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LIS 652 – Site Visit  
December 5, 2008

Hudson Park Branch – New York Public Library  
66 Leroy Street – New York, NY

The Hudson Park Branch of the New York Public library is a small branch that has served the West Village since 1906<sup>1</sup>. It is a little off the beaten path through the neighborhood so is not typically as busy as many of the other branches in lower Manhattan. The first floor of the library is the non-fiction, fiction, reference, and young adult section. The top floor is their children’s collection, which is vast and also features an education area specifically designed for toddlers. The library also has a lower floor that is an auditorium for meetings and other events. Quite recently the library has undergone major focus changes. The Hudson Park branch used to maintain the “Early Childhood Center” and the New York Public Library recently decided to move this to the new Children’s Center at 42<sup>nd</sup> between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue.<sup>2</sup> This move being so recent was a major factor in a large amount of disorder and overall confusion that I found during my observation.

The library’s main floor is a small space, but they do have a small separate room on this floor where the reference materials are housed. The reference room also serves as a reading room with eight tables and a mini-gallery where they have display cases that the librarian’s change infrequently. Sadly, the small reference space ultimately is out of sight and out of mind for the library; it seems very poorly managed and forgotten within the library.

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson Park Branch Information. NYPL Website. <http://www.nypl.org/branch/local/man/hpinfo.html>

<sup>2</sup> Children’s Center at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. NYPL Website. [http://www.nypl.org/news/articles/?article\\_id=204](http://www.nypl.org/news/articles/?article_id=204)

As I walked into this small reference materials room, the first thing I noticed were the reading tables. The tables are more for a child's height than an adult and they are also beautiful early American tables, which speak to this branch's history. The homeless were using these tables during my entire observation period, as it was a cold day. However, they were sleeping at the tables; and this should not be acceptable within a library because it did not make that room feel very welcoming and overall I felt uncomfortable using the materials. The tables take up a large portion of the room, on the edges of the room they have waist-high bookshelves that housed their reference books and also a small number of non-fiction and fiction books in other languages.

The books within this reference section were mainly medical or legal reference. It seemed as if is where the collection was focused. On top of the shelves they were featuring both the 2009 and 2008 Guinness Book of World Records so those are perhaps popular as well. The newest encyclopedia they had down here was a set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica from 1996. They did have a good number of various dictionaries, which appeared to have had more use than most of the other materials. Overall, their collection was pretty sparse and did not look frequently used.

Other things that they have decided to put into this little nook of the library make it feel disregarded. Besides the reading tables and reference books there are 6 glass display cases that were extremely dusty and not maintained. Four of these cases contained materials related to Edna St. Vincent Millay, which sadly were all reproductions and therefore of no value really to see. For example, in the display

there was a doll that was a reproduction of a doll that she may have had during her childhood. Not having materials that were from her or even copies of her books within these displays really makes them have no inherent value to the library. Beyond the dusty display cases there also was a disregarded large framed map of Greenwich Village and a filing cabinet with no protection for the materials housed within. This room seems almost to be a storage closet for items that the library wishes they could forget. This was very disappointing to discover because the library does have a wonderful history, this library is in a prime location and has a beautiful interior it is a shame that it is not cared for more.

The Hudson Park branch has two reference librarians one on the first floor for adult and young adult materials and a second librarian for the children's section on the top floor. The branch does not offer any online or e-reference services beyond what the New York Public Library website offers. When you walk into the library the first floor reference librarian is situated right in front of the entryway for the library. This positioning of the reference desk gives the reference librarian more of the position of greeter than that of a reference librarian. The librarian is not facing the materials but facing the doorway. It is a bit disorienting for both the librarian and the patron to have the librarian set up this way. The reference librarian (the use of the librarian's name is not used as per request from librarian) during my observation stated that they often did not feel that they answered many typical reference queries because of the positioning. They continued to detail the list of directional instructions they have to continually give all day, positioning the

desk here creates a forum for people to ask before they enter the library for every possible thing they could want.

In addition to this problem, the reference desk is in the complete opposite location from the reference material. This disjoins the material and the supplier, if they were located in the same area of the library, even if the librarian did not use the materials to answer questions it would create the appearance of more knowledge authority. The reference desk itself was rather small and only had a computer for searching the catalog.

The librarian really has to multitask at the Hudson Park Branch; they have to do a bit of cataloging, shelving, re-housing books, and many other small tasks in addition to working the reference desk. This makes the work more interesting and the librarian that day finds that it makes it easier to sit at the desk for longer shifts having other work to do. However, to me it seems as if the librarian is not there at the desk and doing other things they may lose the opportunity to help someone. Sometimes it takes people to work up a lot of courage to admit defeat in a library and ask the reference librarian for help. Therefore, if the librarian does not seem involved or interested in answering questions than that breaks that opportunity to help. In the end, I found the reference librarian to be very knowledgeable about the library, but because of bad planning and positioning of the desk the librarian does not have the opportunity to be a true reference librarian in this branch library.

On the computer systems, I found that there was not much offered beyond what is offered on the New York Public Library's website for databases. They do not have any special databases just for this branch. On the second floor, there were

some child specific encyclopedia tools, educational programs, and also a few educational games, but not any specific purchased database for this branch. There really was not much help in the access of these materials on either floor, one would need to be a little computer savvy or already know of their existence in order to find them on the systems.

Ultimately on the second floor, that is where the true focus of this library seems to be found. The second floor is one half pre-school play area and one half children's library. The interesting part of the set up of this library is not only this but the extremely large desk that greets you when you arrive on the second floor. It is a very bulky wood desk that is so large that only children can pass through to the other side of this desk. It is an interesting way of setting up the entrance and it makes it seem as if you need some level of security clearance to pass into the library. During the visit, I stopped for a moment to see if the librarian would ask what I was doing on the children's floor, but just got a slight glance from the librarian and so I walked through the small passageway to the library area.

The children's section of the library is clearly where this branch is putting all of their money towards, they have a very good selection of materials and overall it appears better kept than the first floor. The reference materials are once again a bit hidden though within this top floor. It took me quite some time to figure out where they were placed within their collection because I did not realize that there were two levels of bookshelves. There is an inner layer of books in the back and behind those was a hidden back layer where the children's reference materials could be found. They had the 2008 World Book prominently displayed on this shelf and

otherwise there were some children's themed almanacs and dictionaries, as well as some parenting guidebooks located here. The books seem to be up to date, but because they are a little tricky to find it did not seem like they were frequently used or even found. One of the patrons was walking by me and I asked her if she liked encyclopedias or dictionaries and she told me she does not like them usually because there aren't enough pictures, pretty cute answer, but I can see how these materials would fail in an area aimed at more pre-school aged children than those that are in school.

The reference librarian was not very helpful from what I could tell during my visit, and he also declined an interview. Most of the time that I was there he was on various popular websites (Netflix.com and Myspace.com) and seemed disinterested in the work. Overall I feel that the size of the desk may be a little overwhelming and imposing for a child to feel comfortable with the librarian. Most children that were there could not see over the desk, which creates the illusion of the librarian being more powerful than the child. This is good for some of the rule enforcing that a children's librarian must do, but creates a bit of a stigma for the child who has a reference question. On the whole, the children's floor had a much better reference section and also had more potential for a great reference interview to take place between the patron and the librarian.

The Hudson Park Branch of the New York Public Library, I expected to be a hidden gem in the library system and generally I left the library a bit disappointed at my findings. The library has a beautiful small space that has true potential for excellence, but it seems to be disregarded and the visitation seems a bit spotty

because of this lack of attention. The reference sections in both parts of the library are tucked away so much that they are forgotten, and the librarians seem to be placed in areas where they serve as greeters instead of respected knowledge professionals. Sadly, this library left me believing that reference sections are on the way out and completely disvalued in a library system any longer.

## Recommendations for the Hudson Park Library Branch – NYPL

1. Purchase a new reference desk for the first floor of the library; this desk should also be repositioned within the library to be located closer to the reference section room, perhaps where the current DVD/CD shelves are located.
2. Clean up the reference section room.
  - a. Take the display cases out into the entrance hallway
  - b. Move the filing cabinet out of this space
  - c. Hang up the Greenwich Village Map
3. Organize the reference materials into proper categories of materials. This will create a sense of order and also confidence in the information housed within these great sources.
  - a. Encyclopedias need to be placed together on the shelf
  - b. Dictionaries should all be located next to one another so one can choose the dictionary that is best for their query.
  - c. Group other categories of books similarly (health, legal, almanacs, atlases, etc...)
4. Have two librarians work in the children's section, one that works at the front desk for checking out materials and also rule enforcement. The second librarian should be located at a separate desk within the children's book section so that children can ask the librarian book related questions. This librarian could also be in charge of creating children activities to draw more patrons to the library.