

CINE-GT.3049: The Culture of Archives, Museums, and Libraries
Spring 2019
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Observational Study

Nestled along the Eastern Parkway in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Museum and the Central Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library share some of Brooklyn's prime real estate. Both memory institutions encounter heavy foot traffic, drawn in by the institutions' visually stunning exteriors, and draw diverse crowds seeking out the institutions for various reasons. On Sunday, February 17, I visited both the Library and Museum. I intentionally chose my hour-long visits to occur towards the end of the day, from 4 to 5 p.m. at the Brooklyn Public Library and from 5 to 6 p.m. at the Brooklyn Museum, as I hoped the timing would provide me with an interesting mix of people to observe.

Upon arrival at the Central Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, I placed myself at a table in the lobby, where I could see the information desk, main reference desk, main entrance and exit, both public service offices, the entrance to the computer lab, bathrooms, the café, entrances to two library rooms, one of which was the children's library, and a slight view of outside in front of the library. The lobby is both a study space, a gathering place for groups, and a resting location for families and tourists. From my lobby table, I observed tourists visiting the space, locals crowding the lobby to get ID cards, students rushing upstairs to study in one of the quiet rooms, and parents and children meandering toward the children's library. People from all levels of income and living situations appeared to use the library as a destination. With that in mind, it quickly became apparent that certain groups felt more comfortable existing and moving and interacting in this space. Those groups tended to be middle class and above, who could comfortably glide in and out of the different spaces in the library without any suspicion or

lingering glances from other visitors. Throughout my observation, tourists would occasionally walk into the library for a brief respite from the cold, stop 40 feet inside the building, gaze up at the multiple levels and high ceilings and then all murmur to themselves as they decided to walk back out into the cold. This behavior was in contrast to the visitors to the Brooklyn Museum, where people walking into the museum had already made the decision that they were going to go to the museum. Making that decision already filters out a subset of the population, mostly consisting of lower-income and homeless populations. At the end of my time at the library, as I was packing up, an older man, who had been sitting behind me, came up to me and asked if I could help him add page numbers to a Word document he was working on, which turned out to be his Master Thesis. Unfortunately, in the end, I could not help him, as he wanted to start the numbering on page six of the document and I did not know how to do that without researching on Google or watching a YouTube video.

Once the Brooklyn Library closed and I was asked to leave, I took a two minute walk over to the Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum is also a very public space. Perhaps because the exterior of the building is constructed of glass and inside activity is visible from outside, the museum felt like a much friendlier and more inviting space than the Brooklyn Public Library, with its grand façade. There were a lot more families with young children and twenty- to thirty-year-old couples and groups. The level of fashion and personal presentation was elevated in comparison to the Library. It appeared as if the museum visitors wanted to be seen and visited the museum to be seen, as opposed to the library visitors who were at the library to work or accomplish a goal other than being seen and photographed. I placed myself on a bench inside the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum, where I could see the information desk, security desk, building entrance and exit, bathrooms, giftshop entrance, Frida Kahlo exhibition entrance, the small lobby

concession stand, and a view of the outside in front of the museum. To proceed further into the museum, you are required to pay. Unlike at the Brooklyn Library, there is a limit to how much a visitor can experience for free at the Brooklyn Museum.

There was a small craft table set up in the front of the lobby where any visitor could make paper flowers. During my observation, the table was only occupied by children and their parents. When asking a guard about the table, he said it was specifically set up to coincide with the Frida Kahlo show that recently opened at the museum.

At both institutions, I also spent time in upstairs rooms. The Brooklyn Museum was much more of a date spot. In the upstairs galleries, everyone was so excited about seeing the works. However, there was a quiet to the space, like one you would expect in a library. The silence, I think, came from a place of respect for the space, an awe in the artwork, and a focus on the topics being depicted in the works. The upstairs rooms at the Brooklyn Library were more suited for studying. There was far less group interaction. Any type of external noise was looked upon with a scowl and sharp look from those already occupying the space. The only places that were relatively noisy and lively were the library entrance and first floor atrium.

I stayed at both institutions until they closed. I wanted to see how people acted when being forced to conclude their visits to these public memory institutions. Some people acted calm and finished their business without appearing rushed and then left on their own timeline, while others quickly ran around trying to tie up loose ends and left as quickly as possible. The last ten minutes before closing were the busiest during my visits. It also was the time I saw the most diverse crowds of people.

The day after my visit to the two institutions was President's Day, a federal holiday. Because of the long holiday weekend, I believe more tourists were present and more people were

willing to be out later than they usually would be on a normal Sunday night. If I were to visit the museum or library on a weekday or non-holiday Sunday, I believe the institutions would be less crowded and perhaps the populations would be less diverse, as tourists may not be as prevalent.

In terms of access, the Brooklyn Library provides free entry for all. Any visitor to the library can look and read almost any book in the institution and utilize all the resources the library has to offer, free of charge. The experience of visiting and engaging with a community in the library can be completely free. This is in contrast to the Brooklyn Museum, where an entry fee is required if a visitor wants to go beyond the lobby of the institution. This fee limits the population that is able to visit the museum and is comfortable in the institution. People seemed happier at the Brooklyn Museum than at the Brooklyn Library. Both can be places to escape from the present, but I think the library, as you get older, loses its escapist element and turns into a place where you go to get work done, whereas the museum has remained a place to escape, to explore, to learn, and to engage. In both public memory institutions, the local community combined with tourists to engage in solo and group reflection on culture and the arts. Both institutions were very well populated and had diverse crowds in terms of age, gender, nationality, and race. While different types of memory institutions, in the end, I was pleasantly surprised by their similarities.