

Down the Rabbit Hole: Exploring Libraries Across the Globe (2012, consolidated 2023)

By Maria C. Tan, MLIS & David Sulz, MLIS

October 2023 introduction:

In November 2012, we co-wrote a short article for the Wired West bulletin of the Western Canada chapter of the Special Libraries Association. In November 2023, while updating CVs, we noticed the links to the bulletin, the article full-text, and the related Flickr photo collection were all dead. Oh, the fun of the world of internet sharing over time!

We dug through our personal archives and unearthed the various pieces in various places and formats. On re-reading, we found it still interesting (especially the starter checklist of possible observations, questions, and conversation topics) even after a decade of big changes in the library and information worlds.

So, here is a consolidated version no longer “internet-dead” and hopefully better “futurized” in an institutional archive. Herein is a screen shot of the blog introduction, the full-text, and the photos. It is slightly reformatted in places and, ahem, might have had a few small typos corrected.

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar with links for NEWS, PROGRAMS, and WIRED WEST. Below is the SLA Western Canada logo and name, with the text 'British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, Northwest Territories & Nunavut'. A secondary navigation bar includes links for Jobs Listings, Leadership, Why join?, Awards/Grants, and Partnerships. A purple banner indicates the article is categorized under '2012 Vol 15 Issue 4, Wired West'. The article title 'Down the Rabbit Hole: Exploring Libraries Across the Globe' is prominently displayed, followed by the date 'Posted on 18 November 2012.' and the authors 'By Maria C. Tan, MLIS & David Sulz, MLIS'. The main text begins with 'David and I have had a number of conversations about our travels to far-flung libraries. In this article, we share some of our reflections on these visits, as well as a list of aspects to consider when visiting libraries. We've presented the content in a conversational, question and answer format, followed by a checklist of sorts that you, the reader, are welcome to use when embarking on your next library field trip!'. A link to the PDF article is provided: 'To read more about libraries across the globe, click the link to the PDF article: [Down the Rabbit Hole](#)'. Below the text is a photograph of a modern library interior with bookshelves, a computer workstation, and a large wall display. The caption reads: 'International and Cultural News area, University of Technology, Sydney'.

Wired West Article for 15 November 2012

Consolidation: November 2023

Down the Rabbit Hole: Exploring Libraries Across the Globe

By Maria C. Tan, MLIS & David Sulz, MLIS

David and I have had a number of conversations about our travels to far-flung libraries. In this article, we share some of our reflections on these visits, as well as a list of aspects to consider when visiting libraries. We've presented the content in a conversational, question and answer format, followed by a checklist of sorts that you, the reader, are welcome to use when embarking on your next library field trip!

What got us interested in visiting libraries?

Maria: When I was considering applying for the master's in library and information studies (MLIS) program, I was curious about how librarians are using their degree – their work environments, their roles and responsibilities. I met with an academic librarian who then connected me with a librarian working in a different area, who, in turn, had another contact to recommend, and so on, and so on... As well, I'm an avid globetrotter, so I figured I'd take the opportunity to visit libraries in the region in which I'm travelling. Needless to say, I got hooked on library fieldtrips! Since then, whenever I travel, I investigate the possibility of a behind-the-scenes tour of a library in the area.

David: Visiting foreign libraries started with my wife's attendance at international academic conferences when I had time to explore on my own. When I worked in museums, I visited museums and galleries to compare our facilities, programs, and displays so when I started library studies, I started visiting libraries with the same purpose. Tellingly, I was never as successful at engaging museum people in conversation as I find possible in the library world. You might think there are only so many library visits before they all look the same, but I'm amazed at how much I learn each time and how much there is to talk about.

How might library visits in other parts of the world benefit interactions with library users at home?

Visiting different libraries helps us to become more aware of the fact that library policies can vary greatly from one institution to another despite our essential business being the same – collecting information, organizing it, and making it available to users.

That awareness of variety can make sense of a lot of seemingly strange patron behavior. Here are a few recent examples from our University of Alberta libraries (UAL). A student recently approached the service desk asking if she had to return her one book before being allowed to borrow another on and was visibly amazed (and delighted!) to discover there was no limit on the number of books she could borrow. When asked about this reaction, she described her academic library in Tunisia, where, until recently, students were allowed to borrow only one book at a time (she added that the loan limit has since increased to two books for students and to seven or eight for faculty). Another student, this one from China, was given directions at the desk on how to locate a book in the stacks then returned a short while later - without the book, - saying, "Okay, I saw the book is on the shelf. I want to read it – what do I do?" It turned out that the concept of open stacks where users peruse and procure items on their own was unfamiliar to this student.

We serve many international students at the University of Alberta (UofA). The two interactions described above are excellent reminders that our academic users come with diverse experiences in interacting with the library's staff, services, policies, collections, and spaces. These experiences may influence their understanding of how to use the libraries at the UofA, and their behaviour in the library. We must be careful not to make assumptions about our users' expectations of the library.

How do you fund visits? Does your library pay?

While some librarian positions might have an international relations role where visits are reimbursed, our visits have been part of personal trips. Libraries can be as much a part of travel as museums, galleries, and tourist attractions with the bonus being that your interest and expertise are more likely to score a behind-the-scenes view and result in some interesting conversations. It could also be that your commitment to visiting on your own time and dime could lead to other opportunities for partnerships through your job.

Advice for aspiring library trekkers:

An important consideration is whether to arrange a visit ahead of time or to just drop in. There are pros and cons to each approach and sometimes there is just no opportunity for planning ahead. In either case, figure out a clear and concise way of stating your reason to visit because: a) it is not necessarily a common practice, b) you may not have much time to explain, c) you may have to explain it to several people in a row, and d) the other person may not be fluent in your first language. If emailing to book arrangements ahead of time, a short email is more likely to be understood; it might be helpful to think of the "elevator pitch" where you have 30-seconds to explain who you are and why you want to visit.

While some might consider advance contact the polite thing to do, this is not always possible. Often, it is difficult to locate contact information on a library website - especially if you're planning to visit a location where you don't read or speak the official

language(s). Even if you do find the contact information, you may not get a direct response.

Informal, or drop-in, visits require less pre-trip organization, are more flexible with your on-the-ground schedule changes, give you a chance to see a library through baffled new patron eyes, and can increase the chance of meeting regular librarians and staff. The self-directed nature makes it easier to ask questions of your own interest. On the other hand, wandering into a library, figuring out who to approach, and explaining what you want can be nerve-wracking. There is also the possibility of not getting to talk to anyone, the library being closed, and catching your hosts off-guard and unprepared.

A formal visit, on the other hand, requires pre-visit planning, a commitment to a certain time, and the chance of a canned tour. However, your hosts have had a chance to put some thought into your visit and maybe arrange for someone with similar interests to show you around and communicate with you in your preferred language.

Finally, bring some little souvenir gifts or thank you cards to show your appreciation. If your library or institution does not have any branded items, get something from your city. Some simple ideas are pens, notepads, and postcards but umbrellas, hockey pucks, and music CDs also work.

Some things to observe and ask when visiting:

The idea for this article arose from conversations about our travels and how it would be interesting to develop a checklist of things to observe, ask, and photograph, when visiting libraries. As we started jotting down ideas, were amazed at the number of possibilities. The list of features that follows is a good start with some of them having illustrative anecdotes from our own experiences (we fully admit some may have been due to miscommunications). Of course, you will have your own interests and conversations will flow in other fascinating directions – this is just a “starter” list.

Following the list are some reflective questions, a list of libraries we have visited (appendix A), and a just a few out of our many, many photos (appendix B).

Table 1: Starter checklist of some possible observations, questions, photographs, conversation starters when visiting another library.

Feature	Examples
<input type="checkbox"/> Entrance to the library - open or restricted? - obvious or secret?	<p>Libraries such as those at the UofA and at Simon Fraser University’s Surrey Campus have security sensors to protect against book loss but are freely open to the public as well as members of the university community.</p> <p>Some libraries (e.g., Tohoku, Universidad Austral de Chile) have security gates requiring library card swipe access.</p> <p>The entrance to L’université al-Quaraouiyine Library in Morocco was guarded and restricted to the university community. Stepping on the staircase leading up to the university in Havana, Cuba elicited a sharp whistle and shaking heads from two guards with guns.</p> <p>The Babeş-Bolyai library entrance was a tiny door on the side of a big building with no sign and the entrance to the service desk area was one of about 10 identical doors in a long hallway.</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Library hours	<p>Librarians at Leipzig were under the impression that most “American” libraries were open 24/7 so their recent policy to offer after-hours access via swipe card was just catching up.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus support & access	<p>(electronic resources, help via chat, text messaging, email, services for distance learners)</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Signage (and services) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - especially for new patrons, visitors, or non-native speakers 	<p>University Technology Sydney (UTS) City Campus library hires students to provide roving Information Technology support throughout the library. Rovers are easily identified by their bright orange t-shirts.</p> <p>Many Chinese libraries have bilingual signs although the English meaning is not always clear.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Services for the general public and visiting scholars? <input type="checkbox"/> Are library privileges automatic, or do they have to be arranged separately? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - any additional fee? 	<p>UTS library has a designated space, the International Culture & News Centre, an informal reading area with print resources as well as monitors and listening posts that provide access to a range of international media; this area is regularly used by international students.</p> <p>Although the Tohoku entrance had gates and swipe cards, there was a receptionist right there to help fill out a day pass application.</p> <p>Babeş-Bolyai students have to apply for library privileges separately and there may be a fee attached.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Circulation policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - open/closed stacks - noncirculating collections - reserve readings - loan periods <input type="checkbox"/> Are there different policies for different members of the institution?	<p>Some libraries only lend books if they have multiple copies. Leipzig’s circulating books have the call numbers on white stickers while the noncirculating ones are on green stickers.</p> <p>Chinese libraries usually have a “reserve” collection with one copy of every book in the collection and five or more circulating copies so there is always one available.</p> <p>Our International Relations Librarian has visited libraries where students get longer loans than faculty on the assumption that faculty can afford their own copies.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-serve options?	<p>(checkout, interlibrary loan and holds requests, reserve readings)</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Single library for the institution vs. multiple libraries covering specific disciplines	<p>UTS has one five-storey library that serves the whole city campus.</p> <p>Babeş-Bolyai and Palacký libraries had several branches and no system for patrons to request a book be delivered from one unit to another unit, but they could borrow items by going to the other location directly – some libraries don’t even allow this without special permission.</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Service desk - single service desk model, or separate services?	<p>UTS has an Enquiries and Loans desk (for general enquiries, directional assistance, circulation questions) and a separate Research Help desk.</p> <p>Fraser Library at Simon Fraser University (SFU) Surrey Campus has separate loans and reference desks; it incorporates a technology lending depot into their Loans Desk, where students and faculty can borrow tablets, laptops, video cameras, lighting kits, etc.</p> <p>Inner Mongolia Agricultural University library, not uncommonly for China, has many separate reading rooms where books are signed out, a return desk room on the third floor, and no apparent service desk.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Noise zones policies	<p>UTS library has a combination of sound-proofed silent study rooms (with a no cellphone policy), group study rooms, and presentation practice rooms.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Fines policies	<p>May not exist in cases where books don't circulate.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Food and Drink policies	<p>Some libraries have no food or drink policies but do provide separate eating areas (e.g., Leipzig Campus), a café (Leipzig Albertina), or vending machines serving food as well as hot or cold canned drinks (Tohoku).</p> <p>An extreme example is the Amsterdam public library with a beautiful top floor restaurant overlooking the harbor and city serving fresh food (e.g., pizza dough freshly made and toppings cut from whole fresh vegetables) along with even wine and beer.</p> <p>Wageningen library has a sign (maybe only confusing only for non-Dutch) indicating it is not allowed to prepare sandwiches in the library, but pre-made ones are fine. Apparently, if permitted, patrons would bring in loaves of bread, cutting boards, knives, meat, whole vegetables, and jars of condiments to ensure the freshest sandwich possible.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Other amenities: cloak rooms, lockers, umbrella stands,	<p>Several libraries we visited have day-use lockers: some are even mandatory (e.g., National library of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia).</p> <p>Tohoku library has locking umbrella stands and umbrellas not claimed for a certain time (e.g., one week) are then up for grabs.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Collection preference: print or electronic resources.	<p>Tohoku library has a whole separate building for journals because patrons (even the young ones) prefer print journals and few Japanese journals are published electronically (as was the case as well in Leipzig).</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Classification system	<p>Many German, Austrian, Swiss libraries use the Regensburger Verbundklassifikation (RVK).</p> <p>Tohoku university uses the National Diet Library Classification, which is similar to LCC but quite unlike the Nippon Decimal Classification based on Dewey.</p> <p>Chinese libraries mostly use the Chinese Library Classification or CLC, which is alpha-numeric and has some Marxist elements such as category A: Marxism, Leninism, Maoism & Deng Xiaoping Theory.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Role of librarian	<p>While we usually see the librarian role as a guide into the collection, the librarian's role other countries may be to protect the collection from patrons.</p> <p>Also, while some of our colleagues advocate for increased access to information, intellectual freedom, and social justice, librarians in Romania during the communist era dealt with "fond S" whereby banned books were not removed from the library but anyone reading them was noted for the state police.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Librarian status <input type="checkbox"/> Degree of librarian embeddedness in the academic setting	<p>Librarians at the UofA have a status similar to academic faculty but other systems may use "librarian" to mean anyone working in the library. In China, at least, the idea of librarians as having academic status was quite intriguing.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Highlighted collections: Do they have something unusual or that connects to home somehow?	<p>Wageningen has a large collection of aerial photographs of the Netherlands taken in at the end of WWII by the Canadian Air Force.</p> <p>Fraser Library (SFU - Surrey Campus) has a technology collection, new media and video games research collections.</p> <p>Beijing Dance Academy Library is developing an online database of dance resources from newspaper clippings and programs to videos of performances and classroom teaching techniques based on their massive audio-visual dance collection.</p> <p>Inner Mongolia Public Library has a large collection of Western books left in local churches by missionaries in the mid-20th century.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Use of technology to connect with library users	<p>Many libraries are increasingly using social media to connect with patrons but these are not as ubiquitous and we might think. Many popular tools are not useable in China such as Facebook, Flickr, and even often Gmail or Google itself.</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Promotion: pamphlets and brochures	<p>Tohoku library also has a display case of items for sale such as library publications, postcards highlighting some special item in the collection, bookmarks, etc.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Collocation with non-library facilities	<p>Leipzig campus and Wageningen libraries are located in buildings with classrooms and faculty offices. Amsterdam public library has an in-house radio broadcasting studio with public seating; apparently several live studio shows emanate from here featuring, for example, author interviews or musical performances.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Connections with other international libraries	<p>Universities have been creating international agreements for a long time but as far as we know, the UofA is notable for seeking international academic library-to-library relationships as an element of our strategic plan to align with the overall university strategic plan. In fact, this article was partly written while David was in China with Margaret Law (UAL Associate University Librarian with international relations portfolio) checking on existing partnerships and establishing new ones. <i>[2023 note: UAlberta library's international connections initiative was cancelled in about 2015]</i></p>

Reflective questions

Aside from just observing, questioning, and conversing, we both find the opportunity for self-reflection so valuable. Here are some ideas reflective questions to connect your observations with current practice at your library:

- How do you feel in this library? Is it easy for you to navigate and use the library? Why or why not?
- How might users of this library react/ behave if visiting your academic library context? What questions might they have? Is there anything you could do (signage-wise, etc.) to make it easier for someone from this library to navigate your library?
- What would you do if you were contacted to meet and host a visiting librarian in your own library? What would you show them? To avoid being caught off-guard, consider gathering and sharing information about your library's history, collection highlights, building features, usage statistics, and policies – perhaps even creating

an informative brochure. It may also be worthwhile designating a few people as “tour guides.”

- How might you deal with possible awkward situations stemming from different sets of implicit norms? For example, does your library have a policy around taking photographs? We enjoy taking photos in libraries we visit to share with colleagues, but would our library policies allow reciprocation for our visitors?

Concluding remarks

We hope you enjoy exploring other library environments - locally, in other regions of your province/state or country, and abroad – as much as we do. These library fieldtrips place us in the position of naïve observer and provide a wonderful opportunity to step into our library patrons' shoes. And they give wonderful experiences to share with our more colleagues who likely have library visit stories of their own.

Authors:

Maria Tan and David Sulz are both Public Services Librarians at the University of Alberta. Maria currently holds the role of liaison librarian to the Department of Elementary Education. David's liaison areas include Economics, Religious Studies, and Social Work; he has recently taken on the China portion of the UAL international library partnership.

[As of Nov. 2023, David is in the process of retiring from the UAlberta library and Maria is working as a research librarian at UAlberta and Research Associate with Ontario Tech University. Contact: sulzd@hotmail.com

Appendix A. Libraries Visited

Please check out our [Flickr group page](#) [no longer exists in 2023] for photos of some of these libraries [And we've each visited many more libraries since 2012 that aren't on this list!]

- Amsterdam Public Library. 2007
- Babeş-Bolyai University. Cluj-Napoca, Romania. (Central Library). 2010
- Beijing Dance Academy Library. Beijing. 2012.
- Capital University of Physical Education and Sport Library. Beijing. 2012
- Charles University Library. Prague. 2012
- Fraser Library, Simon Fraser University, Surrey Campus. 2011
- Gansu Lianhe University Library. Lanzhou, China. 2012
- Inner Mongolia Agricultural University Library. Hohhot, China. 2012
- Inner Mongolia Public Library. Hohhot, China. 2012
- John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. 2009
- L'université al-Quaraouiyine, Fes, Morocco. 2012
- National Library of Norway. Oslo, Norway. (Norwegian-American Collection, Norwegian Institute of Children's Books). 2007
- Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic. (Central Library, Physical Culture Faculty Library). 2012
- Peking University Law School Library. Beijing. 2012
- Tohoku University. Sendai, Japan. (Main Library). 2011.
- University of Leipzig. Leipzig, Germany. (Bibliotheca Albertina main library, Campus Library, Theology library). 2012
- University of Technology Sydney, Australia. 2010
- Wageningen UR. Wageningen, Netherlands. (Main Library) 2012.

Appendix B: Photo Gallery: see following pages.

Appendix B: Photo Gallery



Umbrella stands – some lockable. Tohoku University library (David)



Security entrance gates in Peking University library (David)



Signage. University of Technology Sydney library (Maria)



International Reading Area. University of Technology Sydney library (Maria)



Library entrance (small door behind little blue car). Babeş-Bolyai University library (David)



Circulation desk. Babeş-Bolyai University library (David)



Faculty-only reading room. Babeş-Bolyai University library (David)



Healthy restaurant within Amsterdam Public Library (David)



Library entrance. Simon Fraser Univ. (Maria)



Circulation desk. Simon Fraser Univ. (Maria)



John Rylands Library, Manchester (Maria)



Guarded entrance. Keraouine Univ. library Morocco (Maria)