**Bringing on the Social**

Infrastructuring Libraries Through Zine-making Workshops

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# Bringing on the Social: Infrastructuring Libraries Through Zine-making Workshops

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## Abstract

Public libraries serve as social infrastructures that foster interpersonal connections and promote well-being and cohesion. In order to explore the role played by libraries in the process of social infrastructuring, we conducted a zine-making workshop with librarians. This workshop facilitated collegial conversations and provided an opportunity for participants to familiarize themselves with the concept of *social infrastructure* and its practical implications in connection with their work. Consequently, both the researchers and librarians gained insight into how libraries function as social infrastructures, and identified areas that require improvement. Furthermore, the workshop also deepened our understanding of how the concept of social infrastructure can be put into practice.

## Introduction

Public libraries' fundamental social role is supported by research confirming that they are important places for social interaction in the communities they serve (Sørensen, 2021). By helping people connect, libraries promote well-being and cohesion in a societal context characterized by increasing gaps and exclusion (Klinenberg, 2018). The concept of *social infrastructure* has been proposed as a means by which to identify and define libraries' social role (Mattern, 2014; Klinenberg, 2018), and has attracted the attention of both library researchers (see, e.g., Dalmer et al., 2022) and practitioners alike. Their interest is evidenced by the fact that Eric Klinenberg, who analyze the library as social infrastructure, was invited to be a keynote speaker at the 2023 conference Nordic Libraries Together: The Public Library as a Social Platform[1], for example. Notwithstanding, it is not clear what the concept means in connection with library practice, nor how day-to-day library work creates a social infrastructure.

As researchers with an interest in social infrastructure, we decided to invite librarians to a zine-making workshop to explore the practical meaning of the concept in the context of library practice. We intended that this workshop should include a discussion about how the library's social role can be strengthened. Our conceptualization of the library as social infrastructure is inspired by Mattern (2014) and Klinenberg (2018). Both scholars highlight that libraries provide open spaces for relationship-building and interaction. In doing so, they play a crucial social role by contributing to inclusion. Nevertheless, libraries' role as social

infrastructures is neither permanent nor static, but requires continuous maintenance. It is therefore the result of a constant process of daily maintenance work that the library is produced (Korn et al., 2019). To emphasize the ongoing effort required to make this infrastructure function, we conceptualize the act of maintaining the infrastructure as a verb—*infrastructuring*. Library staff are crucial to the process of infrastructuring libraries, as our ongoing research confirms (Rivano Eckerdal et al., submitted).

This paper examines how zine-making workshops can be used to enable librarians and researchers to explore the public library's role as social infrastructure and how this role can be further strengthened. Zine-making and workshops are activities familiar to many public librarians, particularly those who work with children and youths. Encouraging librarians to engage in zine-making activities themselves, and in workshops that explore the library as social infrastructure, helps facilitate new perspectives and fruitful collegial conversations. In turn, librarians participating in the workshop produce empirical material that we, the researchers leading the workshop, can use to analyze and learn more about librarians' social infrastructuring of the library. The workshop method thereby connects research with practice for both professional groups.

The aim of this paper is to enhance our knowledge of the role of librarians in infrastructuring libraries by means of a zine-making workshop. In our investigation, we pose the following research question:

- How do librarians experience and practice the library as social infrastructure?

In the sections to follow, we further develop the concept of social infrastructure in relation to previous research on the social role of public libraries. We then describe how we conducted the zine-making workshop in order to allow librarians to use the method to explore how the concept of social infrastructure manifest itself in their library practice. Thereafter, we use the empirical material we gathered to analyze how the library is produced as social infrastructure in its day-to-day work before presenting our conclusions.

## Background and previous research

This paper reports on one part of the research project Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT)[2], which involves public libraries in Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. While all facets of the research involved are conducted in each country, the scope of this paper is limited to providing an account of fieldwork conducted in Sweden. Inspired by Star's and Bowker's (2006) question "How to infrastructure[?]," ILIT poses the overarching research question "How to infrastructure the social through librarizing?"[3] One method we have chosen to investigate this question is zine-making workshops developed in collaboration with social designer Alessia Scuderi.

In recent years, the concept of social infrastructure has been employed to underscore the indispensable role of libraries in a well-functioning society (see, e.g., Audunson et al., 2019; Dalmer et al., 2022; Klinenberg, 2018; Mattern, 2014). This assertion of libraries' value derives not only from the resources they provide to the public, but also from their function as places for interaction and support that are open to all and that are rooted in the local community. Research emphasizing public libraries' role in promoting inclusion and community has a long and distinguished history (see, e.g., Buschman, 2017, 2018; McCabe, 2001; Scott, 2011; Wiegand, 2015). This body of research aims to investigate how libraries contribute to the social cohesiveness that enables interpersonal meetings between individuals with different backgrounds (see, e.g., Aabø, Audunson & Vårheim, 2010; Audunson et al., 2020; Lankes, 2016; Stillwell, 2018). In addition, other research

exists that focuses on the role of libraries and librarians in facilitating integration and inclusion (see, e.g., Birdi et al., 2008; Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004; Johnston & Audunson, 2019). By applying the social infrastructure concept, we highlight both the requisite relations and the continuous maintenance required to sustain these processes (Star & Bowker, 2006). Furthermore, previous research shows that services provided by libraries can be conceptualized as practices of care (Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2020; Adler, 2018, 104). Van Melik and Merry (2023) argue that the role of libraries as "spaces of care" influences librarians' work tasks, and we have previously pointed out how the care practices of librarians infuse the social infrastructure of libraries (Rivano Eckerdal et al., submitted).

Librarians play a pivotal role in infrastructuring libraries. Just as the social role of libraries has been highlighted in recent research, the social role of librarians has also been emphasized. Lankes (2007) makes the point that librarians should demonstrate the service a library provides to the community by assessing the needs of their local communities and actively engaging with them. Zine-making workshops are one possible method for accomplishing this. Robinson (2019, 348) explores how librarians can employ critical design to "help us explore current paradigms and approaches to library spaces, services, and technologies, as well as to uncover assumptions about what a library is and what a librarian does." Although Robinson does not propose any particular method, we consider that the workshop method aligns well with this perspective, since it helps us explore common assumptions and to contribute to bridge scholarship and practice.

To summarize: This paper reaffirms the social role of public libraries while simultaneously underscoring the library's processual and fluid nature. Libraries are constructed as social infrastructures through the everyday maintenance work performed by their staff and library users in a specific setting comprised of artifacts, technology, and space. Thus, the social role of libraries is not static; it could be either advanced and strengthened, or impeded. In our analysis here, we find examples of both cases. While we propose that the concept of social infrastructure is a useful tool for coming to grips with this complexity, we realize that practitioners may view it as being overly abstract. Our workshop was thus intended as a means by which librarians and researchers could concretize its possible practical applications in day-to-day library work.

## Methodology: zine-making workshop

We arranged a zine-making workshop aimed at exploring librarians' perceptions and experiences of the social role of libraries. Both critical library studies and critical design allow explorations of common assumptions (Robinson, 2019). Zine-making workshops can be used as a tool in this pursuit. Workshops with librarians have previously been used as a research method, such as by White and Martel (2022), for example. They conducted "intercultural situation workshops" to investigate intercultural challenges in a library setting. In our research, we employ the workshop method to allow librarians and researchers the opportunity to jointly explore the concept of the library as social infrastructure.

The authors of this paper conducted a workshop at a public library in Sweden in February 2023, using a seminar room as the venue. Eight librarians participated in the workshop, seven of whom were currently employed at the library, while the eighth had worked there previously and was now employed in another branch of the library organization. The workshop began with a round of presentations during which the participants were informed about the research project, their role in it, and their right to opt out. The participants were then given task cards that guided them as they explored the library. The following eight tasks were prepared for the workshop:

Observing

Take a walk around the library and explore its surroundings. Look around you. Does the library present itself as a social infrastructure? Give examples.

*Take written notes.*

Noticing

When/where does the library function as a social infrastructure? Give examples.

When/where does the library fail to function as a social infrastructure? Give examples. What needs to be fixed?

*Take a few pictures. Take notes.*

Visualizing

Can you visualize a social infrastructure that works well?

What would the opposite look like?

*Sketch, take a few pictures, or write notes.*

Mapping

Draw a mental map of the library or some part of it. Mark places of care. Mark places where you perceive the opposite of care.

*Draw a map.*

Gathering

Gather a few objects that are indicative of care and/or its opposite.

*Collect up to five objects.*

Including

Who is included in the library room and its activities? Who is excluded?

*Take notes and/or a few pictures.*

Sorting

Discuss as a group how the material you have gathered could be sorted and the reason for sorting it that way.

*Sort and discuss.*

Imagining

What could you and your colleagues do to realize the library's potential as a social infrastructure? What would you need to achieve it?

*Discuss and explore possible futures together.*

We divided the workshop into two parts. The first part began with the tasks Observing and Noticing, which everyone worked on at the library for 30 minutes. Next, we reassembled to introduce the tasks Visualizing, Mapping, Gathering, and Including. The participants could choose to work on one or more of these tasks at the library for a period of 15 minutes. They carried out these tasks either individually or collaboratively with one or more colleagues based on their own preference. Part two of the workshop was conducted jointly with the entire group in the seminar room. It began with the Sorting task, followed by the Imagining task, and ran for 45 minutes in total. Using this discussion as a starting point, the group was invited to make one or more spreads for a zine. Paper in different colors, old books and magazines, stickers, pencils, and glue were placed

at the participants' disposal, as were a copy machine and a printer located in a nearby room. The participants discussed their collected materials and jointly created pages containing text and images for the zine. The researchers then compiled the zine after the workshop was completed, and each participant received a printed copy.

The researchers keenly observed the participants' speech and actions throughout the course of the workshop, and particularly during the discussion held in part two, when the participants were engaged in creating the zine. We considered the dialog that ensued among the participants to be especially important, since it provided us with access to a broader range of perspectives than those contained in the resulting publication itself. Although we actively participated in the discussion, we refrained from creating any zine spreads. To allow us to actively engage in the discussion, we chose not to take any notes during the workshop. The resulting material comprised a rich assortment of zine pages produced by the participants and the notes we produced afterwards. We analyzed this material in an iterative process, thematizing both its graphic and textual content with a focus on the social infrastructure concept. During our analysis, we came to realize how important our presence at the workshop had been in grasping the depth of the content. In the analysis to follow, we begin by dissecting the discussion that occurred during part two of the workshop before finally analyzing the zine itself.

## Analysis

One significant finding yielded by the workshop, and which harmonizes with the results of the fieldwork that preceded it, is the affirmation that the libraries included in the study already function as social infrastructures. After the participants gathered around the table in the seminar room for part two of the workshop, they began with the Sorting and Imagining tasks, which included both reflecting on possible futures for the library and sharing the results of the tasks they had already performed, before they began to create spreads for the zine. Three participants mentioned being approached by visitors as they walked around the library completing their workshop tasks and collecting material. Despite their being unable to assist visitors at the time, since they were participating in the workshop, the librarians were well known to regular visitors, who consider them trusted sources of help. A discussion ensued regarding the staff's significance in making the library a community space and the level of appreciation they receive. When staff are present, library users ask them for help finding their way around, locating a book, or using a digital resource, for example. While these are all well-known and obvious tasks for any librarian, the discussion nevertheless served to underscore that the presence of library staff is crucial if the library is to function as a social infrastructure. The librarians are a fundamental part of what makes this infrastructure *social*, and infrastructure naturally requires ongoing maintenance (Star & Bowker, 2006). Thus, one obstacle to a library's efficacy as a social infrastructure is a lack of staff in certain areas of the library at certain times of the day.

The participants' discussion also clarified how librarians contribute to altering the infrastructure of the physical library room by translating its structure and layout for visitors as needed. It is more common than not that a library's space changes over time. For example, parts of its collection may be repeatedly moved, or new library functions may be added. The current layout of the library on any given day might therefore be difficult for both experienced and new visitors alike to grasp. The participants talked about the difficulty of gaining an overview of the library's physical space and its unwelcoming air. In such situations, librarians can help users overcome any uncertainty about what a room contains and how it can be used. By being present and available, staff can not only encourage people to enter the library to begin with, but also help them to understand it. We consider such translational practices—which include both face-to-face interactions with

visitors and informative signs posted on walls and shelves, and which were also the subject of several of the photos taken by workshop participants—to be practices of care that enable visitors to experience the library as a welcoming place.

Our analysis of the library as social infrastructure focuses on the interaction and interpersonal evolution that occurs within it. Such encounters are not always harmonious, however. During the conversation about how the library can be realized as a social infrastructure, the staff mentioned the Swedish verb *samsas* in connection with two large, curved sofas that stand opposite each other in the center of the library. Samsas basically means "to get along," but with the underlying nuance that such harmony requires a degree of negotiation to achieve an equilibrium among differing views on the matter in question. The staff emphasized that the library is a space where everyone needs to get along—to samsas. This involves a willingness to share the library's physical space, such as the sofas, and its materials. "Getting along" might possibly involve conflict and negotiation, and thus constitutes a learning process for those who share the library: Everyone is welcome at the library, but, equally, everyone must also share the library space with others. Staff are often required to mediate in such negotiations between visitors. Moreover, getting along does not necessarily mean achieving consensus. Visitors must accept each other's presence and share the library's facilities and resources despite their possible disagreement on all kinds of matters. The library thus encourages agonistic relationships between its users, which make it impossible for them to samsas (cf. Mouffe 2005).

The participants' workshop discussion was candid, and included mention of problems concerning both the library space and the degree of opportunity available to staff to create the inclusive, caring space that they strive to achieve. Sometime after the workshop had concluded, one participant made a comment regarding library development and management's expectation that librarians should support it, the gist of which was that although management often invites librarians to share their views on different aspects of library operations, it seldom does so in a manner that invites anything beyond spontaneous, impromptu comments. Similar criticism was expressed concerning the time allocated for our workshop: While thought to be interesting, it was viewed as too rushed to elicit truly considered responses.

It is not only the library space that changes with time; libraries are constantly-evolving entities inextricably linked to the surrounding society. From an infrastructure standpoint, this means that the library as a social infrastructure is linked to countless other infrastructures, and it is essential that these be linked in ways that do not impede their operation. Or, as Star and Bowker (2006, 4) put it: "Infrastructures don't just exist by themselves." For libraries to function well, they must therefore be capable of adapting to societal changes. However, any library's development must be founded upon its staff's knowledge and expertise, and this can only occur where there is continuity within the organization. Our workshop participants emphasized that staff at all levels of the library organization require continuity, time, and resources to carry out the work involved in the continuous infrastructuring of the library in a sustainable manner. This task is essential in insuring that libraries remain relevant and serve their communities in the face of society's changing needs.

Thus far we have analyzed the discussion that ensued between workshop participants while they sorted the materials they had collected and presented these to each other, and during the zine-making activity that followed. We now turn to a discussion of the zine itself.

The fact that libraries already function as social infrastructures is illustrated by the zine that resulted from our workshop. This zine includes two maps of the library room drawn by participants who chose to work with the Map task card. On one map, places of care are marked with hearts. On the other, places of care are marked with plus signs and words describing them. These maps visualize how spaces for interaction furnished with

comfortable sofas, soft furnishings, and plants signal care and reassurance. Additionally, places where library staff provide various types of assistance to users are also marked with plus signs on the second map. Thus, the infrastructuring of the library is related to both the practices of care inherent in librarians' face-to-face interactions with users and to the way library staff organize the library room.

Taking photographs was a suggested method on four of the workshop's task cards: Noticing, Visualizing, Gathering, and Including. Several of these photographs were selected for inclusion in the zine after participants were instructed to illustrate different aspects of the library as a social infrastructure based on their discussion. Adjacent to one of these photographs depicting groups of tables and chairs, the participants wrote the words "welcoming environment." [4] Further, next to a photograph of the library's entrance, participants wrote the words "That we exist." Notwithstanding, the participants also acknowledged that the library does not *necessarily* function as an infrastructure or a caring institution by default. A photograph of a gloomy, empty hallway paired with a photograph of dimly-lit bookshelves, closely spaced and packed with books, were labeled "unwelcoming environment." These examples underscore the importance of recognizing infrastructuring as an ongoing process (Star & Bowker, 2006). Where there is no activity nor personal interaction, and users are left alone with stacks of books on shelves that they may perceive to be inaccessible, the social infrastructure ceases to function, and the library is perceived to be a cold and asocial place.

The workshop participants gave another of the zine's spreads the title "The library as a multipurpose meeting place." They also wrote the following description of the library as a meeting place next to some photographic cut-outs of people smiling and laughing: "Creating new social contacts at the library. For example, participating in social activities such as informal IT and language classes [respectively]." The participants also added speech bubbles alongside each portrait photograph, suggesting that the people depicted were engaged in conversation. One of these speech bubbles reads: "I can be by myself at the library, while still being surrounded by people." This spread highlights the importance of social interaction. In this context, social infrastructuring is achieved by facilitating activities that allow library users to meet and build relationships (cf. DiGiacomo, Oltmann & Hall, 2022; Klinenberg, 2018). Activities such as informal language classes and IT classes, respectively, can also strengthen participants' skills and ability to enhance their own social networks in a broader context. For example, Johnston (2018) shows how conversation-based programming at public libraries has the potential to promote integration. Thus, the impact of the social infrastructuring of libraries extends beyond their walls.

We have now analyzed the zine-making workshop task and the resulting publication. Both the zine spreads and the discussion among workshop participants underscore the significant impact that libraries can have on people's lives. This realization constitutes a crucial motivator for librarians, who derive immense job satisfaction from making their libraries function well in cooperation with their colleagues. While receiving appreciation from library users is important to them, it is not librarians' ultimate goal. On the contrary, it simply serves to arouse in them an even stronger desire for, and commitment to, their library's continued development. Conducting zine-making workshops, both in research contexts and otherwise, can be a tool for scrutinizing one's own activities—and one's library as a whole—and can thus contribute to achieving the desired progress.

## Conclusion

This paper introduces a workshop method designed to engage librarians in exploring their role in fulfilling

the social mission of public libraries. The theoretical concept of social infrastructure has been developed in previous research to describe this role, and is currently being revisited and scrutinized by library practitioners. Although social infrastructure may appear to be an overly abstract concept in this context, it proved to be a highly effective framework for discussing both the successes and problems connected with a library's activities.

We invited the participants in our workshop to attempt to make sense of the theoretical concept of social infrastructure in relation to their work as library staff. The tasks they were asked to perform facilitated knowledge sharing among them. As a group, they familiarized themselves with the concept of social infrastructure and were given the opportunity to relate it to their own everyday work practices. Thus, in our experience, the workshop method has proved to be one way to present a theoretical research concept to librarians, allow them to become acquainted with its meaning, and possibly go on to include it in their professional vocabulary. Although our workshop was held just once, it yielded one valuable insight: Library staff require dedicated time to engage in ongoing discussions regarding the conditions under which they perform their work, including a consideration of strengths and weaknesses.

Our workshop also provided us researchers with empirical material. We analyzed both the graphic and textual content of the finished zine, and observing the discussion carried on by participants while they constructed it allowed us to gather rich material concerning how librarians experience and conceive of the library as social infrastructure. As such, the zine-making workshop gave us insight into how the interplay between librarians' experiences and practice can be researched, and how research can advance library practice. We therefore argue that the zine-making method not only translates research into practice, but also turns practice into research.

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

1 Eric Klinenberg gave the address "Palaces for the People: Libraries and the Future of Civil Society" at Nordic Libraries Together: The Public Library as a Social Platform, https://borgarbokasafn.is/en/conference-nordic-libraries-together/program-nordic-libraries-together?language=en

2 Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT) is a three-year research project (2022–2025) examining how public libraries in Rotterdam, Malmö, and Vienna address systemic challenges in rapidly-transforming societies through infrastructuring. Lisa Engström, Alexa Färber, Marion Hamm, Jamea Kofi, Friederike Landau-Donnelly, Rianne van Melik, Johanna Rivano Eckerdal, and Alessia Scuderi are project members. ILIT is funded within the framework of ERA-NET Cofund Urban Transformation Capacities (ENUTC). In Sweden, this project is funded by the Swedish Energy Agency and the government research council for sustainable development Formas (52846-1).

3 The term "librarizing" refers to the ongoing process of enacting the library by recasting it as an active verb; for more information see Equipped for resistance: An agonistic conceptualization of the public library as a verb by Johanna Rivano Eckerdal, *JASIST* vol. 69(12) pp. 1405-1413.

4 Quotes from the zine included here have been translated from Swedish into English by the authors. The

original zine can be downloaded from the project's website: www.transforminglibraries.net

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