

Jessie Gillan
LIS 651
March 8, 2008

Observation and Interview of the NYPL Mulberry Street Branch

For this project I chose to do my observation at the Mulberry Street Branch of the New York Public Library. The Mulberry Street Branch is the newest branch to open in the New York system and it is located in the Soho neighborhood. It opened in March of 2007 and is located inside of an old chocolate factory, which adds a good bit of interest in the library itself. The library was funded by Mayor Bloomberg and is in really pristine condition. Overall, I really feel through my observation that the Mulberry Branch is quite innovative and has created a great space for the people in the Soho neighborhood.

For the interview portion of the interview, I interviewed the Young Adult Service's Librarian, Kerri Wallace. She is actually a current library science student, but has 8 years experience of working as a librarian in New Jersey, so was able to obtain this position through the New York Public Library system on a promise that she would obtain the LMS degree. Overall, she was very insightful to the library and was a great subject for the interview. I am mostly interested in working either as a children's or young adult librarian in a public library system, especially as an entrance position.

To begin, on walking up to the library, the name Mulberry Street Library is a little confusing as the library's entrance is not on Mulberry Street. The address for the library is 10 Jersey Street, and a part of the library is on the corner of

Mulberry, but this makes finding the library a bit of a struggle. I am sure that calling the library the Jersey Street Branch was out of the question, because New Yorkers do not really have the best perspective of New Jersey. Jersey Street is a very tiny single lane street, and does not offer much of a sidewalk; it appears to be more of an alley. So coming to find the library was a bit of a task initially, I actually went into a bookstore nearby thinking they would know where the library was, surprisingly the first two people I asked had no idea what I was talking about. The third person told me it was two short blocks away, so I am unsure how well publicized the location has been. Actually in a recent issue of New York magazine they mentioned the location of a new library being in an old chocolate factory, and left it at that for the reader to do the research to find the branch. The branch is a bit tucked away and that adds to the allure of the library, but it probably also ensures that the patrons of the library are dedicated to using the library.

Going into the library is also interesting, the library is set up the main level floor is the top floor of the library. The other floors are below the main level, so I am sure the designers of the building had to work a lot at making the space still seem light even though it is below ground. The library itself according to NYPL.org is 12,000 square feet and overall the library does not feel very large. The most surprising thing looking around at the library is that all of the materials are brand new. A lot of money went into providing all new materials for this branch and the employees really strive to keep it this way.

The first floor is where the checkout, reserves, paperbacks, magazines, and media materials are located. There are really large windows in this space, which lets a lot of light into the entire building, and also the farther back walls are painted yellow for a cheery look. Overall, this floor looks really modern with cherry wood and nice and clean seating along the windows. During the observation, the people on this floor generally were enjoying reading a magazine quickly or were looking through the DVDs. These are probably the most popular areas on this floor besides the checkout of course. The employees at the checkout were really kind and courteous. Often as I was walking around the other floors the checkout employees would be walking around doing some re-shelving and would make jokes with the librarians and it really seemed like a very happy place to work.

The second floor is the children's floor and I also think this is the floor where you can see the most signs of the chocolate factory. Intertwining the chocolate factory with the children's section is very smart from a design point of view. Chocolate factory for children conjures up images of Willy Wonka and a fantasy world of candy. Nothing could be better for getting children to come to a library than this. The floor is really well designed with three nooks filled with books for storytelling and for book play and beyond this features a large open space with colorful upholstered furniture and tables and chairs.

During the observation, there were tons and tons of kids playing in this space. There were kids hopping on the circle reading pods and kids coloring at the tables, it really seemed like a well-utilized space. Also there were four

computers that were for use by children, I saw children playing educational games mostly on these systems and were always in use. An issue with this section comes with the children's librarian; she was not very pleasant towards the children. She was constantly going back and forth from her desk to where the children were playing and giving a big loud "SHHhhh!!!" to the children, which they did not appreciate. The children did not seem to respect this too much, because quickly after the librarian left they would go back to being pretty loud. The demographics of the library in general are very wealthy (from Soho) and Chinese (from Chinatown). So it's interesting to see these two groups interacting, especially in the children's section.

The library offers many opportunities for community interaction, especially with children's activities. A brochure from the library gives a full list of all the programs the library offers for children. A program called Book Babies is aimed at 1-2 year olds and they have "simple stories, rhymes, songs, and finger plays for babies and their caregivers followed by a short playtime." They really seem to aim at all ages in the children's section, with a very large section of board books and all the way up to children's fiction. Other programs the library offers are Toddler Time, Picture Book Storytime, Curiosity Club (science themed), Alphabuddies (alphabet themed), Kids' Crafts, Kidz Library Arcade (video game themed), R.E.A.D. with Mudge, and Pajama stories (bedtime stories). All of the programs have a really high turnout according to Kerri Wallace the Young Adult Services Librarian. Wallace especially highlighted the R.E.A.D. with Mudge, the

children get to read aloud to a dog (Mudge) and it's really a big success so much so that they require reservations.

The bottom floor is the Young Adult, Community Center, Computer Lab, Chinese-Language, and Non-Fiction Adult section of the library. The library is somewhat small in size, so putting all of these on one floor perhaps was not the best choice; they are all a little small and could use some development. However, they are really well designed and all of the sections really were almost full to capacity during my observation period. The community center was holding a book club meeting where about 20 people were attending to discuss a Zadie Smith book.

The young adult section is interesting, they only allow teenagers to use the computers and desks in this area so there is a lot of warnings on not to use things. At first when I arrived no one was using this section at all so I thought that people found it to be outputting to see all of the warning signs. But soon the section was filled with teenagers using the computers and scanning through the DVDs there. The most popular sections in this area are the computers and also they have a large graphic novel and Anime section that Kerri said is really popular. The young adult section has everything the rest of the library has but targeting towards teens. A mini media section, computer lab, periodicals, magazines, books, everything really a person would want. This area has been a very large success and was developed with lots of thought for the community. The Soho area is really popular with teens because of the shopping and also many families do live in this section of Manhattan.

Also, on the bottom level of the library is the adult selected fiction and non-fiction section. This section is much smaller than I would expect in any library, but the collection is really direct and modern. There is a section here for graphic novels and periodicals as well. The very center of the room features a very long wide table where many people can sit and work on their laptops (the entire building is wi-fi) and do any other work or reading they would like. This section during my visit was always filled, although I never saw someone browsing the stacks occasionally someone would grab the newspaper of the day. Kerri during our interview commented that many of the patrons of the library are professional writers and do a lot of their work at the library because it's quite and offers a lot of resources. In addition to this section there is a small nook that is a computer center with 12 computers that were never open during my time at the library, this was a very popular area. The people sitting at the computers were all adults this in a large part is due to the YA and children specific computers. This is very smart for the library to do so that information can be simplified, restricted, and viewed appropriately by all patrons.

Overall I think the library does a fantastic job with all aspects of this library. They make a possible dark environment inviting and friendly and it seems very open to anyone who would want to use the library. There are many programs that the library is integrating to make the community more aware of their presence such as the "Meet the Neighbors" program, which provides an open house in effect for anyone to come to a book discussion with a local author. There are some issues of course; one is that the adult section perhaps is a little

too small for the amount of patrons who use the space. The same goes for the adult computer lab, implementing some sort of time restriction could perhaps help this or just adding additional computers would allow more patrons to use this feature. Also, Kerri during our interview pointed out that about half of the patrons are Chinese-Americans from Chinatown, and there is a very small Chinese-language book section and also now ESL program offered. These both would integrate that part of the community much more into the library.

For the interview again I spoke with Kerri Wallace who granted me permission to use her name in the paper and was quite happy to have an interview about the library. Kerri said that a good majority of her questions that she answers during the day are about the library itself. Many people have heard that it was a chocolate factory and want to know more about the history of the library. My first question to her was to go through a typical day for her at the library. She said that she comes to work at about 8am and works in re-shelving and setting up the library for the day. Making sure that all of the computers are turned on and ready to go is next and because everything is so new they really try to keep it looking that way. So they do a lot of straightening of materials and making signage so that people will find materials with ease. From this point she goes into collections where she works on cataloging materials and setting up new books that have come in, then goes out to the reference desk in the young adult section. There is only one reference desk on the bottom floor of the library show she fields the adult and young adult questions.

From this point I asked Kerri, how she found the position. She found the position on nypl.org and applied and was hired. She said the hiring process was not too difficult, but she did have a lot of experience and felt really confident about getting the position. Kerri lives in New Jersey and had worked in the public library system there for 8 years and she said her commute takes about an hour and is not too bad overall. Beyond this, I asked her about what the general patron of the Mulberry Branch is looking for when they talk to her and she said they usually ask about the building first then they ask about computers next. I also asked her if she saw any troubles with the library as a whole, she said that the Chinese community is not very well recognized and that the library initially misjudged the community with the paperback needs on the first floor. The paperbacks are never ever used and the community really seeks more literary classics than romance and mystery novels.

About her direct position in the Young Adult section, I asked if she ever tired of working with teenagers and she said that overall they were great and really loved it. Although, she loves working with the young adults she strives to work in a museum someday. Kerri really seemed to be proud of making all of the signage in the Young Adult section. She also runs a lot of the programs that come through the library. She gets to lead book discussions with the teens. Kerri also mentioned that it's nice to feel in the know about things in pop culture from the teens. Overall she really loves the collection development aspect of her position and seems really happy doing what she's doing. Also she said that they

really didn't fear any sort of security threat, she has had money sitting in an office organizer on her desk for 8 months now and no one has taken a penny.

As Kerri is working at the library as a librarian, they have had her sign a promissory note that she will receive her LMS degree within a certain amount of time. Kerri said that the New York Public Library system is really kind to LMS students and has provided her with lots of funding for her education.

On the whole, the Mulberry Street Library was a fantastic place for my observation. I feel as if I learned quite a bit about general organization of materials, employees, and furniture, so that one day I can create a really welcoming library environment. Talking with Kerri about the Young Adult section was really uplifting; she truly seemed to enjoy her work and offered a lot of background information for a position I may be in one day. The library is a really great example of what a small branch library can be for a community. The library is a big success in integrating and developing materials to the needs of the public and has a really welcoming design for the space.