

Sculpting the Future: Planning for Libraries in Transformation

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Books reviewed

Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library. Edited by Joseph Janes. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow press. 2013. Print: 161 pp. 45.00 USD. **ISBN-13: 978-0-8108-8714-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)**; 978-0-8108-8715-2 (ebook).

Mossop, Stephen. Achieving Transformational Change in Academic libraries (Chandos Information Professional Series). Oxford: Chandos Publishing. 2013. Print: 197 pp. 80.00 USD. **ISBN-13: 978-1-84334-724-8 (print)**; ISBN-13: 978-1-78063-390-9 (online).

"Whatever you and I thought we were entering at the start of our careers is a place and a time we have already left behind, and to think anything else is to delude ourselves."

- Daniel Chudnov (In Janes, p. 149)

"Creating a vision is one thing - making it happen is quite another."

- Stephen Mossop (p. 12).

Introduction

At the risk of hyperbole, rarely have two books – at least in principle – needed each other more than Joseph Janes' and Stephen Mossop's 2013 titles on libraries in transformation. One is a collection of brief visionary essays on possible futures that are, by turns, likely, desired or dismal, yet leave to the reader's imagination the pathways for achieving (or avoiding) them; while the other assumes a decidedly businesslike approach to managing and guiding transformative change, yet posits no vision of its own that might drive, inspire or require it.

While it may be true that no one book can possibly cover all issues or meet all expectations relevant to an author's stated objectives, this particular pairing reveals respective gaps in each by illustrating the classic tensions between the

power of a compelling vision and the oftentimes problematic processes of planning and implementing it which are inherent in all projects of institutional change. They are also both quite generalizable in that Janes' contributors deal with the rapid transformations facing both public and academic libraries, while Mossop's observations are (oddly, in my view) billed as being entirely "context free" and therefore applicable to any large-scale organization, library or no.

Both authors also hold leadership positions in the academy. Associate professor and Chair of the MLIS Program of the University of Washington, editor Joseph Janes is a prolific author and popular speaker in the areas of search technologies and computer-human interactions, while Stephen Mossop is the Head of Library Customer Services at the University of Exeter's five libraries, having previously run a private-sector company before entering the library profession.

That said, the purposes and specific intended audiences of these two books are quite different. *Library 2020* is a creative, thoughtful, sobering and occasionally whimsical collection of "think pieces" aimed at library staff, administrators, trustees and interested laypeople, whereas *Achieving Transformational Change* clearly targets administrators with its reliance on acronym-heavy "management speak".

What is most significant about these titles is their timeliness: libraries are facing transformational change, and advice on how to understand, approach, address and guide it has rarely been needed so acutely.

Janes: Creating and Articulating the Vision

For his book, Janes put out a call for chapters based on the premise that the authors complete (and elaborate upon) the sentence, "The library of 2020 will be..." The resulting essays are organized according to *Stuff* (what will be collected), *People* (how library staff will be affected and involved), *Community* (how the library will relate to its stakeholders), *Place* (what will come of the tensions between the physical and the virtual), and *Leadership and Vision*. Janes admits in the introduction that this scheme isn't perfect given the breadth of his gathered essays, but it is one he has previously employed in his work, and it does lend itself to our analysis here.

The authors who focused on collection issues (*Stuff*) are essentially of one mind regarding the library's role as a repository of physical objects: that's not where the future lies. Instead, the prevalence and popularity of e-books, the widespread availability of digital downloads for music and movies, and large-scale digitization projects – to say nothing of growing ownership rates of smartphones and tablets on which to access information – will result in a dramatically reduced need for this traditional focus. Yet, service functions such as library instruction will continue and may be needed more than ever.

In the place of physical objects, many of the contributors argue for the library's role as a provider of *experiences* in the form of facilitating content creation, hosting meetings for community clubs and hobbyists, or through the provision of high-tech "makerspaces" – digital media labs and 3D printers.

There are – and will continue to be – complications. Elisabeth Jones (pp. 15-23) warns that, owing to outdated copyright laws, great swathes of publishing from the middle of the 20th Century will not be available in digital formats for decades, until they lapse into the public domain, while complex, burdensome and expensive licensing agreements have fundamentally changed the relationship between publishers, libraries and readers. Long-term preservation and access cannot be guaranteed either – given changing technologies, formats and standards – making worrisome our present practice of widespread and wholesale journal de-accessioning.

The essays dealing with *People* touch on all of these transformations, but focus on how they will affect our work. *Librarian in Black* blogger Sarah Houghton (pp. 35-39) believes that "geek" librarians who can build, maintain, create and teach about digital technologies and collections will dominate the future, whereas Stephen Abram (pp. 41-47) and Marie Radford (pp. 55-61) focus on the higher premium which may be placed on our ability to provide custom, personalized services, training and experiences. The most explicit articulation of the prospects for a transformed workplace comes from Stacey Aldrich and Jarrid Keller (in the *Place* section, illustrating the lack of mutual exclusivity in Janes' scheme) (pp. 107-110) who posit a whole set of new career areas¹.

Interestingly, a couple of essayists don't anticipate radically significant changes. Marcellus Turner (pp. 89-93) points out that, since the early onset of library automation, our work still consists of the same three basic activities which won't change: circulating materials, providing research assistance, and offering programming and outreach. Courtney Green (pp. 49-54) even cites Elizabeth Bennet's famous remarks regarding Mr. Darcy as apropos to future libraries: that, in essentials they will be very much what they always were.

The best metaphor for transformed services comes from James Rosenzweig (pp. 63-67), who sees the future of information services as a mountain which daring climbers seek to conquer and the library as a "base camp" with the equipment and guides necessary for successful expeditions. In dramatically changed conditions, he suggests, a successful base camp will be one where novice and veteran climbers (not necessarily librarians) can gather and together work out their strategies in tandem with other organizations and community stakeholders.

It is this emphasis on engagement, partnership, outreach and collaboration outside the library which dominates the *Community* section, although much of the content in these essays is admittedly more reflective of present conditions and innovations in this regard than it is about prognostication. Themes here include: customer-focused or user-centred services and customized, targeted

programming (perhaps for a surcharge), the assumption of non-traditional functions, and integrating the efforts of external community professionals and experts.

Paradoxically, this renewed focus on community will occur in the context of an increasingly placeless and global library. In the *Place* section, there is a reiteration of a number of ideas for new programming opportunities in all that space formerly occupied by printed materials. The most profound articulation of the role of Place comes from Loriene Roy (Minnesota Chippewa [Ojibwe]), (pp. 121-125) who applies Dr. Gregory Cajete's "orientation cycle" to libraries, which can be seen in terms of their potential to promote *being* (understanding the self), *asking, seeking, making, having, sharing* and *celebrating*, and thus contribute to our collective ability to lead fulfilled lives.

In the final section, *Leadership and Vision*, the essayists mention many of the same themes as did earlier pieces but with a focus on strategies for addressing them in light of the multiple mismatches libraries face between resources, funding, available vs. emerging technologies, structural commitments, and the weight of traditions and expectations. Daniel Chudnov (pp. 145-50) summarizes these concerns this way:

With vanishing collections and insufficient tooling and staff to bridge the gap between collections and services we offer, and our community members relative to what they can acquire efficiently for themselves already, support for more traditional education and research services...will erode (147).

The threat of erosion haunts the University of Rochester's Mary Ann Mavrinac (pp. 133-9), who asks her readers to consider two possible futures: an academic library that embraces a values-driven, "collaborative, team-based and project-focused" approach to working with faculty, students and community, as opposed to one that adheres to previous, passive, unambitious and siloed services – only to have its budget ignominiously pulled in 2020 for lack of interest.

As in any edited compilation, the style and quality of the contributions vary. Some are genuinely original and insightful on their own terms, while several are the result of more studious efforts to synthesize the forward-looking ruminations of others. Functionally the book works reasonably well, although, given the very wide range of topics and ideas, an index would have been most welcome.

What is most important, and indeed essential, about Janes' collection is that it does not imply an inevitability – or promote resignation – regarding the scenarios within but stresses the importance of *creating* the future. As Marie Radford puts it in her essay:

Ultimately, the future of libraries...is up to us to create. [W]e are sculpting the future in daring to take risks, and being ever open to learn new tricks.

[Our] impact will be made in the problems we choose to address [and] in the solutions we discover (p. 60).

Of course, taking these risks, learning these new skills, identifying and tackling problems and formulating appropriate solutions requires leadership, which is only briefly touched upon here. Interestingly, 2013 afforded us another title to which we can turn.

Mossop: Leadership for Achieving the Vision

Where *Library 2020* is an unpredictable and sometimes contradictory smorgasbord of ideas and predictions, everything about *Achieving Transformational Change* is orderly, straightforward and logical, setting out in both the table of contents and the abstracts preceding the chapters what the reader may expect in the book's two parts.

Chapter 1 explains what is meant by both transformational change and transformational leadership, followed by establishing the basis for creating a vision for change in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes how to engage staff in creating the vision so as to preempt resistance and opposition, while Chapter 4 explores ways to guide, motivate, develop and reward staff. The primary purpose for all these stages, Mossop stresses early on, is to create and maintain cultural change in the organization, not simply to force change from above. Mossop's final chapter delves into aspects of evaluation and marketing to help communicate to one's customers about the extent, nature and quality of the transformations one has achieved.

In Part Two, Mossop and colleagues Vickie Williamson, Dean of the University Library at the University of Saskatchewan and Jeremy Andrew, Head of Library Services for the University of Central Lancashire, each present case studies in which their respective libraries engaged in and implemented change.

Mossop defines transformational change in a most curious and Zen-like fashion: that it may only be recognized in retrospect – in its achievement (p. 4). This is not to say it cannot be the result of planning: not at all. He merely suggests that a planned strategy that encompasses incremental, organizational and cultural change may only be *judged transformative* in its actualization, rather than be preordained as such (p. 7-8).

Unlike Janes' volume though, Mossop's emphasis is on techniques for transformative *leadership*, not on the nature of change. For him, such leaders not only have the necessary charisma and inspire their employees through their own actions but also provide intellectual stimulation to staff and work with them on an individual level to develop their respective skills, talents and interests. Beyond these traits, however, Mossop promotes trust – trust on the part of staff that the organization's leaders are progressing on the correct path and trust on the part of management that their staff will contribute to the change processes as discussed.

To build this mutual trust, Mossop advises transparent dialogue with staff so that the vision for change is mutually created and not imposed from above. By so doing, management can better ensure that the change programme being considered is widely deemed to be attractive, appropriate and attainable for the organization, as well as personally meaningful for staff, and therefore worth expenditure of effort and resources. To address inevitable opposition or lack of enthusiasm in certain quarters, Mossop encourages the recruitment of champions from among respected staff to help engage fellow employees as change agents.

Beyond engaging with staff, Mossop also encourages consultation with one's "customers" – here narrowly defined as the student body – who will likely be inconvenienced by such things as library renovations or staff restructuring, and, depending on the length of time it takes to complete, their enthusiasm for these transformations may shift dramatically. However, he notes, within a few short years the students for whom a major change programme was initiated will be gone, and the new student body will have never known anything else.

The value in Mossop's book lies in its prescribed foundations for planning change and in its concern for staff engagements, consultation and development to help shape it and carry it out. This is all very well as far as it goes; the problem is that Mossop doesn't go far enough, and in the most effective directions, to make good on his own advice.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his own case study of change at Exeter University Library. For all his talk – well, of talking and listening – and in developing a mutually agreed-upon vision for change with one's staff, he appears to have done no such thing himself. His case study is replete with references to how he singlehandedly worked to convince "my staff" about "my concept" and "my vision." This is not only ironic but maddening on its own terms because at no point do we actually get a specific sense of what this vision and concept might have consisted, apart from the need to adapt to a newly-renovated space, and the frequent averment that the resulting services would be "excellent" – a quality that is itself not defined.

In essence, Mossop is only concerned here with means and not ends: in achieving change but not in understanding or anticipating it. By not bothering to define transformational change (only inasmuch as may be recognized in retrospect) he makes it possible to describe anything one wills to be transformational change – as indeed he and his contributors do.

In her chapter, Vicki Williamson refers to the transformative change called for in the University of Saskatchewan Library's Strategic Plan but then offers no details as to what those changes would be, only the strategies that would be used to achieve them. Instead, her chapter goes into considerable detail on the library's staff leadership program, including 11 pages of tables illustrating participant

evaluations of the program, which are of questionable relevance and should probably have been confined to an appendix.

For his part, Jeremy Andrew makes references to transformational changes in regards to a building renovation project aimed at creating more social spaces at the University Library Central Lancashire but, again, offers no justification as to why the reader should consider this transformational. In eschewing these essential details, he even unwittingly suggests management by environmental determinism: "The transformational change to the building had also led to the transformational change in the LIS staff" (p. 176) – seemingly obviating any need to heed Mossop's preceding advice. The renovation itself can't even be fully appreciated, thanks to the poorly-reproduced black-and-white photographs included.

These observations highlight what are, to me, the greatest weaknesses of the book: that it takes only minimal account of the academic context (one searches in vain for any reference to 'faculty'), makes no attempt to understand or characterize the present contemporary forces of transformative change affecting libraries, and offers no vision or rationale for such change.

Rather, Mossop has produced a resolutely generic and instrumental leadership manual, the precepts of which might be appropriate in any organizational context. A review of the bibliography reveals that a mere 37 of 137 items listed are from the library literature, and only 10 of these concern academic libraries specifically; the rest are from the management and business literature. As a result, the reader is struck by the sheer lack of library-related content in the book's first 85 pages, in favour of references to "organizations", "customers", "markets" – and even to "products"! This is, however, fully consistent not only with the "context-free" approach promoted on the book's jacket but also with Mossop's belief that universities "are a business like any other [which] operate[s] in a defined market sector and their saleable product is knowledge" (p. 75).

Discussion: Planning for the Future of Libraries?

A close reading of both *Library 2020* and *Achieving Transformational Change in Academic Libraries* underscores the barely comprehensible complexity of the forces converging on the world of libraries and information and suggests it would be folly for any management strategy to fail to account for it. The contributors to Janes' book are all acutely aware of the rapidly-shifting sands around them and are casting their curious yet apprehensive eyes outward to an all-too near horizon, while Mossop appears to be entirely and willingly oblivious to such extrinsic realities, opting instead for "context free" and inward-looking approaches which seem, on reflection, to be incapable of meeting the challenges posed by those realities.

The contrast between these two approaches is more than striking: it reveals fundamentally diverging paradigms for dealing with change, the examination of

which is itself instructive. The first embraces uncertainty, complexity and the limits of expertise, and knows that the challenges presented are multifaceted and may only be understood and addressed through collaboration, dialogue, engagement, mutual learning and a willingness to transcend tradition; the other seeks to persuade and rally allies, convinced of the inherent rightness of one's expert and internally-derived vision and the imperative need for its implementation.

Both books do share one notable shortcoming: for all their references to consultation, in neither is there guidance offered from relevant literature as to how such consultations might proceed. It is worth stressing, however, that for Mossop this engagement encompasses staff and students but goes no further, whereas Janes' contributors are more inclusive of, and engaged with, the broader community.

For the academic library, I believe that "community" is a far more accurate and productive framework than is Mossop's business simile, and even more so in this era of community outreach and "town-gown" collaborations promoting neighbourhood development and revitalization². This community planning context, not incidentally, affords the librarian a wealth of literature outside the discipline on which to draw, and which would be invaluable in navigating the treacherous and controversial issues comprising the transformative changes with which these books are concerned.

For example, Lynda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley's urban planning classic *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (1995) sets out a holistic and tested framework for structuring community engagement processes, particularly those facing conflict and dramatic changes. Contrary to Mossop's casual advice for consultation, and the vague references in Janes to "engagement", Schneekloth and Shibley propose a specific process that includes creating a *dialogic space* in which participants can feel comfortable participating, and in which ground rules for discussion and debate are agreed upon. This is followed by a *confirmation and interrogation* phase in which participants' assumptions, values, aspirations and anxieties are shared, and in which differing experiences and bodies of knowledge are welcomed – but also open for questioning as well – so that the group does not proceed on the basis of unexamined assumptions. At this stage current conditions are critically examined and questioned, so as to gain an understanding of how things are done and why – and what might be changed. Finally, in *framing the action* the participants engage in a process of inclusion and exclusion, mutually deciding on a course of action (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995).

Another standard planning text, Patsy Healey's *Collaborative Planning* (1997), outlines strategies for creating forms of governance based on trust aimed not just at collective decision-making but at "shaping and re-shaping convictions" (p. 245). She writes:

[Collaborative planning] requires those involved to take a major leap in reflexive activity, to step back from their particular concerns, to review their situation, to re-think problems and challenges, to work out opportunities and constraints, to think through courses of action which might be better than current practices and to commit themselves to changing things (p. 244).

For Healey, true collaboration involves power sharing and social learning between individuals and across relational webs comprised of “culturally-embedded, intersubjective processes” through which “people acquire frames of reference and systems of meaning” (p. 263). In other words, no single body of professional expertise will be adequate in the face of complex and interrelated problems; and, depending on the diversity of one’s stakeholders, the perceptions, values and meanings concerning the library and its purpose may be quite different from those of the “experts” involved.

These are only two possible readings, but they illustrate ways in which we might build a bridge from the aspirations of Janes to the instrumentalism of Mossop.

Conclusion

In Janes, the focus is on the contexts for and drivers of change; in Mossop, it’s administration. Between the two is the missing domain of *planning*: the deliberative, inclusive, dialogical, multicultural and epistemologically diverse basis for understanding and defining problems; of identifying, exploring and evaluating solutions and their potential impacts, especially those affecting power relations, inequity and disadvantage; of recognizing and accounting for the needs of multiple publics and stakeholders, not merely an assumed “common good”; of devising the means for implementation by testing and applying solutions and incrementally moving from a former state to another, mutually agreed-upon and desired state of change. All solutions must at the same time be considered partial, contingent, context-dependent and born of the recognition that knowledge is limited, information is constrained, and that no one solution will definitively solve the problem, only change the underlying conditions³.

The exciting and potentially controversial possibilities raised by many of Janes’ contributors clearly beg for further guidance as to their realization. Frustratingly however, Mossop’s volume, in eschewing discussion of these contexts or visionary statements of any kind, is incommensurate with the very innovations and threats Janes has collected.

Therefore, to “sculpt the future” when the issues and problems we will face in the “Library of 2020” are so decidedly fluid and complex, we shall need to engage as never before with ideas and knowledge bases outside of librarianship (the domain of planning being a particular example) if we are to achieve – and not just be overwhelmed by – transformational change.

Notes

¹ This was the only chapter that actively solicited reader feedback. See #futurelibjobs.

² See Wiewel, Wim and Knapp, Gerrit-Jan (Editors). *Partnerships for Smart Growth: University-Community Collaboration for Better Public Places*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Print. 2005.

³ For examples, see: Harper, Thomas L., and Stein, Stanley M. *Dialogical Planning in a Fragmented Society: Critically Liberal, Pragmatic, Incremental*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 2005. Print; Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 1973, 4(2): 155–169; Sandercock, Leonie. *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1997. Print.

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