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Interdisciplinary collecting – a conceptual outline of Urban Studies

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Abstract

Supporting interdisciplinary programs like Urban Studies, Urban Affairs or Urban Design and Planning is challenging for subject specialists used to dealing with traditionally defined disciplines. This paper presents an outline of Urban Studies to guide collection development librarians to avoid collection deficiencies.

Key Words

Urban Studies, Urban Affairs, Urban Design, Interdisciplinary, Collection Development

Introduction

Collection mapping for Urban Studies is a challenging task. Urban Studies is an interdisciplinary approach to current issues, chiefly made up of parts of sociology, history, economics, geography and political science. Practitioners can also draw from architecture, public administration, nonprofit management, public health and social science methodology.

Collection Development librarians will need to have a conceptual map of Urban Studies that catches the gaps between traditional disciplines in order to support a curricular program. Descriptions of the field of urban studies, whether they preface an anthology, textbook or program description, often begin with a declaration of the approaching universality of urban living. To give a more concrete idea of what this means, United Nations figures for 2011 count 3.6 billion people living in urban areas worldwide. They also project an additional 2.6 billion will be absorbed into the world's cities by 2050 (2011). Not surprisingly, Urban Studies has become a popular course of study at both the undergraduate and graduate level (sometimes as Urban Planning or Urban Affairs). According to Petersons.com as of Fall 2013, 138 North American colleges or universities offered a B. A. in Urban Studies and 3399 schools offered a Master's program in Urban Studies or Urban Affairs and 266 offered an M. S. in Urban Planning.

It is necessary for librarians to have a good understanding of the field when selecting and maintaining resources that support these curricula. In this paper I will use the term Urban Studies to represent the conglomeration of Affairs, Planning and more narrowly defined programs such as American Urban Studies or Sustainable Urban Environments.

What is Urban Studies?

As a major or concentration Urban Studies is attractive to both students and educators. For students its flexibility is a plus. Students may explore a wide variety of current issues. Even better, because Urban Studies is action oriented, students often gain valuable problem solving experience that gives them an advantage in the job market. Urban Studies is also, in many ways, perfect for educators because there are many opportunities to take students through the process of analyzing, synthesizing, proposing and testing solutions to real world problems.

It is this very flexibility that presents difficulties for librarians. Collection Development librarians might be tempted to begin with a definition of "urban". There we find that "urban" no longer corresponds with the legal or political boundaries of any given city. We find terms like "metropolitanized areas" which Brenner and Keil further define as "an internationalized network of local places that are increasingly bound together and interdependent" (2006). Or we might find Saskia Sassen talking about "contradictory spaces characterized by contestation, internal differentiation, continuous border crossings" (1996) because the urban is now a *global process*. One thing is clear, that any conceptions of the city or the urban, as a well bounded entity are "obsolete," (Prakash and Kruse 2008) and that "totalizing explanations are unsustainable" (Stevenson 2013). In our own experience we find that things once thought to be the opposite of urban, such as small scale farming, forest management and suburban housing are now very much part of the urban world. While a city is easily defined politically, the lived experience of people occurs in a metropolitan area which includes suburbs and edge cities.

As theoretical conceptions of the city develop and urban life changes, the information resources need to maintain a collection also become more complicated. When selecting materials, librarians need to think outside of disciplines and be aware of issues where disciplines overlap and where there are gaps. In short, the Urban Studies collection will not be neatly contained in one call number range. The most common subject headings used for Urban Studies are **Cities & towns** and **City & town life**, both with a lot of subdivisions available, **--Research, --Growth, --History, --Cross cultural studies**. These headings will not always appear on relevant resources. For example, doing a search for the subject heading **Food supply** will include many purely agricultural titles. However, when combined with the heading **Supermarkets** the search will narrow to titles about urban food deserts, disadvantaged neighborhoods without adequate retail access to food, a currently important topic in Urban Studies.

The Genesis of the Field

The groundwork for Urban Studies as it exists today begins with the birth of sociology (Stevenson 2013). Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel were all deeply concerned with life in the industrial city. They were seeking a generic framework that would explain and predict patterns of life applicable to all cities. In time Urban Sociology was differentiated from Sociology in general. The genesis of this branch is often referred to as the Chicago School and was developed by people like Louis Wirth and Robert Park. For a more detailed history I recommend Gottdiener and Hutchison (2011).

In the 1960s major American cities, like Detroit, Chicago, Newark and others, erupted into violent race riots. Persistent racial and economic inequalities were inextricably linked to cities, as was the growing unrest. The public and politicians were willing to engage the problems of the city. Federal support came in the form of the National League of Cities. Federal support attracted a variety of researchers, college faculty and graduate students from many different disciplines. They began to collaborate with each other and policymakers to address real and specific urban problems. This was the birth of Urban Studies - multidisciplinary, collaborative and action oriented (Bowen, Dunn and Kasdan, 2010).

Environmental Scan and Analysis

 At the outset of this project, I began with a survey of Urban Studies syllabi, program and course descriptions. Fortunately, I discovered an article which corroborated my findings and improved upon them with interview data from pioneers in the field. Bowen, Dunn and Kasdan (2010) found from examining syllabi and textbooks that Urban Studies consists of Urban Sociology, Urban Geography, Urban Economics, Housing and Neighborhood Development, Urban Governance, Politics and Administration and Urban Planning, Design and Architecture. They proceeded to test their findings with a survey and interviews of practitioners. The scope of this project was limited to the United States. The authors found their original categories confirmed with the caveat that respondents thought that there was a declining significance of economics. Study interviewees added Urban History, Urban Anthropology and Cultural studies to the original list of relevant disciplines.

By focusing on the United States, however, Bowen, Dunn and Kasdan have missed subject areas that will undoubtedly be important to educators and needed by students. The increasing influence of economic globalization on cities and metropolitan regions in fact, points to an increasing significance of global economics and the need to have resources that address all areas of the globe in supporting Urban Studies curricula. Margit Mayer identifies three trends in cities directly due to the forces of globalization (2006). First, is the struggle between global capital and local residents, in a word, gentrification. This falls squarely into Bowen, Dunn and

Kasden's category of Neighborhood Development. The other two trends, however, call for an expansion of those categories. Mayer also identifies the eroding welfare state as another urban trend driven by globalization. This involves an increasing need for services and concurrent decreasing of government delivery of services. This results in the direct growth and expansion of the nonprofit sector. Students will be working with nonprofit groups and in some programs, concentrating in this area. Therefore, Collection Development librarians will also need to add to their collections those resources that describe the management and functioning of nonprofit corporations. Mayer's third trend is the increasing competition between cities and metropolitan areas. She cites the competition for mega projects such as hosting the Olympics and projects like London's Observation Wheel as examples and emphasizes the development of city and regional branding. Therefore, Collection Development librarians would need to have resources related to regional branding and various mega projects from around the world.

Also missing from Bowen, Dunn and Kasdan's list are the research methods and skills prospective practitioners will need for data collection. In Urban Studies both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to conduct needs assessment, program evaluation and policy research and evaluation. Therefore Collection Development librarians will also need to provide resources that describe the theories and methods of research design, qualitative research and analysis and quantitative research analysis. Students will also need resources for presenting their findings both in general use software like PowerPoint and in specialized software such as SPSS for statistical analysis or GIS mapping software.

Depending on the degree to which a curriculum focuses on the developing world will also inform selection. For example, in the developed world noise pollution is a growing concern while access to clean water is less so. In the developing world, the importance of these issues is reversed. Workforce participation and subsequent social and residential mobility, while perennial concerns in Urban Studies, vary greatly on the part of the world. For example, in India women's participation is greatly affected by a tradition of women being restricted to the home. Therefore, students would need cultural studies or ethnographic resources.

Lastly, librarians will need to collect in areas that reflect the lived experience of city dwelling. Graffiti and street art, performances, public art, walking, green spaces are just a few examples. Librarians must not neglect current urban issues especially those like Occupy Wall St. (an instance of spontaneous urbanization) and the use of surveillance cameras. The following table provides a conceptual map of Urban Studies with as little reference as possible to traditional disciplines. It reasonably represents the different forces operating in urban processed as relevant to educators and students. It is not comprehensive and has no pretensions toward three-dimensionality. Rather, it is a conceptual framework primarily meant to avoid collection gaps for those unfamiliar with Urban Studies.

Concluding Thoughts

In recent years we librarians have often been urged to focus on students rather than collections. But we have precious little to guide us except customer service models developed in retail environments, which can be difficult and inappropriate to adapt to education. Libraries and librarians have at this time, with the surging popularity of programs like Urban Studies, a perfect moment to explore interdisciplinarity as a means of shifting energy onto students in a way that enhances the educational mission. Ultimately we might find transcending the disciplines is the strongest inspiration to motivate our development as educators.

Libraries are naturally interdisciplinary spaces. Long gone are the days when classroom faculty were responsible for library collections and content. In the wake of this abdication we need to recognize the unique strengths of libraries and question all of our practices in terms of our own goals for reaching students. When librarians intentionally avoid mirroring disciplinary and departmental politics we are free to build bridges across disciplines and departments, and we maximize the opportunity for students to develop, learn and test multiple sources, perspectives, skills, methodologies and curiosities.

Conceptual Outline of Urban Studies

1. The Conceptual city
    a. Historic Urban Forms
        i. Ancient cities
        ii. Colonial cities
        iii. Industrial cities
        iv. Growth of suburbs
        v. Urban reform
        vi. Utopias
    b. Sociological Concepts
        i. Social order
        ii. Chicago School
        iii. Simmel, Weber, Marx
    c. Geographic Concepts
        i. Urban geography
        ii. Space, see Henri Lefebvre
        iii. Place, see Doreen Massey
    d. Global Concepts
        i. Global cities
        ii. Regional branding

2. The Material City
a. Urban Ecology
  i. Urban forestry
  ii. Water containment
  iii. Alternative agriculture
  iv. Waste management
  v. Green spaces
  vi. Air, noise and water pollution
b. Planning & Design
  i. Land use
1. Real estate development
2. Housing
  ii. Architecture
  iii. Spatial concentration
  iv. Transportation & Infrastructure
  v. Renewal
  vi. Megaprojects
3. Services
a. Types
  i. Education
  ii. Public health
  iii. Food systems
  iv. Housing
  v. Community development
b. Providers
  i. Government agencies
  ii. Nonprofits
1. Community based organizations
2. Non-governmental organizations
3. Quangos
4. Economics
a. Globalization
b. Labor markets & supply
  i. see Richard Muth, Edwin Mills
c. Informal sector
d. Urban economics
e. Government expenditures
f. Regional economics
5. Politics & Policy
a. Administration and Governance
  i. Municipal government
  ii. Metropolitan government
b. Community participation
c. Urban Policy Areas

        i. Housing policy
        ii. Education
        iii. Health
        iv. Immigration

6. The Urbanization Process
a. Urban Types
        i. Megacities
        ii. Metropolitan areas
        iii. Primate city
        iv. Post- industrial city
        v. Post- modern city
        vi. Global city
b. Growth
        i. Sprawl
        ii. Edge city
        iii. Private edge
        iv. Dispersion
        v. Smart growth
        vi. Rurban
        vii. Urban rural migration
        viii. Overurbanization

7. Quality of life &Styles of life
a. Public space
        i. Psychogeography & Urban exploration
        ii. Behavior & psychology
1. Spatial behavior
2. Public spaces--Social aspects
3. Smellscapes, Nightscapes
b. Culture
        i. Public and Municipal art
        ii. Street art and Graffiti
        iii. Alternative lifestyles
        iv. New urbanism
        v. Neighborhoods

8. Research
a. Data Collection
        i. Research methods
1. Quantitative methods and theory
2. Qualitative methods and theory
b. Research goals
        i. Policy research
        ii. Policy evaluation
        iii. Needs assessment
        iv. Program evaluation

    v. Impact assessment
 c. Background research
    i. Ethnography and cultural studies
1. Sociology, Urban
2. Urban anthropology
    ii. History of places
 d. Presentation of findings

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Biography

Linda Wadas is the Collection Management librarian at Borough of Manhattan Community College/CUNY and has been since 2007. Her MLIS is from Pratt Institute and she has recently completed a master's of science in Urban Affairs with a concentration in nonprofits at Hunter College/CUNY.