groups.

Roughly 110 tourists, many from affluent backgrounds and of Asian or European descent, moved through the space, taking photos. Three reference librarians were available for book assistance, but community programming was limited, consisting mainly of an upscale lounge

and tearoom for exclusive events. The atmosphere conveyed an implicit sense of prestige and elite purpose.

Boylston Street Building

Modern and vibrant, this site features a café, GBH film set, children's library, public computers, and multiple floors of study areas. From the mezzanine, I observed the café, entrance, and children's section. Security guards greeted patrons, including five who appeared to be of lower socioeconomic means; some even knew patrons on a first-name basis. Among the visitors were three presumed nannies (older Hispanic women) with white children (surmised from the children referring to them as "miss" in the absence of traditional maternal colloquialisms), approximately 10 homeless individuals who knew the guards, and 19 people who appeared to be of lower socioeconomic status, gathered at public computers. The café bustled with both older adults and young people, some studying, others socializing. The individuals of lesser means and the nannies often stayed and chatted with the security guards having lengthy conversations while many other patrons didn't bother to react to the security guards greeting them with a "hello" or "welcome in."

Three help desks staffed with multiple librarians offered resources and hosted programs ranging from citizenship classes to youth mental health workshops, GED preparation, and financial empowerment. Flyers promoted LGBTQIA+ authors and political discussions. Tourists (about 50 during my observation) mingled with locals, and around 45 patrons studied quietly. Large glass windows revealed 15 homeless individuals outside in small groups. See Table 3 below for the summarized findings of ethnographic observations.

North End Library

Nestled between restaurants and situated across from an Italian coffee and spice shop, the North End Library reflects the neighborhood's historic character. A brick façade and religious statue greet visitors. Inside, the small, well-kept space is divided into

adult and children's sections, with two librarians at the front and a security guard managing building access.

During my observation, 10–15 patrons were present: five older white men and approximately 10 younger white adults (ages 25–30), all using MacBooks, none of whom appeared to be students. Six of eight younger women wore workout attire and carried yoga mats. There were also children, noticeably dressed in upscale brands, accompanied by adults who were often addressed as "miss," suggesting non-parent caregivers, like the Boyleston Street building of the Copley library. The caretakers, presumably nannies, were interacting with the library staff with familiarity, indicating that they take the children here often. The caretakers themselves also had familiar intersections with each other as they let the children meander the library, another indication of relationship building between community members in the common meeting place of the library.

Younger patrons kept to themselves, while the older men conversed in Italian about soccer, switching to English to study for the U.S. citizenship exam. Services included children's movie nights, chair yoga, and after-school homework help. Interactions between librarians and guests were minimal. Outside, foot traffic was steady with locals and tourists visiting nearby eateries. Approximately 10 visitors stopped by briefly to view the library before leaving. This was a relatively uneventful Saturday afternoon as this is not a sought-after location by students due to its secluded location in a mature residential community. However, it drew tourists and regular patrons, like Copley, but on a significantly smaller scale. See Table 3 below for the summarized findings of ethnographic observations.

Roxbury Community College Library

Located on the second floor of a campus building, this extensive, modernized library offers numerous study rooms, tables, and computers. The circulation desk is centrally located, staffed by three librarians, and surrounded by flyers advertising various events. African art pieces line the glass walls, and a

classroom hosted a financial management session during my visit. A small children's section is well-stocked with books and activities. Roughly 20 patrons were present at any one time, ranging from young adults to older learners. The majority were Black or Hispanic; I was one of two white individuals. Seven children used the children's area independently while nearby adults, often in work uniforms, studied or worked. The atmosphere was quiet, yet friendly, with patrons greeting one another as they arrived. Many stayed only 30–45 minutes. Technology use leaned toward Chromebooks, often loaned by the library. Services included free textbook lending (with near-complete coverage for courses), book and short story clubs, current events discussions, productivity workshops, and a 24-hour virtual librarian. The library is located in a residential area, near a grocery store, T-stop, community church, and Islamic center and had a very community-oriented vibe as many of the students knew each other, most likely due to the small size of the college, with many of the students being from the nearby neighborhoods. Not only were the patrons using the library, but among those also who brought their children, I noticed that the kids were interacting with each other, and I had the opportunity to make some small talk with the patrons about their experiences of the community college. Of the few patrons I spoke to, they were here to study between going to work or other responsibilities outside of college.

Boston University–Mugar Memorial Library

The main library for Boston University spans six floors, housing specialized collections in African American studies, astronomy, music, science, engineering, archaeology, and geology. The space is more traditional than modern, with large communal tables and individual study areas.

During my one-hour observation, around 50 students occupied the second floor at any given time, with another 80 passing through. Most appeared to be in their early to mid-20s, with a few older graduate students also present. Over half were non-white and female. Technology

use favored MacBooks and gaming laptops (the latter mainly among men).

Students primarily worked alone at shared tables, surrounded by textbooks, coffee, and take-out food. Rarely did students from other social circles interact with other groups, and I only had brief interactions with other students, most of whom were my age. Staff provided research and writing assistance, but few students used the resources they had to offer during my observation, and the reference desks were inundated with signage promoting special collections, such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Reading Room and the CAS 150 Historical Archive. Similar to the North End library, this was an uneventful afternoon with many students busy working, as expected near the midterm period.

Located on Commonwealth Avenue with views of the Charles River and Cambridge, the library is surrounded by BU facilities, coffee shops, convenience stores, and the Green Line T with many residents and Boston University students passing by the library and threw with very little interactions between each other nor the library staff, that did not provoke the same community orientation as the Roxbury Community College library.

Comparative Analysis Along the Axes of Academic v. Public and Well-Resourced v. Under-Resourced Across Boston's library landscape, the contrast is stark between academic and public institutions, as well as between affluent and under-resourced libraries. These spaces not only reflect the demographics and needs of the communities they serve but also embody deeper social, economic, and cultural divides.

Academic vs. Public Libraries: The Institutional Divide

The built environments and locations of academic and public libraries immediately signal their institutional roles. BU's Mugar Memorial Library is situated on Commonwealth Avenue, surrounded by coffee shops and in view of both the Prudential building and the Charles River, symbolically positioned within Boston's academic and economic elite. In contrast to the Mugar library, the Roxbury Community College Library is embedded within

Library	Location & Setting	Patrons & Demographics	Interactions & Behaviors	Services	Surrounding Area
Boston Public Library – McKim Building	Historic 19th-century architecture, Bates Hall, marble staircases, mahogany shelves.	~170 young adults (20–25), mostly white & Asian; 20 older white men. 110 affluent tourists (Asian/European).	Quiet study in small groups; tourists taking photos; atmosphere of prestige.	3 reference librarians; minimal programs; exclusive lounge/tearoom.	Copley Square; tourist-heavy; homeless individuals moved aside by security.
Boston Public Library – Boylston Street Building	Modern café, GBH film set, children's library, public computers.	~150 people, of a diverse mix of ages, races, SES; 10 homeless individuals, 19 using public computers; ~50 tourists.	Quiet study on upper floors; café socializing; regular presence of homeless patrons.	3 help desks; classes (citizenship, youth mental health, GED, finance); LGBTQIA+ support; homework help.	Glass façade facing street; visible homeless presence; Copley commercial area.
North End Library	A small, older building with a historic feel, featuring a brick façade and a religious statue.	5 older white men; ~10 younger white adults (25–30), upscale attire; children with caregivers.	Minimal interaction among young patrons; older men socializing in Italian; a quiet overall atmosphere.	Children's movie night, chair yoga, and homework help.	Surrounded by Italian restaurants, cafés, and light tourist traffic.
Roxbury Community College Library	Extensive, modernized campus library with study rooms, art displays, and a children's section.	~20 patrons at a time; mostly Black/Hispanic; some in work uniforms; children using play area.	Warm, friendly atmosphere; short visits common; greetings exchanged.	Free textbook lending, book clubs, current events talks, and a 24-hour online librarian.	Residential area near grocery store, T stop, church, and Islamic center.
Boston University – Mugar Memorial Library	Six floors, specialized collections, traditional study spaces.	~50 students at once, mostly 20s; >50% non-white; some grad students; MacBooks/gaming laptops.	Mostly solitary study with light conversation; long study sessions.	Research/writing help; special collections (MLK Jr. Room, historical archives).	Commonwealth Ave; views of Charles River; surrounded by BU buildings, coffee shops, Green Line T.

a residential neighborhood with a median household income of \$32,000, where many households include children (City of Boston Planning Department). Its smaller, modernized space emphasizes accessibility and proximity, with centrally placed reference desks and multipurpose study areas designed to serve immediate educational and community needs. Public libraries reflect a different institutional logic. Copley's grandeur, split between the historic McKim building and the modern Boylston addition, stands in sharp contrast to the North End Library's modest, outdated interior wedged between restaurants and niche grocers. While academic libraries prioritize scholarly specialization and institutional insulation, public libraries balance neighborhood access, civic visibility, and community integration.

Demographic patterns further distinguish these institutional types. Academic libraries reflect their student populations but in different ways. BU's patrons were predominantly young adults in their 20s and 30s, with a majority being female and of Asian or Middle Eastern descent, with no children present. At Roxbury, most patrons were Black or Hispanic, and the age range was much broader, spanning from children to older adult learners. Many arrived straight from work, often still in food service or labor uniforms. Public libraries more directly mirrored neighborhood wealth and cultural heritage. Copley drew a racially diverse mix of Asian, Middle Eastern, and white European patrons split between young adults and older users. The North End was almost entirely white, with older men speaking Italian and younger women in upscale athleisure carrying yoga mats. Clothing and personal technology reinforced these differences, with Apple products near-universal at BU, rare at Roxbury, and luxury brands common in the North End.

Patterns of social interaction also reflected institutional structure. Roxbury's smaller scale and community focus fostered warmth, with patrons greeting strangers, chatting about families and jobs, and using the reference desk heavily, about half of all users during observation. At BU, students sat in groups but largely remained within them, rarely acknowledging others, reflecting the anonymity

of a much larger student body. Public library behavior varied by setting. In Copley's McKim building, the atmosphere was formal and tense, with many students frantically typing or studying under the pressure to maintain academic decorum, while Boylston's café area allowed for more casual interaction. The North End was quieter among younger patrons, but older men studying for citizenship exams engaged in visible sociability.

Differences in access and inclusion further illustrate the institutional divide. Copley's Boylston building provided a visible space for unhoused patrons, many of whom were on a first-name basis with the security staff and regularly used public computers, social programs, and the café. In contrast, the McKim building saw unhoused individuals redirected toward Boylston, preserving its aesthetic for tourists and students. Neither the North End Library nor the academic libraries included unhoused patrons in any visible capacity, the latter due to formal institutional access restrictions. Academic libraries thus operated as closed systems tied to enrollment and affiliation, while public libraries retained porous boundaries, albeit unevenly applied.

Tourism shaped public library space but bypassed academic libraries entirely. The McKim building functioned as both a library and a destination, with as many tourists, primarily from Asia or Europe, as students. Many posed for Instagram-worthy photos, dressed to match the historic aesthetic. Boylston's visitors were more family-oriented, using the café or restrooms. North End tourists were primarily white and stopped briefly for directions or facilities, reflecting the neighborhood's role as a heritage site rather than a scholarly destination.

Programming further reinforced institutional purpose. BU's offerings, including poetry readings and historical exhibitions, reinforced its academic prestige. Roxbury prioritized the lived experience of its patrons, offering 24-hour online librarian access, free textbook loans, productivity classes, and discussions on current events and policy changes affecting healthcare and food assistance. Copley offered a hybrid model in its programming, combining citizenship classes, youth mental health workshops, and LGBTQIA+ author spotlights

that blended educational and community-support functions. The North End focused on leisure activities such as chair yoga, movie nights, and children's story hours, alongside citizenship classes that reflected the specific needs of its community.

Well-Resourced vs. Under-Resourced Libraries: The Economic Divide

Well-resourced libraries, BU and Copley, were defined by scale, symbolism, and institutional investment. BU's multi-floor specialized collections and Copley's architectural grandeur, particularly in the McKim building, reflected concentrated economic and cultural capital. These spaces conveyed prestige through both physical magnitude and symbolic authority. In contrast, under-resourced libraries, Roxbury and the North End, were smaller and more spatially constrained. Roxbury emphasized efficient accessibility within limited square footage, while the North End's outdated interior reflected minimal reinvestment, despite being located in one of the city's most affluent neighborhoods.

Technology, clothing, and visible wealth further distinguished these economic conditions. Apple products were near-universal at BU and common at Copley, but rare at Roxbury. Luxury brands (high fashion like Burberry and Louis Vuitton) were the norm in the North End, while Roxbury patrons often arrived in work uniforms, signaling economic precarity rather than leisure-driven usage. Copley displayed the widest socioeconomic mix, ranging from students and tourists to unhoused individuals, highlighting its position as both a symbolic and functional civic space that crossed class boundaries.

The social functions of these libraries diverged along economic lines. Roxbury functioned as a true community hub, with heavy reference desk use and interpersonal warmth shaping daily activity. The North End functioned as a quiet leisure space serving a homogeneous and economically comfortable population. BU and Copley, by contrast, operated as large-scale productivity zones, particularly in Mugar and McKim, where

academic and professional performance dominated behavior.

Programming also functioned as a signal of material need. Well-resourced libraries emphasized enrichment, through academic exhibitions at BU and cultural programming at Copley. Under-resourced libraries emphasized survival infrastructure. Roxbury's productivity resources, policy discussions, and textbook access addressed immediate structural barriers faced by its patrons. The North End's leisure-oriented programming reflected a community with fewer urgent socioeconomic demands, even as it maintained services such as citizenship classes.

Academic libraries functioned as insulated ecosystems, highly resourced but restricted to institutional members, reinforcing their role as exclusive spaces of scholarly production. Public libraries, by contrast, remained porous civic spaces where students, tourists, caregivers, unhoused individuals, and elderly residents intersected. Yet even among public institutions, inclusion varied sharply by neighborhood wealth and social need. Copley's blend of grandeur and grassroots services stood in contrast to the North End's comfortable but insular character. Roxbury and BU further illustrated how institutional mission and economic conditions dictate not only who uses the library, but whether it serves as a space of survival, connection, leisure, or elite productivity.

Discussion

Public libraries have long been understood as institutions of knowledge and inclusivity, offering free access to information and resources regardless of socioeconomic status. However, closer examination reveals that these institutions often mirror the very societal inequalities they aim to bridge. Disparities in funding, resources, and services across libraries underscore broader class structures and power dynamics. This research highlights that while libraries are often perceived as neutral, they in fact reflect and perpetuate social inequalities through differences in funding, architectural space, programming, and cultural access.

Prior work on libraries as meeting places helps explain how this occurs in practice. The same building can operate as a quiet “private” bubble, a parochial neighborhood hub, and a fully public realm among strangers, often all in the same day (Aabø and Audunson 2012). This was visible within the Boston Public Library itself, where the McKim building functioned as a high-prestige, quiet academic space dominated by young adults with Apple laptops and affluent tourists photographing the architecture, while unhoused individuals were redirected toward the more informal Boylston Street building. By contrast, the Boylston side fostered open social interaction through its café, children’s area, public computers, and social programming, where unhoused patrons, nannies, families, and students visibly coexisted. Public health scholarship extends this frame by arguing that libraries function as meso-level social infrastructure that shapes social determinants of health; when resources and programs are unevenly distributed across neighborhoods, so too are health-relevant benefits (Philbin et al. 2019). Popular and policy writing echoes this shift, documenting how branches are increasingly expected to be “everything for everyone,” from story hours to overdose response (Howard 2019).

The trends and countertrends identified across the four Boston libraries illustrate the core sociological theories outlined by Karl Marx, Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thorstein Veblen. Alongside contemporary ethnographic observation, this analysis reveals how libraries both reflect and reinforce broader patterns of social stratification—while in some cases also serving as platforms for bridging across difference (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Philbin et al. 2019). These patterns were visible in clothing, technology, and use of space: Apple laptops and leisure-driven usage at BU and the North End contrasted with Chromebooks, work uniforms, and short, task-oriented visits at Roxbury Community College.

During observations, librarians at both Copley and Roxbury Community College emphasized that modern public libraries increasingly function as frontline social service providers addressing homelessness, mental health crises, and substance use. This shift was directly observable at the Boylston Street

building, where unhoused patrons were known by name to security guards and consistently utilized public computers and social service programs, while similar individuals were physically displaced from the McKim building. Howard (2019) describes the typical scope of this labor: a librarian may run story hour in the morning, assist with research at noon, and administer life-saving aid during an overdose in the afternoon, illustrating expanding responsibilities without matching funding or training. This aligns with public health scholarship conceptualizing libraries as community-level infrastructures whose programming, including benefits navigation, early literacy, and crisis response, has direct population health implications (Philbin et al. 2019). Copley’s full-time social worker and Roxbury’s intensive support programming reflect this structural shift toward survival-oriented infrastructure.

While theory provides a robust framework, ethnographic observation across Boston-area libraries confirms how these dynamics unfold in lived experience. The four-case studies function as microcosms of how libraries operate as barometers of inequality shaped by the patrons they serve. At Roxbury, warmth, greetings, and consistent reference desk use reflected a community-oriented space where patrons studied between work and caregiving responsibilities. By contrast, at BU’s Mugar Memorial Library, students worked largely in isolation at shared tables, rarely acknowledging other groups, reinforcing the anonymity and productivity-driven norms of an elite academic institution (Bedford 2024).

This gap between perceived neutrality and lived complexity is further revealed through the lens of street-level bureaucracy. As Howard (2019) and Wahler et al. (2020) argue, librarians increasingly perform duties once reserved for trained professionals as social safety nets fray. At the frontline of this transformation are Lipsky’s (1980) street-level bureaucrats, who interpret policy in real time, deciding which rules to enforce, which services to prioritize, and whom to help first. This discretion was most visible at Copley-Boylston and Roxbury, where staff actively facilitated access to social services and educational resources, while

McKim, North End, and Mugar largely presupposed patrons' existing cultural capital and institutional familiarity.

These patterns are also legible through Marxist and Weberian frameworks. Libraries operate within capitalist funding structures that privilege affluent communities with stronger tax bases and donor networks, resulting in unequal access to space, technology, and programming. As observed, Copley and BU displayed architectural magnitude, specialized collections, and technological saturation, while Roxbury and the North End reflected material constraint and limited reinvestment. Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption further illuminates how patrons signal class distinction through visible technologies, clothing, and leisure practices, patterns that surfaced clearly in the observational data.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital further explains how uneven familiarity with institutional norms shapes who benefits most from library resources (Bourdieu et al. 2021). Middle- and upper-class patrons at BU, McKim, and the North End arrived already equipped to maximize institutional offerings, while working-class patrons at Roxbury relied on the library as a site for building that capital through textbook access, productivity workshops, and current-events discussions.

The Third Space framework further clarifies how these negotiations unfold inside library environments. Copley-Boylston and Roxbury routinely cultivate bridging Third Spaces by honoring patrons' lived repertoires through citizenship clinics, multilingual programming, and social-service navigation. In contrast, McKim, North End, and Mugar more often reflect complexity-reduction dynamics that assume or subtly enforce dominant cultural literacies. Recent scholarship cautions that when the Third Space is invoked merely to harmonize patron practices with institutional norms, it risks becoming gentrifying rather than transformative (Tatham 2025).

Together, these findings demonstrate that libraries simultaneously reproduce and resist inequality. They reflect broader systems of class, power, and culture while also offering limited but meaningful opportunities for social bridging, especially when institutional resources

are intentionally aligned with community needs. Rather than functioning as neutral civic spaces, libraries emerge from this analysis as contested infrastructures where inequality is both visible and, at times, actively negotiated.

Conclusion

Libraries are not just collections of books; they are barometers of community need, identity, and inequality. Idealized as equalizers, public libraries are nonetheless entwined with the structures that stratify social life. Classic sociological theory helps name the mechanisms at work: Marx links institutional capacity to material conditions and class struggle; Weber reminds us that status and political leverage shape who can secure resources; Veblen examines how products of capitalism and activities of social life are utilized to illustrate status in society publicly; and Bourdieu shows how cultural capital—already held or acquired—conditions who finds a library intuitive versus alienating (Marx et.al, 1848/2009; Weber and Matthews 1978; Veblen 1889; Bourdieu, 1984). On the ground, librarians operate as Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats, translating policy into practice through everyday discretion—deciding which rules to enforce, which crises to prioritize, and how to welcome (or unintentionally deter) different patrons (Lipsky, 1980). These observations make these abstractions visible: the "same" institution reads differently across McKim, Boylston, North End, RCC, and Mugar, because architecture, rules, user mix, and local histories bend what a library is in practice (Aabø and Audunson, 2012).

This confounding complexity reorients the myth of neutrality. Libraries cannot be neutral if their material, symbolic, and discretionary features differentially enable, or foreclose, transformative Third Spaces. Yet they also hold the real capacity to resist inequality. Embedding social work, expanding multilingual and community-co-designed programming, and designing spaces that welcome high-intensity and low-intensity uses side by side are practical moves that align with what the evidence suggesting libraries already do well when supported (Howard 2019; Wahler et al. 2020;

Aabø and Audunson 2012). However, durable change requires system-level commitments, including equitable and transparent funding formulas, policy frameworks that recognize libraries' roles in health and safety, and appropriate staffing that treats libraries as a site of justice rather than merely a quiet triage (Philbin et al. 2019).

Finally, this study clarifies the two-grounding questions of this ethnography that literature raises but rarely answers within a single city: How does the same institution appear in different settings? And how do different demographic groups use the theoretically same institution? These findings suggest the answer turns on how branches assemble place, policy, and people to produce either transformative, bridging, or complexity-reducing Third Spaces—and on whether staff discretion, resources, and design choices widen or narrow pathways to cultural capital in practice (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Philbin et al. 2019; Tatham 2025). With equitable investment and explicit attention to Third Space possibilities, public libraries can move from mirroring inequality to deliberately, measurably, and locally dismantling it.

Future research could build on the practical and theoretical findings from this study and further address the research questions outlined here, in part by expanding the time frame and methodologies employed in this project. Suggestions include:

1. Mixed-methods expansion:

Pair comparative observation with semi-structured interviews (patrons, librarians, social-work partners) and short intercept surveys to capture perceived inclusion. This directly addresses the measurement gap in the health/social-infrastructure literature (Philbin et al., 2019).

2. Operationalize Third Place:

Develop and pilot indicators for transformative, bridging, and complexity-reducing dynamics. (Tatham, 2025).

3. Administrative and spatial data:

Incorporate branch-level metrics and neighborhood indicators (transit access,

housing cost burden) to model how resources and context shape use (Philbin et al., 2019).

4. Equity-focused evaluation:

Use a pre-post experiment to evaluate the effects of libraries adding social workers, extending hours, or launching citizen-led initiatives to test the impact on access and bridging the capital gap.

5. Comparative replication:

Replicate the design across additional branches and cities to test portability and refine typologies of space, programming, and discretion.

Taken together, these steps move from a rich descriptive baseline to actionable evidence about how the "same" institution appears and can be re-made across settings and groups, advancing the comparative questions this study evaluates.

Acknowledgements

This ethnographic study was made possible through the support of Emmanuel, and particularly Dr. Catherine Bueker, whose guidance and encouragement transformed a mere conversation into a passionate research endeavor. I am deeply grateful for her mentorship, intellectual generosity, and sustained commitment to unwaveringly encouraging students "to reveal that which is hidden"- Pierre Bourdieu (1999).

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