

# Public Libraries and Spaces of Micro Connection in the Intercultural City

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*Everyday spaces represent central platforms that provide opportunities for encounters marked by ethnic and cultural diversity, where transformations can be negotiated that rethink living together. The significance of these ‘third places’ has been extensively researched. Yet, some spaces such as public libraries continue to be largely overlooked by geographers. Public libraries also remain under-appreciated within wider society despite their obvious social functions. Central here is that public libraries can be understood as dynamic and ‘lived spaces’ that enable the emergence of transient connections and relationships. Such spaces are increasingly sparse within modern cities. This paper explores the potential of everyday spaces of encounter, specifically public libraries, to facilitate the unfolding of ‘light’ connections and relationships, nurturing more inclusive forms of urban togetherness and belonging in multi-ethnic societies and the significance that people attribute to these often mundane encounters and micro connections. In so doing, this paper combines findings from two research projects that investigate mixed or intercultural encounters in public libraries in Bremen (Germany) and Glasgow (Scotland).*

*Keywords: public libraries, intercultural encounters, micro connection, shared spaces, belonging, multi-ethnic societies*

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## Introduction

The city is a shared place, where ethnic and cultural diversity and multicultural living are increasingly regarded as everyday and ‘commonplace’ (Wessendorf 2014). Yet, cities are often also divided/dividing settings that are shaped by fragmentation, exclusions and parallel lives. Both trends are closely intertwined, with the tension between them posing new challenges for urban living as people continue to arrive, settle and live in Western cities. Accordingly, public discourse and policy debates continue to be interested in questions concerning which spaces the ethnic and culturally diverse city needs to thrive and whether there are spaces which can help to nurture more inclusive forms of living together. In this paper, I wish to draw attention to the relevance and value of a widely known yet seemingly underestimated urban space: the public library. Public libraries enable diverse practices, interactions and encounters to take place between people, with often-unforeseen consequences, that matter to a variety of groups in urban society. Specifically, I suggest that the modern city needs *connecting spaces* – ordinary social spaces that provide opportunities for encounters and connections to emerge between people – that foster progressive forms of urban togetherness, with the public library representing one of the crucial and increasingly sparse spaces of connection that exist in modern cities (Amin 2008; Low 2006).

Urban scholars have done significant work to accentuate the city as a site of ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey 2005) that is characterised by a ‘permanent disequilibrium’ (Wilson 2016: 453) and the ‘juxtaposition of difference’ (Bennett, Crochane, Mohan and Neal 2016). This captures the city as *made from encounters* (Darling and Wilson 2016), instead of serving only as their backdrop, where connection and understanding meet tension and conflict. Everyday spaces represent central platforms that provide opportunities for encounters marked by diversity, where transformations can be negotiated that rethink living and being-in-the-world together (Oldenburg 1989). The significance of these ‘third places’ has been extensively researched. Yet, some public spaces such as public libraries have been largely overlooked by geographers, who have otherwise carefully studied public institutions, including schools (Duveneck 2018), prisons (Moran, Turner and Schliehe 2017) and asylums (Philo 2004). Emerging research has just recently begun to fill this gap (e.g. van Melik and Merry 2021; Hitchen 2019; Norcup 2017; Peterson 2017; Robinson 2020; Schloffel-Armstrong, Baker and Kearns 2021). Public libraries also remain under-appreciated within the wider society despite their obvious social functions (Aabø and Audunson 2012). This is surprising, given that public libraries are a central part of the urban social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018). They serve as settings of ‘articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’ (Massey 1991: 28) and represent critical spaces through which people can encounter difference in interactions with other people, ideas and knowledge, access information and build shared notions of belonging and social inclusion. This is particularly relevant in enabling more vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups, including migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, to develop a sense of social well-being and connectedness to others and their surroundings (Johnston and Audunson 2017; Koscieljew 2019).

Research suggests that public libraries can play an important role in processes of inclusion and settlement. Understanding inclusion as an everyday process taking place in ‘ordinary’ spaces of social relation and contact (Wessendorf and Phillimore 2018), public libraries – due to their diverse social and educational functions – emerge as critical platforms in the lives of many people but specifically in the lives of migrants and refugees. This is because public libraries can make inclusion processes ‘less traumatic for immigrants and natives’ (Varheim 2014: 68) by acting as ‘welcoming places of refuge’ (Koscieljew 2019: 90) and ‘fostering community for all individuals’, helping migrants and refugees to ‘navigate the process of settlement into their new communities’ (2019: 90). As people often have similar reasons for visiting libraries, contact between users can increase over time, allowing these groups to settle into and participate in the wider society. The literature on

conviviality emphasises how such social interaction may help to mediate and translate cultural differences, something which is particularly relevant for migrants (Meissner and Heil 2021). This can help to find ‘a mode of sociality that builds on difference rather than trying to erase or subjugate it’ (Heil 2015: 323) and to manage urban multicultural and precarious modes of living together (Amin 2012; Wise and Noble 2016). Moreover, public libraries offer critical opportunities for migrants to expand and diversify their forms of contact with other people through library programmes (Johnston 2016), building and maintaining intercultural contacts and diverse social networks in increasingly multi-ethnic societies.

Public libraries can also be understood as dynamic and ‘lived spaces’ (cf. Lefebvre 1974) that specifically enable the emergence of ‘light’ connections and relationships. Since most libraries are shared or mixed spaces that accommodate multiple activities and practices, encounters of differing form, depth and duration can unfold here: from fleeting, banal and temporary interactions to more-personal, intimate and profound exchanges, (un)known others experience new, repetitive or one-time contacts that can feel (un)comfortable and emotional. Important here is that encounters are often chaotic, ambiguous and open-ended, with often unpredictable outcomes (Wilson 2016). The encounter literature also cautions against romanticising encounters and their effects, avoiding the ‘celebratory diversity drift of conviviality’ (Neal, Bennett, Cochrane and Mohan 2018: 70). The fear here is that conviviality loses sight of the structural inequalities, insecurities, exclusions and harms of racism that also always shape encounters (Valentine 2008; Valluvan 2016; Vertovec 2015). Yet, more-recent work emphasises convivial encounters as both collaborative and conflictual moments (Meissner and Heil 2021) in which people (re)negotiate and (re)translate differences (Heil 2015) and build shared lives through difference (Wise and Noble 2016). Similarly, the scalability of encounters has been extensively discussed, a dominant argument being that only repetitive and in-depth – or perhaps even engineered or staged encounters – have the potential to disrupt stereotypes and prejudices of otherness, thus shifting stigmatising thinking in broader society (Amin 2002; Valentine 2008). Yet, a growing body of literature emphasises the value of ‘the fleeting’ in everyday life, arguing that a sense of feeling connected to others can also unfold in moments of everyday encounter where ‘differences are negotiated on the smallest of scales (...) [and] subjectivities are continuously (re)formed’ (Wilson 2011: 646), inducing a sense of community and belonging (Blokland and Schultze 2017) and new modes of living with difference (Peterson 2019a). In this paper, I foreground the relevance of these ‘light’ encounters and emergent connections, since they transform the public library into a crucial site of social association and connection or ‘micro public’ space (Amin 2002), where people can ‘do togetherness’ (Laurier and Philo 2006) and exchange ‘mundane acts of kindness’ (Thrift 2005). Micro connections at public libraries, as this paper will show, are vital to develop a sense of conviviality and embeddedness in the city and in dealing with and/or overcoming crises.

The concept of micro connections is also conceptually stimulating; inspired by Amanda Wise’s (2005) notion of ‘micro hope’, I understand micro connections as ‘the multiple and iterative points of connection that people foster in informal settings and their capacity to translate into wider notion of recognition, belonging, hospitality, comfort and multicultural exchange in society’ (Peterson 2019b: 5). Social interactions and encounters are key elements here. The concept of micro connections highlights them as an integral part of dealing with diversity and difference, as well as the open and gradual development of everyday urban living and togetherness. Taking seriously the warning by some of the encounter literature to not romanticise encounters and their effects (Valentine 2008), the concept of micro connections emphasises that moments and spaces of ‘light’ connection do matter, since it is *then* and *there* that people connect to the world in often profound ways. This speaks to literature that emphasises the politics of the everyday (Neal *et al.* 2018). It also emphasises that, since encounters and relations are scaled through the local to the global (Katz 2007), the connections which people forge in everyday spaces such as public libraries can enhance urban space and togetherness, shifting broader political imaginaries and discourse.

Living together is clearly not without its challenges and moments/spaces of encounter are always woven through with issues of non-belonging, exclusion and discrimination. Micro connections thus exist alongside micro aggressions (Sue 2010), the latter emphasising that unequal power relations, histories and forms of oppression and racism fundamentally shape past, present and future encounters (Valentine and Sadgrove 2014; Wilson 2016), laying open the ‘micro-mechanisms of power’ (Foucault 1980 in Dirksmeier and Helbrecht 2015: 488) – the ways in which relations of power are always present in and shape human relations – in moments of social interaction. This underlines the complexities of many encounters, bearing the potential for both (dis)connection, (dis)identification, (non)belonging and inclusions and exclusions. Crucial here is that the mutuality of micro connections and micro aggressions foregrounds mundane and mixed spaces as political, where living together unfolds as ‘not only an active process but a shared one’ (Neal *et al.* 2018: 131) and where people negotiate their differences and similarities in often careful ways.

This paper explores the potential of everyday spaces of encounter, specifically of public libraries, to facilitate the emergence of ‘light’ connections and relationships, nurturing more inclusive forms of urban togetherness and the significance that people attribute to these often mundane encounters and micro connections. In so doing, this paper combines findings from two research projects that explore public libraries, amongst other spaces, as key sites of intercultural encounter in the cities of Bremen, in Germany and Glasgow, in Scotland.

### **Contexts and methods**

This paper builds on two research projects that investigate mixed or intercultural encounters in public libraries. The first project explores public libraries and people’s right to community and knowledge in the contemporary city, collaborating with local libraries in Bremen, Germany. The other project looks into everyday spaces of multicultural encounter as critical sites to nurture precarious yet progressive forms of living together in Glasgow, Scotland (Peterson 2019b). In Bremen, the participating public libraries include the large central library – which serves a mix of more affluent and working-class neighbourhoods in the centre of Bremen – and two smaller libraries located in the more peripheral neighbourhoods of Gröpelingen and Neue Vahr, both characterised by high ethnic and cultural diversity, lower incomes and lower education levels. In Glasgow, I explored a range of public spaces as key sites of urban diversity and multicultural living, including local cafés, community centres and public libraries in the north and west of the city, with the researched local libraries including those in the working-class neighbourhoods of Partick and Maryhill.

Adopting a qualitative methodological approach in both projects, this paper presents findings from my research in Bremen, Germany. The findings stem from ethnographic observations mapping the micro geographies of everyday life taking place in the participating libraries between September 2019 and October 2021, qualitative collective mind maps collecting visitors’ experiences, stories and opinions of library life between September 2020 and February 2021 and initial results from in-depth interviews with diverse library users between June and September 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic emerged as a central research context, as public spaces – including libraries – suddenly had to close or adopt strict hygiene restrictions. Covid-19 may not only have contributed to the crumbling of public space (van Eck, van Melik and Schapendonk 2020) but also changed how people interact with and possibly view libraries as an important meeting place in the city, altering their relationship with public spaces in general. Methodologically, I attempted to account for these changed relationships as well as the hygiene restrictions by carrying out collective mind maps, where I asked library users to write down and collect their thoughts on specific questions on colourful sticky-notes, labels and slips of paper and to paste them onto movable pinboards. Since the mind maps were meant as a low-threshold, playful and creative way to engage with library users, no additional information on who participated was

collected. The boards were left standing in the libraries for a week for other visitors to see and add to the emerging mind maps, collecting and connecting a variety of voices. In addition, I interviewed 23 library users one-on-one in a private room offered to me by each library. Both methods explored the role of public libraries in dealing with crises, their significance in urban society, atmospheres and emotions felt and the importance of their design. These experiences have taught me that using different materials, objects and forms of display can be a creative and innovative manner in which to conduct fieldwork by enabling diverse forms of participation. This highlights the potential of creative and visual methods in qualitative research (Hawkins 2015), which is perhaps even more relevant within strictly regulated research contexts. This paper also presents findings from my research in Glasgow, Scotland, where I spent time and observed the everyday happenings in the participating local libraries. I carried out 27 in-depth interviews, three focus groups and a closing event with diverse users of these spaces between September 2016 and October 2017.

Inspired by a feminist ethic of care and responsibility (Edwards and Mauthner 2002), I tried to adopt a research practice in both projects that carefully considers ‘how and what we do-and-write, think-and-feel’ (Askins 2018: 1280). This included asking interviewees to describe their background to me, deciding for themselves which information to share and how their identities should be presented, including their age, gender, ethnic and cultural background and migratory histories. This was meant to guarantee people’s anonymity and, more importantly, foreground their voices. In terms of positionality, I often mentioned some of my own identities – e.g. being a young woman with a mixed ethnic background or just recently having moved to Bremen at the moment of the research – in order to connect with different people, building a rapport and trust and opening up new perspectives to discuss topics. A feminist approach to careful research also includes data analysis. Ethnographic observations were transformed into vignettes (Langer 2016) with ‘thick descriptions’ (Ponterotto 2006) detailing important observations, conversations overheard and situations I was part of while in the field. Similarly, I connected and organised the contents of the pinboards from the different libraries into one mind map per question, identifying often-mentioned themes and important verbatim quotations. I openly coded all interview material, looking for themes across interviews as well as for topics deemed relevant to specific groups or individuals, connecting themes with those collected on the mind maps and ethnographic vignettes, where fitting and helpful, to better understand people’s stories and narratives.

### **Connecting spaces as platforms of urban conviviality and embeddedness**

Public libraries represent crucial *connecting spaces* that nurture progressive forms of living together. Being open to the public, libraries enable many different social groups and individuals to spend time together. Particularly, I suggest, the chance to observe others in libraries – ‘people-watching’ – provides important opportunities for visitors to feel closer to unknown others who also live in the city, express and receive emotional gestures and exchange small acts of sharing, care and support (Peterson 2017). Observing others was frequently mentioned by library users in both Glasgow and Bremen as one of the main and often ‘fun’ activities made possible in public libraries, as indicated in the following statement by a Bremen-born middle-aged white woman in 2021):

*You can observe people – without voyeuristic ulterior motives, mind you! [laughs] But you can just watch what others are doing, the kids running around, people browsing the shelves. (...) Everybody does it! I often see people watching others.*

This comment underlines people-watching as a fleeting encounter taking place at a distance that is still experienced as valuable and meaningful in its own right. As this woman engages with others through observing

them, I suggest that micro connections emerge as feelings of co-presence and familiarity with difference (Blokland and Schultze 2017). Since observing others means getting in touch with others who are part of the social fabric of society, people can come to terms with their differences and similarities and with diversity as commonplace (Wessendorf 2014). Some people, such as this East-Asian, Kong Kong-born young woman in Glasgow in 2017, also commented on the added value and significance of observing others:

*People-watching is a kind of socialisation as well [because] maybe you will smile at [people] and they will smile back. That is good enough for me already. That makes me feel less lonely.*

The light and temporary connections seem to enable this young woman to fight feelings of loneliness and disconnection, developing a sense of belonging in their place. This emphasises the significance of ‘the fleeting’ and encapsulates belonging as both a be-ing and a longing for attachments (cf. Probyn 1996). Fleeting encounters and transient connections as social relations, then, can have practical and affective consequences, specifically for migrants. As ‘weak ties’, they can serve as ‘first steps towards social as well as structural integration’ (Wessendorf and Phillimore 2018: 130) as they provide ‘much needed information or even just a sense of humanity, which can be crucial to a migrant’s life’ (2018: 134). The above-mentioned statement also indicates that fleeting encounters are often woven through with emotive elements and gestures, in this case smiling, that can fulfil a person’s yearning for sharing and receiving emotional responses from other human beings. These moments of sensed connection may be small and temporary; however, they can build up over the course of a day and have a ‘critical flow-on effect’ (Wise 2005) as people develop a sense of conviviality in the city that is felt beyond their immediate environment. The emotional and felt dimensions of encounters and their outcomes are the focus of a growing body of feminist research (e.g. Askins 2016; Everts and Wagner 2012; Smith, Davidson, Cameron and Bondi 2009).

Another important characteristic of public libraries as spaces of micro connection is their ability to accommodate a myriad of activities and social groups, unthinkable in other urban spaces, that enable people to get in touch with and connect to others and to ‘do identities together’ (Peterson 2019a, i.e. forming new and shared identities around common interests and passions that better capture how people think of themselves. Since these activities and groups are often of no or low cost and repetitive in nature, different bodies are routinely brought together and into relation. I suggest that this opens up opportunities for people to experience more personal and intimate encounters and to identify points of commonality and difference (Iveson and Fincher 2011). Fostering these common interests and identities can contribute to a convivial atmosphere in shared spaces and lead to a sense of connection and understanding (Wiseman 2020) that moves towards more socially inclusive societies. A knitting group in which I participated in a local Glaswegian library illustrates some of the effects that can flow out of enacting these shared identifications:

*I am a knitter now! (...) When I first came to the library, I saw the knitting group – the library is a big open space. I observed them. After some time, I walked over and talked to them about the knitting. They gave me some wool and needles...we had tea. (...) I now sometimes see [two group members] at the supermarket or on the street...we will talk. I like that [because] it makes me feel more at home (Young woman, East-Asian, born in China, Glasgow 2017).*

This young woman touches upon the open and public sense of the library and the group enabling her to engage in this spontaneous encounter that seems to open up, re-work and shift her sense of self in relation to others and local communities. Feminist work emphasises the unequal relations of power that all bodies are embedded in (Butler 1993), some of which, I suggest, may be renegotiated and shifted in this moment of micro connection

as this young woman enacts the shared identity of ‘being a knitter’ and realises that she can have a place in the local community. Materiality is an important element of the knitting-group encounters, as becomes clear in the following statement from this white middle-aged, USA-born female in Glasgow in 2017:

*I was terrified [the first time I attended the group] but I got here and they were just lovely people. (...) I have learnt a lot about their lives over time. I have talked about my life. (...) We work on our things, talk about what everybody’s working on. I might say ‘Oh, that’s lovely. Who are you making it for?’ (...) or I can lean back and listen to what they are talking about. I hear about their lives, what they’re doing.*

This woman emphasises how the group’s engagement with the materials – the needles, wool and crafted garments – enables interaction and communication to emerge between them, as they discuss and comment on each other’s work – and the doing of it – and share materials among them. This can create openings for fragile relations, identifications and connections to emerge between group members (Peterson 2019a). It can also ease feelings of uncertainty that are part of many intercultural encounters, as this woman talks about exchanging stories and gaining – as well as giving – insights into each other’s personal lives while leaning back and participating in the group’s convivial atmosphere. Central here is the fact that the resulting micro connections can serve as stepping stones towards developing a sense of embeddedness that stretches beyond the immediate group setting, enabling both women to feel connected to the city and ‘at home’ in the wider society. Especially for migrants, embedding in local communities is often a complex, dynamic and differentiated process (Ryan 2018). Yet, when it came to discussing library group encounters, some interviewees – like this Turkmenistan-born Central-Asian/German young woman in Glasgow in 2017 – remarked on the possibility of groups becoming cliquy and potentially exclusionary spaces:

*Groups can start to feel like a clique. If you come to a group that is already established, it can be less flexible to accommodate new people. You can feel a sort of pressure to fit in amongst all the others. You start to ask yourself ‘Where is my place?’ (...) A lot of places have certain images attached to them which can work against some people feeling welcome there. (...) That can give you a feeling of not belonging in a group or a place. You don’t look the same. You feel that you don’t fit in. (...) At the same time, it can create a bond between the people who always go there but it can exclude people who join later.*

While not mentioning a specific a situation or moment of exclusion, this woman comments on how groups can provide an opportunity both for bonding and identifying with others and also for excluding people, making them feel different, unwelcome and out-of-place. These processes depend on a specific group’s dynamics and inner workings, yet show how groups meeting in public spaces, including libraries, may reproduce and deepen dividing lines of non-belonging and exclusion. Similarly, people understood that the ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey 2005) of public libraries can pose challenges, for example by restricting certain practices or behaviour that may further push aside already marginalised individuals and groups and their needs. As this older white, Bremen-born gentleman said in 2021, these individuals and groups include the homeless or the young:

*It is not permitted to sleep here or to drink alcohol or to smoke, which doesn’t restrict most people. For some, it can be a problem. Like, I have seen somebody sleeping in the library (...) who, I think, was homeless. (...) Staff woke him up and told him that’s not possible here. (...) Or some youngsters. They act out, push the limits. (...) Staff will rein this behaviour in and, most of the time, the kids quieten down. (...) They also don’t want to throw them out or put them off but it’s to ensure the collective good.*

While public libraries are often spaces of care, inclusion and participation that can work against marginalisation, this statement illustrates that contestations of social power that include and exclude are also at work in the public library (Lees 1997). These contestations are experienced in tangible ways here, as this gentleman notes how a seemingly homeless man was woken up by staff and told that sleeping was out of place in the library. Likewise, he states that young people have to be ‘reined in’ if their behaviour transgresses the arguably ‘proper’ and ‘fitting’ norms of the library. The willingness to comply with library policies and norms makes the library a common ground where all visitors are treated in more or less the same way yet, upon transgression, some become more visible than others and are positioned as ‘disruptive minorities’ (Cronin 2002). Without going into too much detail here, it was interesting that, when mentioning these issues, most interviewees were quick to point out that the collective character of public libraries meant that a bit more acceptance and leeway for these groups and their needs was shown than perhaps would have been in other places in the city, indicating how these contestations of inclusion and exclusion are somewhat flexible and negotiable (Hodgetts, Stolte, Chamberlain, Radley, Nikora, Nabalarua and Groot 2008). Moreover – and in terms of working against discrimination – the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of library staff was emphasised by interviewees such as this German-born white older woman in 2021:

*I mean, discrimination is everywhere [in society], so probably here as well [but] the library tries to... well, for example, different people work here. Some speak different languages [besides German]. That makes a difference. Seeing diverse people. (...) Everybody who comes here can talk to a member of staff who they feel comfortable with. (...) That can help, maybe, with feeling more comfortable when you are visiting the library and [to feel] that different kinds of people are welcome here.*

She touches on the diversity management of many public libraries, which attempt to diversify who works for libraries and is visible as a member of staff, to more aptly capture who lives in the city and calls it their home and to reflect the super-diversity of most societies (cf. Vertovec 2015). While diversity management should be regarded critically (e.g. Chan 2020), this woman sees it as an opportunity to give library visitors, many of whom are super-diverse themselves, a chance to feel recognised, seen and more in place in the library which, she suggests, might work against experiences of discrimination encountered elsewhere in the city. Crucial in this statement is the understanding that experiences of discrimination, exclusion and non-belonging are also part of library life for some people and echo social inequalities and insecurities at play in the wider society.

Despite these difficulties and perhaps more-negative aspects of the processes ongoing in libraries, I suggest that public libraries represent critical nurturing grounds for urban togetherness and belonging, potentially shifting dominant understandings of these terms by opening up opportunities for experiencing transient connections and developing shared identifications and relations with others. This is particularly important when it comes to processes of inclusion, since even fleeting connections can challenge the fear of ‘the other’ embedded in some migrant encounters and ‘open up space for a low-stakes sort of inclusion where interactions are short lived’ (Ye 2019: 484). This allows, according to Ye (2019: 485), for a ‘breathable sort of diversity’ that can foster everyday forms of inclusion. As such, public libraries are also a key social infrastructure in the urban context, understood here as ‘installations of possibility’ (Lossau 2017: 176, own translation), where cross-cultural interaction and social connectivity can unfold, contributing to a more social and just city. The latter has become particularly obvious in light of the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, with the following section examining the significance of public libraries as connecting spaces in times of crisis.



## Connecting with others in times of crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely altered everyday life and public space, including public libraries. For those using libraries, these changes became very clear as ‘the sudden changing social infrastructure of [libraries] as vital meeting sites of unfettered social interactions’ (van Eck *et al.* 2020: 374) temporarily collapsed in March 2020. In Germany, media outlets reported feelings of outrage, fear and sadness at the closure of this important cornerstone of urban public life. Interestingly, the city of Bremen, as a city state, was able to keep its libraries open to the public by putting in place strict hygiene and social distancing rules – their doors were only really shut during the first wave of the virus in early 2020. Consequently, the local media reported people willingly waiting in line to use libraries once they reopened in May 2020 (Messerschmidt 2020) and emphasised libraries as important sites of social contact and connectivity during the pandemic (Knief 2020). Nevertheless, the situation also emphasises the fragility of public space and publicness. Often taken for granted while being used, the importance of public spaces as social infrastructure is only really noticed and lamented when they break down (Latham and Layton 2019). Libraries’ fragility in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic thus begs the question of what happens to the micro connections emerging here, with their temporary break-down potentially deepening dividing lines in urban society.

While the Covid-19 pandemic immediately comes to mind when hearing the word ‘crisis’ at present, the term is highly complex (Brinks and Ibert 2020). In the context of my research, I approach the term ‘crisis’ in an open and explorative manner, to capture people’s varied interpretations of the word and the role which public libraries may play in dealing with / overcoming different crises. This approach has proved useful, with people expressing a multi-faceted and complex understanding of the term. This understanding ranges from personal perceptions, e.g. depression, social isolation and loneliness, aging or becoming a parent, to more societal ones, including the ‘refugee crisis’, living together, migration flows or educationally distant groups. These findings deserve more-detailed discussion beyond the scope of this paper. Here, my intention is to focus on people’s reflections on the library as an inter-connecting space at a time of continuing crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the strict regulations which public libraries in Bremen have had to put in place in order to remain open, the people I have spoken to for my collective mind maps emphasised their continued longing for social closeness, fleeting encounters and ‘small’ moments of feeling connected to others, even given libraries’ current reduced and more ‘sterile’ state. Frequent comments on the collective mind maps included ‘The library is a place where feeling and being close to others is still possible in some small way’ (Bremen, November 2020) and ‘The library lets people be there for one another’ (Bremen, February 2021), indicating that public libraries remain powerful inter-connecting spaces, although limited in terms of how (long) people can encounter others due to social distancing rules. Other visitor statements suggested that the current situation even strengthens the value that people attach to the now predominantly fleeting library encounters in an urban landscape with otherwise scarce possibilities for social contact. People mentioned that ‘Spending time and seeing people matters, even at a distance’ (Bremen, November 2020) and that ‘The library is the only place where I can still see people’ (Bremen, December 2020). Others highlighted that ‘The library is a constant, stable place where everything is mostly the same’ (Bremen, November 2020), adhering to the micro connections experienced there which serve as a remnant of normality, reminding people of how they used to ‘do togetherness’ in urban settings now nearly rendered beyond recognition. As mentioned earlier, fleeting interactions and transient exchanges constitute a substantial part of how people come together and build connections in public spaces like libraries (Peterson 2017). In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the above-mentioned statements suggest that togetherness emerges as a fleeting network of social connections that library users can tap into, giving them a chance to check in with the experiences of others who also live in the

city and, as one person argued, to ‘collectively try to deal with Covid-19 and to look out for each other’ (Bremen, February 2021).

Yet, not everyone agreed that the public library helped them to better deal with the Covid-19 crisis. In some interviews, people like this older German man in Bremen in 2021 mentioned that the continuing crisis has severely impacted on ‘normal’ library life, with the strict hygiene restrictions limiting library activities and routines:

*Unfortunately, [the library hasn’t helped me to better deal with the Covid-19 crisis] because opening times have been limited and because I come here to sit and read, which still isn’t possible. I miss that. That’s why the library isn’t that helpful to me during this crisis. [short break] But in principle, yes, because I can still come here and access my things. Sometimes I see known faces, talk to the staff. Both are important during this crisis.*

He touches upon feelings of frustration and perhaps a longing for ‘ordinary’ library life, which were oft-mentioned emotions in many interviews, as people expressed feelings of stress, frustration and sometimes anger at not being able to access and use library spaces in the city as they used to do. This reveals the importance of public libraries as key social infrastructures (Klinenberg 2018) and as lived and felt places where emotions – which shape how society feels to different people – become known (Hitchen 2019). Simultaneously, this statement alludes to the significance of fleeting encounters and the impact of low-key sociality, touched upon earlier in this paper, in the context of the current crisis, with this gentleman remarking that short-lived interactions and passing encounters with other library users do matter. Interestingly, when discussing the disruptions to previous and ‘normal’ library life, a common trend across the interviews was that the same people often clarified that they experienced these disruptions as only temporarily and quick to overcome. Most interviewees connected this feeling to the efforts made by the participating libraries to guarantee access and activities, even though with added hygiene and distancing rules in place. As such, the above statement captures the ambivalence of how the library space is experienced and felt by visitors during Covid-19, indicating both how social relations are strained in this public space and how there can be hopeful and productive encounters that carve out ‘geographies of possibilities’ of relating to others (Ye 2016). I suggest that this also implies how the micro connections formed and forged in public libraries did not break down during the Covid-19 crisis but remained flexible and elastic (enough) forms of connection that continue to contribute to (the emergence of) sociabilities in diverse settings during crisis times.

Moreover, I suggest that the emerging micro connections represent moments of opportunity for some visitors to develop a sense of resistance to the current crisis. On my collective mind maps, resistance emerged as a feeling of being competent and able to successfully manage uncertainties. Re-occurring phrases that people used to describe how libraries help them to handle the Covid-19 pandemic included ‘Coming here makes me feel powerful’ and ‘The library helps me to keep calm during stressful situations like Covid-19’ (Bremen, November 2020). I suggest that resistance may nurture a sense of ‘ontological security’ (Botterill, Hopkins and Sanghera 2019) as people experience everyday and embodied forms of security. They also establish ‘anchor points’ (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022) in local libraries, helping them to maintain and strengthen a sense of safety and stability while navigating the Covid-19-landscape of increased uncertainty, stress, fear and anxiety. This sense of security may be small and ‘inward-looking’ (Philo 2012) and more about well-being and people’s emotions and everyday practices (cf. Giddens 1991) than protection and defence, yet it represents an important psychosocial strategy that people can use to resist the uncertainties of current urban life. Here, the role of emotions also became particularly clear as many people perceived the micro connections in public libraries as a way to enact feelings of hope and ‘hopeful affect’ (Wise 2013). Visitors mentioned

‘I can still come here, that gives me hope’ (December 2020) and ‘Coming to the library is like a ray of light and makes me hopeful for our future’ (November 2020). The importance of experiencing hope-*full* encounters in dealing with feelings of fear and sadness provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic also became clear in some interviews:

*I was very scared at the beginning [of the Covid-19 crisis] when everything was closed. I thought ‘I can’t go anywhere. I can’t do anything, just sit at home’. That made me very sad. But even then, I could book an online appointment at the library and tell them which books I wanted to borrow, [which] gave me a good feeling. (...) The library was also mostly open during the Covid-19 crisis. We could see people! [laughs] We don’t talk but even that gave me the feeling that ‘I am not isolated! There is still a place, where I can see people’. Seeing people is important. [laughs] We need it. We are social creatures. To feel that we aren’t isolated, that the social isn’t all broken but that social life continues. (...) It’s a feeling of connection to other people. (...) It made me happy that the library was doing this for the people and the neighbourhood. (...) That really helped me with this feeling of fear. Made me less sad [smiles] (Middle-aged East-Asian woman, Bremen 2021).*

She touches upon how the disruption of the Covid-19 crisis has affected her daily life, with the public library – as an important ‘everyday’ space of social contact and human connection – being temporarily taken away from her, resulting in feelings of stress, fear and sadness. Importantly, she also underlines the impact which very low-level forms of social interaction, in this case seeing other people, can have in dealing with these feelings, evoking more positive emotions in their place. I argue that this illustrates how even small moments of felt connection can become crucial anchor points (cf. Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022) when dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, perhaps contributing to the ‘social intimacies’ mentioned in the introduction of this special section and enabling people to maintain a shared and connected sense of place and belonging.

## Conclusions

This paper set out to capture the importance of *connecting spaces* in the city, arguing that public libraries represent key urban settings of being together that are crucial to the development of a sense of conviviality and embeddedness in the city and the overcoming of crises. As such, this paper combined findings from two research projects that investigate mixed or intercultural encounters taking place in public libraries in the cities of Bremen in Germany and Glasgow in Scotland. Both follow van Eck *et al.*’s (2020) call for geographers to engage with the lived experiences of public spaces as well as to question how their changing function as important social infrastructures might impact on the experience of shared urban communality.

In attempting to do so, this paper used the conceptual framing of *micro connections* to shift attention to the importance of seemingly superficial, transient and ‘light’ encounters and connections and the spaces that make them possible, such as public libraries. This approach takes seriously the potential of these fragile connections between people, attempting to flesh out their effects on urban society: some of the effects touched upon in this paper include the development of a sense of familiarity with difference, a feeling of connectedness and shared emotionality with others and a notion of belonging across scales, connecting the local to the regional, the national to the global and back. In so doing, I have attempted to emphasise the gradual, step-by-step emergence of urban togetherness and belonging and the fragility of these processes as they form the connective tissue in urban society. This also adds to our understanding of social connections in everyday situations and spaces as key elements in processes of inclusion.

The emphasis throughout this paper was on a specific public space: the public library. This focus is deliberate, since there continues to be a lack of engagement with public libraries as vital spaces of encounter and connection in much of the geography literature. This paper thus adds to the growing interest of some geographers in this unique public space (e.g. Peterson 2017; Hitchen 2019; Norcup 2017; Robinson 2020; Schloffel-Armstrong *et al.* 2021; van Melik and Merry 2021). Turning geographic interest onto public libraries is also a worthwhile endeavour because the latter represent key spaces of social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018) that it is crucial to study in more depth if our understanding of the texture of urban life and what makes a ‘good’ city (Latham and Layton 2019) is to be advanced. Increasingly put under pressure by the widening of neoliberal thinking in urban development and planning, public libraries are one of the ever-fewer urban settings that are still without commercial interests and are accessible, public and socially engaged spaces, where forms of low-key sociality and urban togetherness can unfold and be nurtured. Public libraries deserve more of our attention as they constitute essential platforms of social life where some of the lines that divide urban society may be bridged.


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