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# Towards Impact Design for Public Services

**To assess impact is to care is to design is to assess impact...**

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## Abstract

We present here an experiment with designing for cultural integration in one of Montréal's public library. This experiment, conducted from May 2019 to June 2019, aimed at producing a design audit of a particular library and proposing design responses that would be mediated by cultural inclusion impact indicators. To assess the contribution of design to the taming of local cultural issues we elaborated an enriched version of the Canadian Urban Library Council's Social Inclusion Audit and Toolkit. The difficulties experimented with our research through design strategy shed light on some of the organizational conditions that should be carefully dealt with when designing for public services innovation.

## Introduction

The research we present here stems from an experiment with designing for sociocultural inclusion. The experiment took place in a particular branch of Montréal's (Canada) network of public libraries. A branch plagued for some years with inter-cultural issues. This experiment, conducted from May 2019 to June 2019, aimed at producing a design audit of this particular library and proposing design responses that would at least partially alleviate those ongoing inter-cultural problems.

In the course of the project, to ensure an accurate reporting of the impact of our intervention, we got into designing an enriched version of the Canadian Urban Library Council's (CULC) Social Inclusion Audit and Toolkit (SIAT). The core of the CULC revolves around three indicators : receptivity, intentionality, inclusion. To these, we added a fourth one in line with Carol Gilligan's (2003) ethic of care, that better account for the heavy demands that such social issues place on the shoulders of public servants. We also tried to intertwine with the CULC framework some form of design proficiency indicators. This paper sheds light on this experiment and the issues that confronted our endeavour into design for social impact.

## Experimental background: Advocating for Montreal's public libraries through design

Since 2010, Montreal's public libraries have been developing a framework to better assess their patrons' needs while thoroughly renewing their offer in terms of services, activities, equipment, interior design and architectural infrastructure. At the time, a comparative audit of Canada's metropolitan public library services demonstrated that Montreal was dragging behind its counterparts regarding most indicators: open hours, number of books per capita, number of libraries, etc. In response, central network

management was foreseeing the addition of maker spaces and digital media lab to their core offer. They wanted to see branches implement tools, seeds, and musical instrument libraries while experimenting with all sorts of sharable pieces of equipment — even people (living-books). The plan outlined also included expending off-location services, boosting cultural exchanges within the community they serve, etc.

Over these years several frameworks were proposed to help public libraries embrace the twenty-first-century library model promulgated by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and UNESCO. In Canada, many approaches, and toolkits have been developed and used by public libraries, but the particular context in which Montreal's library network found itself at the time, called for a specific effort to build a kind of proprietary framework from the ground up. The aim was to design an approach that could infuse Montreal's libraries' organizational culture while the city administration was pushing forth with its plan to overhaul its lagging library infrastructure. Our team has been invited to outline this framework, proposing methods, and experimenting with approaches that could put patrons at the center of design decisions (Abrassart et al., 2015).

While the first couple of years saw our efforts be dedicated to developing methods and experimenting with a participatory approach to library design, a constant questioning for the actual value of our production prompted our research team. In 2017, the Social Science & Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada awarded us a grant to analyze the conditions, performances, and impacts of our efforts to introduce design thinking in local public services ecosystem.

While we are still in progress with our findings, one of the main lessons we have been able to circumscribe so far stresses the need for design endeavors to better come to grip with evaluation and assessment issues, formative and summative. Both of these forms of assessment are important for they can help to determine the worth and the value of different aspects of a given organization's activities (Clark & Dawson, 1999). On the one hand, formative assessment is important for practitioners who can use this kind of evaluation to clarify goals, better understand the nature of implementation strategies, and identify outcomes. Summative assessment, on the other hand, is central to public institutions competing for public resources, as the incapacity to assess the impact of public sector decisions impede their legitimacy, and their capacity to secure monies. Despite the importance given to evaluation by public institutions, we were well aware of the problems it raises for organizations that need to reform themselves and keep pace with social trends (Streatfield & Markless, 2011). The question is how can designers stay focussed on specific impacts without curbing their creativity and capacity to open new innovative paths ?

## **Experimental Objectives and Research Strategy**

The experiment we depict here represented our first outright effort to engage in a design intervention that would partake in civil servants' explicit quest for social impact. The library branch we partnered with for this experiment is located in one of Montreal's boroughs where the housing cost is the most affordable. Incidentally, the area is widely adopted by first and second-generation Canadian residents, immigrants and citizens. This borough is also beset by a reputation for violence, drug abuse, and poverty. Both aspects are widely confounded whenever the neighborhood's events make the headlines of local and national media. Given this context, most local civil servants, like the librarians, tend to reside outside the borough itself, which can only help deepens the cultural divide between the public institution and the population. The friction thus generated taints the relation endured between the local library workers and the community they serve. For better or worse, much of this friction is attributed to

a compound of cultural and ethnic issues. Hence the interest for the managers of the library to try and foster practices, events, services, and equipment that could ease the cultural gap deemed problematic. That was the intention that was communicated to our team who undertook to translate it through an experiment in designing for public libraries.

Two nested questions raised from that social context. At first, as any designers confronted with a new issue would wonder, we asked ourselves in what direction should we engage our design effort to help in taming these frictions ? The specter of conjectures we could start testing seemed then pretty large, and, at the same time, pretty threadbare given the vast array of experimentation that has been going on in public libraries over the last years. Despite all this experimenting with new practices and services, that *this* situation kept creeping in in *this* particular branch had us seeking some sort of guidance to come up with better, more relevant means of answering the situation. It is then that the second question stemmed : what sort of guidance is there available to a designer aiming at specific social issues ? How can designers direct their work in such a context, and how can they monitor the transformations they produce in the course of their design effort ?

Trying to answer these questions, we engaged a small team of experts, designers, urbanists, and apprentice-librarians, in an eight weeks design residency, asking them to work collaboratively on location in the heart of the partner library branch.

This design team was responsible for trying to understand the systemic socio-cultural issues facing the branch, for imagining design answers to these issues and for testing a few prototypes of services and apparatus that could hinder these issues. In all, the team amounted to eleven graduate students. The most experimented one was named project manager, while five other members were given a special role, their participation in the project being part of an international workshop limited to ten days. We thought that these foreign students, who didn't understand the local language, could help the other members of the team keep a fresh, somewhat naïve look at the problems at hand. All members of the design team were asked to keep a detailed journal of their experience with the project for *ex-post* analysis sake.

The proximity generated by the design residency between the design team, the librarians and the local population, was expected to favor a more efficient knowledge transfer : users informing designers of experiential issues, designers opening to librarians new perspectives to better understand the population in light of experiential realities, and showing librarians alternative path to answer these issues, librarians sharing their everyday concerns with designers.

As the design team was responsible for the design and redesign of services, spaces, activities, etc., the research team was assigned two complementary tasks. First, we wanted to monitor the kind of cultural awareness that the designers would display in their work. How this awareness would translate into the methods and tools they would use ? Would it lead to a compromise between efficiency or disruptiveness and security ? Would it ensure the cultural relevance of the propositions they would come up with ? How would designers deal with such issues ? The daily journals produced by the members of the design team were central for this task, although the presence of researchers side by side with the design team during the residency was paramount in its success<sup>1</sup>. Second, we wanted to experiment with assessing what sort of cultural impact the design residency would foster ? Can this impact be evaluated at all ? If yes, how ?

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<sup>1</sup> This question will be dealt with in more detail in a forthcoming paper.

While the first task required that we acknowledge what awareness of cultural differences could entail, it also prompted us to initiate members of the design team to cultural integration prior to the residency. To do so, we engaged in providing the project manager with the necessary information about the context, and initial guidance into cultural integration. For that matter, the 3D framework of cultural integration was put to use (see infra). Similarly, experimenting with the assessment task needed us to explore the professional literature in librarianship to find the right tool to bring to light cultural impact.

## **Fostering cultural awareness in design : The 3D framework of cultural integration**

The problems our design team had to tackle were real problems and our experiment raised real expectations on the part of the local library. Hence, given the sensitivity of the local community, the dynamism of NGOs, the ambiguities that surrounded the institutional actions, and the lingering issues of insecurity, the road to finding the right diagnosis to improve the library's offer promised to be quite slippery. Our limited presence on location and the lack of experience of our design team were also bound to impede our capacity to come up with culturally relevant answers. Trying to alleviate those hurdles, we turned to the expertise of a research group (LABRRI)<sup>2</sup> who already gathered a vast experience in the neighborhood, conducting anthropological observations of community practices, and partnering with local NGOs to support citizen integration. They shared with us a framework they had been experimenting with to foster cultural awareness amongst community workers. This framework, the 3D model, had been devised by anthropologist Bob White, from Université de Montréal (White, 2017). The three « Ds » of the framework stands for « diversity », « discrimination » and « dialogue ». They represent the three competing narratives through which intercultural issues are expressed in public discussion. White turned his descriptive model into a tool to help community members better account for the fact that, as he states in his paper, « pluralism is in itself a plural object ». His ambition is to help community workers to recognize the three narratives embedded in local programs, in public policies and their own everyday decisions and dealings.

Explaining the framework to our design team helped us make explicit the sort of issues we were expecting them to deal with. We turned those three Ds into design requirements that were used in pre-assessment drills conducted at the end of the different ideation stages marking their work. Furthermore, during our international workshop week, students were asked to provide a potential answer to an identified issue of their choosing. Since the participant we parachuted in this residency, with a lack of specific knowledge of the past tension experienced in the borough, it would have been risky and unfair to expect them to assertively propose new ideas. The 3D model here became handy to structure students' reflexion in the shape of a formative assessment of their ideas. In asking students to assess their proposals through the 3D lens, we forced them into thinking about cultural impacts and provided them with a framework to further develop concepts and to structure plenary discussions among the group.

## **Trying to assess social impact : Tweaking the CULC SIAT**

To experiment with summative evaluation, and assessing cultural impact through design, many frameworks were compared : Ontario Library Association's logic model (Irwin & Silk, 2017), Public Library Association's *Project Outcome*, the *Global Libraries Initiative* (Streatfield et al., 2015), Schmidt

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<sup>2</sup> Laboratoire de recherche en relations interculturelles [Intercultural Relationship Research Lab].

and Etches *Desirable Libraries* (2014). Given the nature of the issues facing this particular library branch, the *Social Inclusion Audit and Toolkit* (SIAT) framework developed by the Canadian Urban Library Council (CULC) appeared as the most relevant tool available. Moreover, as the SIAT equates social impact to organizational indicators, it appeared to avoid some of the most prevalent problems of the logical leaning evaluation frameworks.

In 2010, the CULC developed a framework this assess public libraries' proneness to social inclusion. As mentioned, the framework doesn't evaluate inclusion *per se* but the existence or not of barriers to inclusion reproduced by the organization throughout its services, management process, and infrastructures.

The SIAT framework promotes three main indicators of cultural inclusiveness :

- Indicator of receptivity ;
- Indicator of intentionality ;
- Indicator of inclusion.

The indicator of **receptivity** stresses the extent to which the organization knows its community and the issues it is facing. It does give the tone for the whole framework as it engages libraries in a defense of equity over equality in the delivery of services, putting the emphasis on the detection of special populations displaying special needs that may not be well attended to. This indicator seems, at first glance, pretty much in line with experience-based design. Knowledge about users, and even more so about the quality of access experienced by the users of different background can highlight many unforeseen deterrents of inclusion.

The indicator of **intentionality** focuses on the depth of the organizational commitment to inclusion. It does shed light on the means put together by a library to acknowledge the differences it observes between populations within the community it serves. Moreover, it points to the fact that a truthful commitment to inclusion should echo in the very definition of the organization itself : the way it works and takes its decisions. For instance, the CULC implies that for the SIAT to be effective, it needs to encompass the « breadth » — to use a concept proposed by Harder et al. (2013) to assess participatory design approaches — of the engagement towards inclusion issues across all the personnel of the organization. The CULC states explicitly that the indicator of intentionality should transform the very implementation of the frameworks itself into a lever of inclusion. If we are right in saying that the design approach represents an efficient means to increase **receptivity** by infusing equity in the development and delivery of library services, then the recent appeal to design to guide public library development could be seen as a sign of **intentionality** on the part of library management.

At last, the indicator of **inclusion** merely reasserts the importance of staying focussed on the main goal of this whole framework. Despite its tautological character, this indicator turns the implementation of the whole set of indicators into the means of a more continuous improvement process, keeping librarians attention on inclusion issues in every aspect of their job.

## The ethic of care twist

At the start of our experiment, we quickly felt that the main limitations of the CULC framework rested in the capacity of the librarians to implement it, and more precisely to translate awareness of inequities, and intention to act upon them, into actual actions. Inclusion issues might well be acknowledged across an organization, it doesn't guaranty that civil servants follow suit, moreover that they know how to do

so. The obstacles facing the translation of these principles into everyday practices is all the more apparent when you get to share the daily routines of librarians.

What is asked of first-line library workers is to care about the citizens that, in fact, do come to them with their own stories and specific aspirations. As the ethic of care has shown (Gilligan, 1982), at that personal level attending for patrons entails something quite different than the mere handling of rational criteria to pinpoint special populations and select the program to address their needs. The intentionality of libraries' first-line workers can hardly manifest itself in the same way than it does at an organizational level. Tronto's model of care (2008) does shed light on this difference. Acknowledging the need for care and taking it in charge are just two, out of four phases of caring. What about practicing the care ? What about monitoring the reception of the care given ?

The success of the «caring» phase *per se* seems to weight more directly on the shoulders of first-line library servants. To assess the readiness of an organization to answer social inclusion issues, it seemed obvious enough then that we would need an indicator of librarian proficiency in « caring » for patrons. The nature of this caring attitude should support an acute awareness for users' experience, discomforts, skills, needs, habits, etc. that bears at least a certain resemblance with designers' own commitment to users. As such, the very capacity of an organization to welcome design teams or to develop design skills within its employees, in itself, might yield some interesting indications about its aptitude to answer social inclusion issues.

So apart from the three indicators proposed by the CULC, we monitored our design experiment having in mind a fourth one in line with the ethic of care. We wanted to account for the knowledgeable ability of the design process displayed by each member of the library personnel confronted with the heavy burden of answering social issues as they manifest themselves in specific user's contexts.

From then on, we somehow skewed the goal of our experiment. Our analysis of the SIAT made us better understand why librarians would value design so much. Design promised to deeply engage civil servants into easing patrons' ordinary journeys, grasping situations as they unfold before individual users' eyes. The more information we could pass on to librarians about patrons' aspirations and experiences, the more they could prove receptive to cultural issues. The more knowledgeable librarians would become of the design process and tools through our residency, the better they could display intentionality in dealing with these issues and keep displaying it in the long run. Incidentally, the design outputs produced during the design residency became the mere pretext of an endeavor to transform our partner library and its staff into an organization centered on design.

## **Then reality strikes**

Our experiment with the CULC framework so far showed us how hard it is to articulate formative and summative social assessments with design. Part of our effort to design for social inclusion went astray, but trying to monitor our design team's cultural impact enabled us to gain an insight into the conditions under which such impact can be fostered. Our account of the difficulties encountered bears on some of the reactions our experiment prompted in the community and the host organization.

As with all evaluation frameworks available, implementing the SIAT requires that observations be made, data produced and centralized, and interpretation drew. The time and engagement needed for the evaluation itself to take place seem to be out of reach for most of the library workers already struggling with the regular workload of an understaffed library. Sure enough, in such a context, receptivity toward

cultural issues and intentionality to act upon them at an organizational level cannot suffice. Finding the time to acquire a command of the design process itself seems just as elusive. As a matter of fact, our incapacity to hone design proficiency among library workers affected our ability to warrant an exploration of the most disruptive design paths we could identify.

For instance, one of the main apparatus that was proposed and tested by our design team was supposed to bring an answer to the rules promulgated by the library managers as a solution to the turmoil caused by the daily swarming of the library by students at the end of class. To regulate this daily flow and gain minimal control over the young patrons, the library had resolved in asking students their ID card at entrance. That allowed library workers to better get to know their patrons while gaining a lever to exclude the most upsetting ones. The hidden fact here is that a large majority of the young patrons of this particular library is composed of black people, while its librarians are mainly caucasian. So the daily upheaval experienced by the library got folded inside a racial issue. The rule itself produced cultural resentment in the guise of discrimination and more disturbing behavior from the young patrons.

While diagnosing that the ID card rule, implemented in good faith by the library management itself, was actually contributing to the cultural divides that enfeeble local community life, and trying to find new ways to calm anger caused by it, we, in turn, called into question the very policies of public institutions. As the local media started to relay our critical stance, our partners began to see the disruptiveness we were looking for with our design proposals as a form of ruthlessness.

## **Reflecting on the condition of impact design for public services**

This situation made us realize that the design strategy we adopted for our experiment might have interfered with our plan to initiate the management and the staff of our partner library with the design process. It begs to question under what condition could design really infuse the world of librarianship ? Despite our engagement toward our partner's problems and the physical proximity that the residency entailed, we were still mere organizational grafts. As outsiders, we granted ourselves free rein to discuss the offer and strategy of our partner branch. That is a precious asset for designers. Conversely, we were accountable only to our research brief. As we operated in spite of the management duty to constantly assert the value of its action, design for social services and public policies appeared to be a potential hazard for public relations. That risk was surely not warranted by our partner.

In the last instance, it seems that summative evaluation, the fact that we had a negative or positive impact on a situation, lies in the eyes of the evaluator. Defining a common framework to assess design impact should then be considered a crucial condition for designing for cultural integration and social inclusion. But would it be enough to curtail the effect of the fundamental critical stance of social design ? Is climbing the « ladder of participation » (Arnstein, 1969) in this way be of any help given the skepticism inspired by participatory approaches, too often just reproducing the power that structures the relation between the knowledgeable and the layman (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) ?

The world of librarianship has been keened to include design competencies in its core training. Having librarian-designers would certainly alleviate some of the issues we faced. But designing entails a fundamental exploration of a problem-space that seldom discriminate between the products of legitimate trials and errors and the problems generated by glooming cultural dynamics. Pragmatism and groping around will always lead those who engage in design to tackle the most obvious issues at hand. But behind the most mundane of problems may very be hiding much larger predicaments, and design solution might trickles down community quagmire that more often than not elude the designer's

attention anchored in immediate situation of use. We saw that in sensitive contexts, such side effects can become detrimental to the transformation needed. But how could a librarian-designer deal with the contradiction of his dual allegiance to design practices and public librarian duty ?

## Conclusion

As a partial conclusion to this experiment, we might underline that any social impact frameworks adopted by public services that wish to engage design as its main development scheme has to take into account the fragility of design answers to problems. It has to assume the fact that design is really about groping around. While genuine in terms of process the trial and error mode of thinking that design entails seems thoroughly misaligned with public relations and political expectations. In other words, the fact that design capacity to answer for complex systemic problems can only go so far and that their intervention can only be, by nature, good enough (Simon, 1982) calls for caution with regard to the impact we ascribe to it.

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