What Are They Doing and What Do They Want: The Library Spaces Customer Survey at Edmonton Public Library

Beth Wortman
Research & Special Projects Librarian
Edmonton Public Library
bwortman@epl.ca

Abstract

As part of its Library Spaces Business Plan initiative, for four weeks in early 2012 Edmonton Public Library (EPL) conducted a survey of its customers about how they use the library's spaces and what they want from their library spaces. Using both print and online versions, the survey received 1517 responses which collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Findings revealed the ongoing significance of collections and quiet in library spaces as well as the growing importance of providing social and group space in the library. Results of the survey indicate EPL's customers do not consider the spaces a separate aspect from the collections and services the library provides. The results of the survey also emphasized the importance of regularly consulting with customers about library spaces to ensure the spaces continue to fulfill their needs as the role of the library, and the space needs associated with it, evolve.

Keywords

library spaces; public libraries; surveys; library use

Introduction

Library space usage, and the needs and wants of users when it comes to library space, has been a growing topic of research in the LIS field. Whether attempting to determine if the library building is still a relevant structure in society or gathering data prior to a building, renovation, or redesign project, this research has revealed that libraries continue to be a vital space in communities. As part of its larger Library Spaces Business Plan initiative to research trends and analyze how customers interact in and use our library spaces, Edmonton Public Library (EPL) conducted a survey of its customers about their current use of its library spaces and what they want from these spaces. Survey results were later combined with data from other library spaces research projects to make recommendations for future renovation and building projects at EPL. While the research focused exclusively on EPL, the findings contribute towards the larger understanding of how individuals are using library spaces and provide further insight into library use trends.
Background

EPL is a multiple branch library system in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. It serves a population of 812,201 (Statistics Canada) from 17 branches throughout the city. With the oldest branch opening in 1913 and the newest in 2008, EPL has five building projects in planning stages or currently underway. Two of these projects are for entirely new branches with the remaining projects being relocations of current branches. EPL also has renovation projects planned or underway for several branches.

As one of its Business Plan goals, EPL strives to "create open, safe and inspiring physical and virtual spaces" (Edmonton Public Library 7). As part of this goal, one of the objectives for EPL is to "understand how customers use our spaces and do something about it" (Edmonton Public Library 16). In order to help achieve this objective, EPL's two annual librarian internship positions were developed as 21st Century Library Spaces Internships to "research trends and analyze how customers interact in and use our library spaces" (Edmonton Public Library 16).

The research questions developed were:

1. What are customers doing in EPL's spaces?
2. How would customers like to be using EPL's spaces?
3. What are current and future trends in library spaces and customer activities?
4. How could EPL's spaces best meet the needs of EPL's customers?

The research used a triangulated methodology and involved several different projects to address the above questions, including meeting with staff members, behavioural mapping, questionnaires for community partners, surveys, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. This article focuses on the survey conducted with EPL's customers. The survey was designed to address the first two major research questions and was intended to collect information about demographics, activities in the library, what customers wanted EPL spaces for, and what customers needs are, and are not, being met by current library spaces.

Literature Review

As the Business Plan goal was focused on discovering how EPL customers are using library spaces, the researcher focused on literature that discussed surveys in varying library settings that were either focused on library space specifically or addressed library space as a facet of a larger research question. Of greatest interest in reviewing this literature was exploring survey tools used by other libraries as well as determining larger trends in how individuals are using library spaces and what they want from their library spaces. The literature on library space surveys is divisible into two groups: those focused on public libraries and those focused on academic libraries.
Surveys in Public Libraries

The most influential study of public library space use was that done at the Toronto Reference Library and Vancouver Public Library Central Branch by Leckie and Hopkins. This study found that patrons of the two central libraries were coming to the space primarily for reading or research-based activities. The copy of the survey in the appendices of this article was very influential in the design of the survey for EPL. Leckie’s project inspired two notable replication studies. The modified replication study by May and Black at three urban and three rural public libraries in Nova Scotia found that patrons reported they were at the library primarily to borrow and return materials. Most's modified replication study in Gadsden County, Florida found that library users did not differentiate between building design features and library services.

Tseng's survey at the Beitou Branch Library of the Taipei Public Library, conducted one year post-occupancy of the new building, focused heavily on space. The survey revealed that while users were predominantly satisfied, they also made comments that resulted in recommendations for changes to the library building, including improving parking and accessibility, and decreasing noise levels.

Other public library studies focusing on specific user groups discussed the space needs of these populations. Howard's study about teens' attitudes towards the public library included both a survey and focus groups. While the teens indicated they were generally satisfied with library spaces, she notes "the survey's positive satisfaction ratings appear to reflect teens' perception of the normal state of public library interiors rather than their opinion of whether the public library provides an ideal teen space" (Howard 340). Her discussions with teens in focus groups proved that they were enthusiastic about "the challenge of envisioning a more appealing library environment" (Howard 340). Fidishun's qualitative survey of women who are patrons of public libraries revealed that the women valued the library as a place "of solitude, of discovery, and of enrichment" (341).

Surveys in Academic Libraries

Several studies in academic libraries used surveys to evaluate use and/or aspects of the library space. Walton's survey exploring how students used library space, and their views on the spaces available at the library at Loughborough University, found that students rated the physical environment and the noise level as two of the most important factors when selecting a study space in the library. Research undertaken by Webb, Schaller, and Hunley at the University of Dayton to assess students' use of the library utilized several different methods. Their survey found that students most frequently selected the library as the best place to study but also selected it second most frequently as the worst place to study. A study of faculty's use and views on library space at the University of Oklahoma by Antell and Engel found that, while older scholars were more likely to use the physical library and its resources, younger scholars more frequently described the library as a place conducive to scholarship. Laaker's article reporting the results of a service quality survey found that students put a heavy
emphasis on the need for extending library hours. A subsequent headcount and observation study of students in the library during the library's current late-night hours found that students were primarily using the library space during that time rather than collections or other services.

Other surveys explored users’ perceptions of library spaces, either specific to an institution or at a broader level. Vaska, Chan, and Powelson used a survey of five open-ended questions to gather input from users prior to the renovation of the Health Sciences Library at the University of Calgary. Their findings indicated that users highly valued individual study spaces and wanted increased access to electrical outlets for mobile technology. A survey of students by Jackson and Hahn exploring the affective responses to traditional and modern academic library designs found that students placed higher value on, and described themselves as more likely to use, library spaces of a traditional design.

In exploring survey tools, Diamond's survey of academic library user surveys was particularly useful for the appendices of sample surveys used in other libraries and was influential in designing the EPL survey.

These research projects highlight the lack of research conducted by public libraries themselves to address the needs of their library users. While there is a growing trend amongst academic libraries to evaluate their spaces to best suit the needs of students, research conducted in public libraries is most frequently interested in addressing larger questions on the role of public libraries in their communities in relation to its spaces or the use of the spaces by specific populations. EPL’s study focused entirely on the overall use of its library spaces by customers, with the explicit goal of addressing any issues that came out of the research to ensure the spaces best meet their needs. The survey, influenced by the projects discussed above, was one of the tools used to achieve this goal.

Methods

In order to address the major research questions outlined above, the researcher designed a single, double-sided page survey tool. The questions were pilot tested in two rounds which resulted in minor changes after the first round. The survey was then sent to EPL's Design and Production Department which produced a print version of the survey (see Appendix). An online version of the survey was also created in SurveyMonkey.

The survey was available to the public from 9 January to 5 February 2012. 3550 print copies of the survey were generated and distributed to the 17 branches of EPL; the number of copies for each branch was dependent on the size of that branch. Public services staff members at every branch were asked to promote the survey to customers, collect completed surveys, and return them to the researcher through internal mail at the end of every week during the survey run. Copies of the surveys were placed at service desks at all branches, and some branches also placed them near self-
checkouts. Additionally, some community librarians took copies with them on community visits. Print copies of the survey were entered into SurveyMonkey by the researchers as they were received.

The online survey was available through a link on the main page of EPL's website for the four week run. The survey was promoted through several different media during the four weeks it was available to the public. During the first and last weeks of the survey, it was featured in the promotional area on the main page of EPL's website. Three rounds of promotion were done on EPL's Facebook and Twitter accounts at the beginning, midpoint, and prior to the final weekend of the survey. The survey was also a featured item in EPL's customer newsletter distributed via email.

Following the conclusion of the data collection, the quantitative questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SurveyMonkey. Responses to the qualitative questions were exported from SurveyMonkey to Microsoft Excel and analyzed using thematic coding, with 22 distinct themes emerging.

**Findings**

In total, 1517 usable surveys, 524 online and 993 print, were completed and returned to the researcher for analysis. Of the questions included in the survey, ten were closed-ended multiple choice questions to gather quantitative data. Additionally, two demographic questions were included to collect data about gender and age. Of the 1351 respondents to the question on gender, 66.0% were female, 30.0% were male, and 4.1% preferred not to respond. Of the 1383 respondents to the question on age, 32.4% were 18-35 years, 45.6% were 36-60 years, 16.3% were 61 years and over, and 5.7% preferred not to respond.

The first question on the survey asked customers to select the branch they visit most often and was the only question which required a response, in order to provide context for later qualitative questions. The largest percentage of responses came from the downtown branch with 16.0%. Percentage of respondents from the remaining 16 branches ranged from 1.5% to 10.3%. Following this question, respondents were asked to answer all remaining questions with the branch they visit most often in mind.

**Frequency and Length of Visit**

The second question asked customers how often they typically visit the library. The most frequently selected option was once a week at 44.7%, with 86.6% of respondents indicating that they visit the library multiple times in a month.
The third question then asked customers how long their typical visit to the library is. The majority of respondents (62.8%) indicated they are in the library for fifteen minutes to an hour.

Activities

The next set of questions focused on activities for which customers come to the library. Provided with 14 different options, respondents were asked to choose all of the reasons for which they visit the library. The three most frequently selected options were oriented around collections, with "Borrow/return materials" ranking first, followed by "Browse materials" and "Find specific item(s)". However, the fourth most frequently chosen option was "Use library computer".
Chart 3. Reasons customers visit (n=1466)

Respondents were then asked, out of all the activities they had chosen, to rank the three most important reasons for which they come to the library.
Chart 4. First most important reason (n=1046)
Chart 5. Second most important reason (n=1034)
Exploring subsets of respondents revealed some interesting differences in ranking of activities. In selecting all of the activities for which they come to the library, customers that come to the library with others (see below) selected "Attend a program" (26.2%) and "Socialize/meet with others" (21.2%) more frequently. Additionally, when ranking the first most important reason for which they come to the library, customers that come to the library with others still selected "Borrow/return materials" most frequently at 74.1%, but "Attend a program", rather than "Use library computer", was the second highest percentage at 7.1%.
Females are another subset where the variance with the overall results is of interest. For the first most important reason to come to the library, the largest percentage response by women was "Borrow/return materials" at 78.0%. However, for female respondents, rather than "Use library computer", the next highest percentage was a tie between "Attend a program" and "Browse materials" each with 4.4%.

Finally, when ranking the first most important reason for which they come to the library, 67.8% of 18-35 year olds selected "Borrow/return materials", but the second most frequently selected option was "Study" with 6.7%, rather than "Use library computer".

Groups

The final set of closed-ended questions focused on groups in the library. As a result of the prior behavioural mapping project, customers using the space in groups emerged as a significant behaviour the researcher wanted to explore further in the survey. Customers were first asked whether they typically come to the library alone or with others. Of the 1458 respondents to this question, 58.2% came to the library alone and 41.8% came with others.

Intriguingly, when looking at the subset of 18-35 year olds, the division between those who come to the library alone and those who come with others is nearly even, with 51.6% coming to the library alone and 48.4% coming to the library with others. By contrast, for respondents 61 years old and above, only 28.9% come to the library with others while 71.1% come alone.

The respondents who indicated that they come to the library with others were then asked how many other people typically come to the library with them. Based on conflicts with findings from the earlier behavioral mapping project, where the number of people in groups of two was much larger than people in groups of three, the researcher hypothesizes that some respondents interpreted the question as being about the total number of people in the group, including the respondent, to account for the very similar percentages for 1 other person and 2 other people.

Chart 7. Number of other people that come with respondent (n=602)
Finally, all respondents, regardless of whether they come to the library alone or with others, were then asked how important it was for the library to provide spaces for groups to meet, socialize, and/or work. Of the 1423 responses to this question, 31.9% indicated group space was Very Important, 38.3% selected Somewhat Important, and 29.8% indicated that it was Not Important.

When looking specifically at customers that come to the library with others, 42.1% selected that it was Very Important for the library to provide group space, 39.9% chose Somewhat Important, and 18.0% indicated that it was Not Important to them — the only subset to have such a small percentage for Not Important.

Males are another group where their variance with the general results on the importance of group space is of interest. Of this subset 31.7% selected Very Important, 31.2% selected Somewhat Important, and the largest group, 37.1%, selected that it was Not Important to them. Particularly noteworthy are the similar percentages for Very and Somewhat Important and the larger percentage for Not Important.

Given the relatively even split between the number of 18-35 year olds that come to the library alone or with others, their responses to the importance of group space are not surprising. Of this subset, 40.8% indicated group space was Very Important, 39.6% selected Somewhat Important, and 19.6% indicated it was Not Important.

In contrast, individuals 61 years old and above responded very differently to the question on the importance of group space. In total, 22.5% selected that it was Very Important, 29.4% selected Somewhat Important, and 48.2% indicated that group space was Not Important to them. Interestingly, this is the only group where the combined percentages of Very and Somewhat Important have such a small majority.

**Qualitative Responses**

Following the closed-ended questions, five open-ended questions were included to collect qualitative data. The questions received 4625 responses which were then coded for the 22 themes. Some responses were coded for more than one theme. However, 106 responses remained uncoded due to their unique nature, their lack of specificity, or their lack of clarity.

**Favourite Space**

The first question, which asked customers what their favourite location or place in the library is and why, garnered 1224 responses. The most common theme to appear in these responses was collections, which was discussed by 437 respondents. These comments often mention a specific area being a favourite, such as non-fiction, fantasy, or DVDs. Other respondents indicated that shelves, or wherever collections of any type are located, is their favourite space. As one respondent stated: "[My favourite space is] In the bookshelves. I love books and libraries and for me it feels like I'm in the magical
library in a story or that there's infinite adventures for me to choose." Responses that discussed collections often also mentioned reading or browsing in association with their favourite space. In addition, several respondents mentioned the holds area as their favourite space, with comments like the following: 

"[I like] The holds section, as it helps me get in and out quickly. While I like to browse the books occasionally, I typically don't have a lot of time to come in to the library to do so. Being able to browse online and place holds on books is something I really enjoy."

The next most common theme to appear in responses about customers' favourite space was furniture which was mentioned by 279 respondents. Many customers simply stated that sitting or reading areas were their favourite place, while some respondents specifically indicated that comfortable seating such as chairs or couches was their favourite. Customers often associated activities like reading, browsing materials before checking out, and studying with comfortable furniture. Comments, such as the following, about sitting/reading areas and comfortable furniture also frequently mentioned natural light as being a factor in these spaces being a favourite place: "I like the area close to the windows, near the fireplace, in the comfy chairs. I can feel comfortable and set myself up with my work and/or reading without feeling like I'm being watched, and yet in a space where my presence is accepted and I can see out." Other respondents favoured carrels or desks, usually for reading or studying. Similarly, tables were a favourite space and used for those activities as well. Many respondents also mentioned tables as places for individual quiet work or as a space to study/work in a group, with a few responses indicating both uses.

The third most common favourite space theme was children's areas, mentioned in 213 responses. For customers who expanded on their comments, many were very positive about the books, toys, and computers available in this area. There were also positive comments from specific branches about the fish tanks in children's areas. Furthermore, customers praised the social aspect of these areas as it allows their child(ren) to interact with other children, such as in this response: "[I like] The kids' section because my daughter can look for books, and she can also play with the educational toys and other kids while there."

Discussed in 195 responses to the favourite space question, noise levels was the fourth most common theme. All of these comments emphasize quiet as being the most important factor in an area being their favourite space, with many respondents stating "Anywhere that's quiet" is their favourite place. Customers often mentioned activities such as reading, studying, working, and/or writing as requiring a quiet space.

Technology was the fifth largest theme to emerge in responses to the question on favourite space, appearing in 172 comments. A majority of these comments, such as the following, were about library computers: "[My favourite place is] The computers – I don't have a computer at home and it allows me to stay connected." Some customers stated the self-checkouts were their favourite place in the library, often associating them with high convenience. Others favoured areas where they could use a laptop, which frequently overlapped with responses that discussed spaces that provided access to a
plug-in. Additionally, several customers mentioned areas with Wi-Fi as their favourite space.

**Least Favourite Space**

The second qualitative question asked customers what was their least favourite location or place in the library and why. The question received 1032 responses. The largest theme for this question was 321 non-responses. Non-responses included comments such as "I don't know," "N/A," and "none." The researcher found the large number of non-responses intriguing. It is tempting to consider these comments to be indicators of satisfaction with library spaces. However, that is not necessarily the case, as some respondents who expanded upon their answers indicated they had no least favourite space as they do not spend enough time in the library.

The second largest theme in response to the question on least favourite space was noise levels, mentioned by 170 customers. While some customers stated anywhere noisy was their least favourite space, many stated that children's areas, computer areas, and/or areas where teens congregate were their least favourite space due to the noise associated with these areas. Comments on noise revealed a conflict between traditional views on library noise levels and the emerging realities of library noise. As one customer stated: "I also find nowadays that libraries are far noisier than they used to be. Any social, group study spots should be removed from other areas. People browsing or studying would probably appreciate the quiet, the traditional reverence of the library." In contrast, another customer wrote: "[My least favourite space is] Amid the youngsters. However, I also believe that the library is evolving perfectly to embrace new technology and that means the library is a much more open, loud public space. And it improves literacy for so many new immigrants who come with their children. So I can put up with the extra noise."

The next ranking least favourite space theme was the 167 responses concerning other people. Many of the comments on this theme came from the downtown branch. The theme of other people frequently overlapped with noise levels, with many customers expressing dislike for areas where other customers are loud, swear, or use a cell phone. Other customers disliked areas they associated with crowding, particularly near computers and self-checkouts. Finally, some customers indicated that any areas where teens, homeless, or other individuals perceived as threatening are found are their least favourite spaces. Some of the comments that include the theme of other people appear to be the result of the conflict between customers' perceptions of what is appropriate usage of library space, such as in the following response: "[My least favourite space is] Any area that is being used for purposes that were not intended for the space... visiting, chatting, sleeping, warming up, people mistreating facilities... feet up on study desks, using library computers for game playing or social media."

The theme of technology was associated with least favourite space in 138 responses. Some customers disliked computer areas, usually because of the noise associated with them. As one respondent wrote: "[I dislike the] Computer section. Occasionally noisy as
some users play music or games at too high volume." However other users stated
computer areas were their least favourite space because of the lack of space and/or
privacy around computer stations. Additional comments associated with technology
came from customers who disliked areas that did not have convenient, or any, plug-ins,
and other customers who felt there are an insufficient number of self-checkouts.

The fifth largest theme for this question was the 98 responses about facilities. While this
theme included a wide range of specific elements associated with the building,
responses coded for this theme in association with least favourite space were
predominantly about washrooms, particularly washrooms at the downtown branch.
Often overlapping with discussion of washrooms were customers who mentioned lack of
cleanliness being a factor in a space being their least favourite in the library.

Space to Change

The third open-ended question asked customers that if they could change one thing
about the library’s space, what it would be and why. The question received 1019
responses. The most common theme for this question was that of space, which
appeared in 190 responses. The theme included concepts such as the size of the library
space as well as descriptive phrases like open, cramped, or nook. Most of the
responses coded for this theme discussed expanding the entire library or expanding
specific areas such as reading, study, teen, and children’s spaces.

Collections, with 147 responses, was the second largest theme in response to what
customers would change about the library. Many customers wrote that they wanted
more collections, sometimes in specific genres or formats, but often respondents simply
stated they wanted more books. These responses frequently overlapped with those that
wished for more space for collections. Another sub-theme was improving the
organization of collections. This was most typically associated with CD and DVD
collections, although print collections were also included. While some customers stated
generally that they wanted an improvement in organization, others made specific
suggestions such as alphabetical and genre organization. For example, one customer
responded: "[I would change] The way music is organized. I don’t have a better
suggestion, but sometimes it can take a long time to find what I’m looking for."

The third largest library change theme was about furniture, appearing in 140 comments.
Customers often expressed a desire for more or a bigger seating/reading area, more
comfortable seating, or more workspaces: particularly private workspaces like carrels or
small tables. Several of the comments indicating customers wanted more comfortable
seating also suggested the furniture be located in quiet areas.

Of the 133 responses that addressed the theme of technology, many discussed the
desire for more computers. Other customers indicated they would like to move the
computers within the library, although there was no consensus, as some customers
wanted computers relocated to a different area, some wanted all the computers in one
central location, and some wanted computers spread throughout the library. Also
associated with technology were responses that suggested more or better access to plug-ins and respondents who wanted more self-checkouts.

The fifth largest theme for the question on what customers would change about the library was 129 non-responses. It should be noted that these responses were coded separately from those that were explicitly positive about the library. Instead, these were comments that were more ambiguous, such as "nothing", which might indicate satisfaction with the library or may just be the result of the respondent not having an opinion on the question.

**Inspiring Space**

The fourth open-ended question was explicitly based on EPL's goal of creating open, safe, and inspiring spaces, and asked customers to describe how EPL could make the library a more inspiring space for them. The question generated 886 responses. The largest theme was collections, appearing in 180 responses. Many of the responses suggested that expanding collections in general, or in a specific subject area or format, would make the library more inspiring. Others felt that more or better displays of collections made the library more inspiring, with many frequently mentioning staff suggestions as a valuable factor in these displays. As one customer noted: "I like when they put out featured items for people to see. It might be neat for staff to pick their favourite books and have them on display as suggestions for people to read." The next largest theme was the 153 responses expressing satisfaction with the library as an already sufficiently inspiring space.

Noise levels, represented by 108 responses, accounted for the third largest theme for this question. The overwhelming majority of these responses indicated that having more quiet space, or a designated quiet space, would make the library more inspiring. However, a few respondents suggested playing "soft" music in the library to make it more inspiring for them.

Space was the fourth largest theme and was discussed in 90 responses to this question. Many of the responses, such as the following, indicated that an expansion of space would make the library more inspiring: "An increase in the amount of space – to make it feel more roomy. This would allow more space for computer areas, for tables, for comfy chairs, etc. This would also increase the distance between quieter study areas and the noisier social areas (both of which are important)." Interestingly, another set of responses felt more nooks or enclosed spaces would make the library more inspiring.

The fifth largest inspiring spaces theme was the 89 responses that mentioned programming. Many comments indicated that having more programs, or offering programs at different times, would make the library a more inspiring space. As one respondent wrote: "Apart from providing a quiet, secluded space for serious study, I appreciate a library that provides cultural stimulation as well."
Additional Comments

The final open-ended question asked customers to share any additional comments they had about EPL’s library spaces and received 464 responses. The largest theme discussed in these comments was satisfaction, which appeared in 142 responses. Many of the comments that expressed satisfaction were variants on the response "I love the library."

The next largest theme in additional comments was staff, which was discussed in 72 responses. Customers were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of staff. As one customer wrote: "It's the staff — their eagerness to assist and incredible breadth of knowledge — that makes the library such a positive and inviting space."

The third and fourth largest themes for additional comments were noise levels, with 62 responses, and collections with 51 responses. Many of these comments highlighted issues that appeared in responses to previous questions, specifically the need for quiet space and the desire for more or better collections. Finally, the fifth largest theme was 51 non-responses.

Discussion

The findings of the survey revealed several insights into how customers use and view EPL’s spaces. The greatest finding to emerge from the data is that customers do not view the library spaces as a distinct and separate entity from the services provided. The large variety of themes that appeared in customers’ responses to the open-ended questions reveal that, even when customers are asked specifically about library spaces, they will discuss the space and its aesthetics but also the collections, technology and programs made available to them within those spaces. These findings overlap with those from Most’s study in Florida where respondents did not differentiate between building features and library services. Given that customers consider our libraries as a cohesive whole, it further emphasizes the need to recognize that the space we provide is a service as important as our collections and programs.

The results of the survey also reveal the larger conflict between traditional views on library space and the emerging trends, particularly in relation to spaces intended for groups and/or socialization and the associated noise levels. While responses from EPL’s survey indicate that some of this conflict is dependent on the age of the customer, with older customers responding that group space in the library is of less importance to them contrasting with younger customers who indicated it was of greater importance, this is not the sole factor in the conflict. Instead, qualitative responses reveal it to be the result of varying perceptions of what a library space should be, the needs and wants of individuals who use the library, and the activities for which customers come to the library. Given trends and the growing need for the “third space” which libraries provide for the community, group spaces and the noise that comes with them will remain a vital service. However, qualitative data heavily emphasizes the need to continue to provide quiet spaces, not just for individuals who come to read or study, but also for those that
come to use a library computer and for individuals who choose to work out of the library. The necessity of zoning for different noise levels and activity types is one that recurs frequently in the literature from academic library space studies (Walton; Webb, Schaller, and Hunley) and, based on findings from EPL, is also a growing need in public libraries.

Customers’ responses on the activities for which they come to the library agree with several other studies emphasizing the importance of collections-based activities (Leckie and Hopkins 346; May and Black 12; Most 161). However, the rising importance of technology should not be discounted based on its overall ranking as a reason for coming to the library. Additionally, the frequent recurrence of the theme of technology in the responses to the open-ended questions indicates the importance of its inclusion in library spaces. Not only do libraries need to provide computers, but the recurring mention of the need for power outlets emphasizes the needs of customers who bring their own technology to the library: a finding that overlaps with results from the study by Vaska, Chan, and Powelson at the University of Calgary.

In contrast with the findings of Leckie and Hopkins that users of central libraries in Toronto and Vancouver were in the space for extended periods of time (346), EPL customers are typically in the space for much shorter periods of time. However, while customers may not be spending extended periods of time in library spaces, written responses indicate that they still care about the aesthetics of the library, suggesting the need to make library spaces not only functional but also visually appealing. As in Howard’s study with teens, while customers may be generally satisfied with spaces, it may be a reflection of what they perceive to be the normal state of public library appearance and not indicative of what they would ideally like those spaces to look like.

The survey project at EPL did have a few limitations. The first is that it exclusively focused on EPL, and thus findings may not be generalizable to other public library systems. Second, due to limitations around gathering consent, the survey was only open to individuals above the age of majority (18 years) which prevented the researchers from gathering data and opinions from children and teens. Additionally, due to the recruitment model used, respondents were far more likely to be those who interact with staff and may utilize the library space differently than non-respondents.

**Conclusion**

Results from the EPL library spaces customer survey were used in combination with results from other library spaces research projects to make recommendations for future building projects and renovations at EPL. However, by itself, the survey clearly revealed just how important spaces are to EPL’s customers, not only for collections and programs but also to fulfill social and community needs. The survey also emphasized that EPL customers have very strong opinions about their library spaces that they want to share with the library. As a result of this survey, EPL plans to continue to evaluate how customers use its spaces, and what they want from them, through future library spaces surveys conducted on a triennial basis. Given the quickly evolving nature of the library and its spaces, eliciting regular feedback will allow EPL to continue to
"understand how customers use our spaces and do something about it" (Edmonton Public Library 16).

Research questions raised by the EPL study and worthy of further exploration include determining whether the trend of the library’s space, service, and collections being considered as a whole by EPL's customers also applies to users of other public library systems. Additionally, gathering data and opinions from children and teens about their use of the library's space, both at EPL and other library systems, should be pursued to ensure spaces fill the needs of all the users of the public library.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Carla Haug for all of her input and Valerie Haberl for her aid during this project. Thanks also go to my supervisor, Pam Ryan, for her tireless mentoring efforts. Additionally, I want to acknowledge the Public Services Leadership Team at EPL who were endlessly supportive. Finally, I owe a large debt of gratitude to the staff of EPL who made the survey such a success.

Works Cited


Appendix

LIBRARY SPACES SURVEY

At Edmonton Public Library (EPL) we strive to create open, safe and inspiring spaces. In an effort to better understand how you, our customer, use our spaces, we ask that you please complete this survey. It will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and your responses will be completely anonymous. Thank you for your participation.

Which branch of EPL do you visit most often? (Please check only one)

___ Abbottsfield-Penny McKee
___ Calder
___ Capilano
___ Castle Downs
___ epiGO (University of Alberta)
___ Highlands
___ Icywylyde
___ Jasper Place
___ Lods Hole
___ Londondey
___ Mill Woods
___ Riverbend
___ Sprucewood
___ Stanley A. Milner (Downtown)
___ Strathcona
___ Whitemud Crossing
___ Woodcroft

Please answer all remaining questions with the branch you visit most often in mind.

On average, how often do you visit the library? (Please check only one)

___ Daily
___ Once a week
___ A few times a month
___ Once a month
___ A few times a year
___ Once a year

How long is your typical visit to the library? (Please check only one)

___ Under 15 minutes
___ 15 minutes - 1 hour
___ 2-4 hours
___ 5 hours or more

For what reasons do you usually visit the library? (Please check all that apply)

___ Attend a program
___ Borrow/return materials
___ Browse materials
___ Find specific item(s)
___ Get help from library staff
___ Read
___ Research
___ Socialize/meet with others
___ Study
___ Use library computer
___ Use photocopiers/printers
___ Use public meeting room
___ Use wireless internet
___ Other: Please specify

Of the above reasons, please place a number (1, 2, 3) next to the top three most important reasons you visit the library.
Do you usually come to the library alone or with others? 
___ Alone (Please skip next question) ___ With others

How many other people usually come to the library with you? (Please check only one)
___ 1 ___ 3 ___ 5 
___ 2 ___ 4 ___ 6 or more

How important is it to you to have spaces in the library for groups to meet, socialize, and/or work together? (Please check only one)
___ Very important ___ Somewhat important ___ Not important

What is your favourite location or place in the library? Why do you like it?

What is your least favourite location or place in the library? Why do you dislike it?

If you could change one thing about the library's space, what would it be and why?

Please describe how EPL could make the library a more inspiring space for you.

Additional comments or suggestions about library space:

Gender: ___ Female ___ Male ___ Prefer not to respond
Age: ___ 18-35 years ___ 61 years and over ___ 36-60 years ___ Prefer not to respond

Would you be willing to participate in a 30-45 minute interview to further discuss your views on EPL's library spaces? If yes, please request form from service desk staff.

EDMONTON PUBLIC LIBRARY epl.ca