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## Public Libraries in Norway and the U.S.: Looking Outside During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Comparing public libraries in Norway and in the US, we will discover a range of differences, especially when it comes to legislation and funding (Widdersheim, Koizumi, & Larsen, 2021). These changes are important to understand, as they have some influence on how changes in library services emerge over time.

While Norway has had a Public Library Act since 1986, there is no national library law in the US. In Norway, according to library law, all municipalities – there are currently 356 – shall have a public library. Section 1 of the Act focuses on, among other topics, active dissemination, free access to everyone living in the country, and that public libraries should function as independent meeting places and arenas for public discussion and debate. While “free access [...] to everyone living in the country” has been a guiding principle since the very beginning of the public library system in Norway, “active dissemination,” and the public library as meeting place and arena for public debate were new aspects added when the law was revised in 2014 (Norway, 2014).

In the United States, every state and territory sets its own library policy, with nominal federal oversight, such as that provided by the U.S. Institute of Museum & Library Services (IMLS). Local libraries are encouraged (but not required) to engage with the IMLS in the hope that they will receive some of the block grants the IMLS distributes to state library agencies, which in turn distribute funds to local libraries (IMLS, 2022).

Despite these differences in national library infrastructure, there are of course also a range of similarities, especially when it comes to programming, and new activities the libraries are engaging in. If we take a look into history we discover that the relationship between public libraries in the U.S. and Norway started more than 100 years ago when Haakon Nyhus, library director in Oslo from 1898 and onwards, came home from a longer stay in the U.S. and started to implement the modern concepts he had seen in Chicago: books and thus knowledge should be accessible for everyone; the users’ needs should be considered the most important issue, not the collection itself.

Both countries also collect numbers about the use of the public libraries. In Norway the proportion of the population using the library is measured in a national census conducted by Statistics Norway approximately every ten years. In the U.S., a primary function of the IMLS is the annual Public Library Survey, a national census of American public libraries administered by state library agencies. According to the Freckle Report 2021 (Coates, 2021), which used the Public Library Survey data as a foundation, there has been a decline both in the physical circulation of library materials and a decline in the usage of library buildings during the past decade. Ensuring the continued and expanded usage of libraries, and expanding voter advocacy for library funding, particularly at the local level, have been major policy goals of the IMLS, EveryLibrary (a library Political Action Committee), and of the American Library Association’s Washington Office (the

policy branch of the ALA). This advocacy is especially important in the U.S. context where, as discussed above, there is no national requirement for municipalities to offer public library services.

The development in Norway seems similar: a survey in 2018 showed that 54 per cent of the population had visited a public library in the preceding year. Although this was the highest number ever measured, and is a high number compared to other Nordic and European countries, still almost half of the population had not visited a library during the last year. To attract new users, including those who do not visit libraries, was therefore one important goal of the new national strategy for libraries presented by the Norwegian government in autumn 2019, before the pandemic. Other priority areas in the strategy period 2020-2023 were to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and to increase the libraries' digital collections.

In both Norway and the United States, then, even before the COVID-19 lockdowns, there was some evidence that public library usage was declining. Declining usage, coupled with a need to reimagine how to safely engage the public during a global pandemic, appear to be among the forces driving increased interest in offering services outside the physical library. These services are typically discussed as library outreach. As the Norwegian government writes, "reading activities, literature and the library itself should be available in arenas where it is possible to reach the groups that do not read or use the library's services" (The Ministry of Culture, The Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 16). While the focus still is on reading and literature, boosting outdoor activities and improving public health become important in reaching the goal.

On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Norway's oldest book and in connection with Norway's role as the guest of honour at the book fair in Frankfurt, the Ministry of Culture commissioned the National Library to distribute NOK 30 million to libraries and other institutions that will focus on reading enjoyment in the year of the book initiative *Bokåret 2019*. NOK 15 million has gone to various events and initiatives in public and county libraries, including projects that aim to move dissemination outside the library building to reach new users.

Although American public libraries had started to utilize outside spaces for community engagement, and to engage new patrons (and existing patrons in new ways), that trend accelerated during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when libraries of all types turned to outdoor spaces in new ways. As early as 1906, then director of the Los Angeles Public Library began work on installing a garden at the new public library building, telling a reporter "It [will not be] a toy garden with terracotta teacup flowers, but a real garden, probably the only one of its sort [in any library] in the world" (as cited in Orlean, 2019, p. 147). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the first 20 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, American librarians in some local communities worked to incorporate outdoor spaces into library services, particularly during summer

months (Lenstra, 2018). This trend dramatically accelerated during the pandemic, when library buildings were often closed to the public, but librarians were allowed to offer in-person, socially distant outdoor programs and services. As a report of the State Library of Ohio stated: “Outdoor programming was the biggest news story of the summer for libraries” (Dwyer, 2021, p. 3), meaning that the increased utilization of outdoor spaces by libraries was one of the most monumental changes to library services during Summer 2021.

### **What has been done in Norway?**

#### ***Cabin libraries***

One of the most comprehensive projects – Nynorsk cabin libraries – was conducted in the county of Sogn and Fjordane, financed by the county, the county library, the municipalities in the county, and a private foundation (Sparebankstiftinga Sogn og Fjordane). In each of the 26 municipalities in the county a cabin was built that included space for books and reading (see the image below for an example). The project is described in terms of improving public health by boosting outdoor activities, but also by stimulating reading. To stimulate reading and to raise awareness of good children’s literature in Nynorsk (one of the two official Norwegian written languages used by about 10 to 15 per cent of the inhabitants in Norway), the cabins are equipped with books that can be read at the cabins. But the cabins and the surrounding nature were also used for concerts and readings. As pointed out by the librarians involved in the project, these arrangements consumed much more planning and time than similar arrangements inside the library building. Children, young people, and immigrants living in the municipality were the target audience. See Sparebanken Sogn og Fjordane (2018) for a presentation of the project.



Image of one of the cabins

### *Outdoor libraries*

Other examples of moving parts of the collection outside the library building are found in many municipalities. Here are just two examples. Fjærland, Norway's book town, promotes nature and books/reading also to attract tourists (image below on the right, see also Fjord Norway [2013]).

Ålesund Library (2019) posted these pictures on Facebook in May 2019. Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen Bokbyen Fjærland



Fjærland, Norway's first book town, presents itself and the concept in a video on YouTube, featuring the following:

Fjærland is a tiny village squeezed in between the glacier and the Sognefjord. Fjærland is Norway's book town and stocks about 2.5 miles of shelves filled with books in a variety of abandoned buildings – from ferry waiting rooms, stables and local banks to a post office and grocery shop. (Fjord Norway, 2013, n.p.)

By placing books outside the library building, one might argue that people – both locals and visitors – are exposed to books in new and probably unexpected surroundings, most often in beautiful landscapes where they are invited to stay for a while. While they enjoy a stunning view, they also have the opportunity to read a poem or to find books about the area, its animals etc.

### *Literary walks and outdoor readings*

Another way librarians take books out of the library building are literary walks and outdoor reading. Libraries have chosen different solutions for how to organize literary walks. One of the most resource-intensive ones was to have guided walks where, for instance, a librarian reads a poem or part of a poem on several specific

points during the walk/hike. Digital walks were for instance created by the library in Vågan in Northern Norway:



Other examples are readings that would take place at the library were moved outdoor and announced as readings under the northern lights or readings around a fireplace.

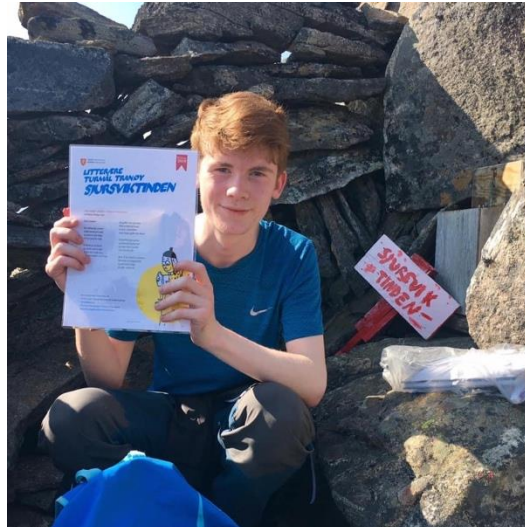
Another option was to place literature in nature along the walking paths like here in Lyngen, Northern Norway:



Photos by librarian Åse Hansen

Or like in Senja, Northern Norway to create literary hikes where people are encouraged to take a selfie at the end of the walk where poems or fairy tales or other texts – mostly aimed at children and thus families – are placed. If you have visited 3 out of the 9 hikes you can collect a little gift at the library. Everyone walking 5 out of the 9 hikes will participate in a lottery.





There are no numbers for how many people were on these walks, but the librarian in charge for the project emphasized that the walks should be for everyone and especially for families with children. At the same time, she mentioned how time consuming the project was, because it often could take several hours to drive to the destination and to go for the walk. In addition to this they often had to ask for permission to place out the posters. In autumn the posters had to be collected again because of the rough climate.

### What has been done in the U.S.?

As discussed elsewhere (Lenstra & Campana, 2021; Lenstra & Campana, 2022), prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic a sizable number of public libraries in North America had already started offering programs, collections, and spaces that supported access to nature and outdoor spaces. National organizations like the Children & Nature Network (C&NN), the National Center for Families Learning, state seed lending networks, the National Park Service, the US Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension System, America Walks, and others all provided librarians with at least some resources to help them create new outdoor-oriented services in specific communities (Lenstra & Campana, 2021). Nonetheless, a few specific recent trends can be identified. Those include the following:

#### *StoryWalk*

Started through a collaboration between a public health professional and a public library in Montpelier, Vermont, the StoryWalk movement has since spread across

North America, and beyond. The idea is simple: a book, usually a children's storybook, is taken apart, the pages are laminated, and they are posted along a walking trail, often accompanied with prompts that encourage both active reading and physical activity. A 2017 survey found that about 30% of public libraries in the United States and Canada had offered a StoryWalk, either by themselves or in collaboration with a park or another outdoors-oriented organization (Lenstra, 2017).



As the StoryWalk concept has spread, it has also evolved. In addition to temporary installations, a growing number of libraries are also investing in permanent installations that involve librarians replacing book titles on a quarterly or other regular basis.

### ***The Nature Smart Library, or NatureBrary***

One of the most visible ideas developed before the pandemic was the concept of the Nature Smart Library, which author and activist Richard Louv developed in collaboration with the St. Paul Public Library around 2010, when the library contracted with the Children & Nature Network (C&NN) to embed nature and nature-based learning into its renovated Sun Ray Library (this story is told in full in Davis, 2017). Louv and C&NN shared their ideas widely within the public library profession, culminating in a conference session at the February 2020 Public Library Association Conference on “Environmental Literacy for Children and Families,” which focused on “Nature Deficit Disorder” (another term Louv coined) and how librarians can address it through spaces, collections, programs, and partnerships (Andrews & Horseman, 2020).





Based on their research on this topic, the Children & Nature Network (C&NN) articulates three ways libraries support engagement in outdoor spaces in the form of the Nature Smart Library (C&NN, 2021):

- Resource lending – such as seeds, backpacks, snowshoes, or placing things like little free libraries or nature book nooks in parks or other greenspaces
- Nature activities & infrastructure – library led programming that takes place in outdoor spaces, including family nature clubs, StoryWalks, and installing gardens on library grounds
- Youth leadership – Building capacity for youth to be outdoor leaders, including connecting Library Teen Advisory Boards to environmental and nature stewardship opportunities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the C&NN continued to support public librarians interested in addressing the nature deficit disorder, particularly in their collaboration with the National League of Cities and their Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiative. This initiative focuses on helping “city leaders and

their partners ensure that all children have the opportunity to play, learn and grow in nature, from urban parks and community gardens to the schoolyards, early childhood centers and *library grounds*” (National League of Cities, 2022, n.p., emphasis added).

### ***Grassroots trends during COVID-19 Pandemic***

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, public librarians were challenged as they perhaps had never been before. In these challenging times, many librarians tried new things. Early in the pandemic the American Library Association (2020) noticed that more and more patrons were coming to library’s outdoor spaces to utilize free WiFi, and on March 23, 2020, the ALA released a press release encouraging libraries to leave WiFi open during closures.

At the national level, one of the first commentators to note that public librarians were turning to outdoor spaces during the pandemic was Eric Klinenberg, who in September 2020 noted that, “public spaces are morphing and transforming during this COVID crisis. A number of libraries, for example, have effectively unfolded, moving services outdoors, and moving librarians to other spaces” (2020, n.p.). Library architects were also early observers of the rise of outdoor public librarianship. The architectural firm MSR Designs (Lesneski, 2020) published an in-depth report on “responding to a pandemic’s impact on built environments,” focusing on how librarians had started thoughtfully using outdoor spaces to engage communities during the first year of the pandemic. A full assessment of how libraries utilized outdoor spaces during the COVID-19 Pandemic has yet to be made.

### **Conclusions**

Through this examination of trends in outdoor oriented librarianship in Norway and in the United States, we see both similarities and differences. In both countries we see efforts focused on promoting reading outdoors. We also see efforts in both countries to take the library outside, thus perhaps ensuring the library’s continued visibility and relevance to the community served. In both cases, library resources and outdoor spaces are woven together, despite challenges associated with taking these resources and programs outside. We also see differences: Norwegians typically consider themselves to be outdoors-oriented people, and the placement of library resources into outdoor spaces could thus be seen as a strategy to “meet people where they are,” outdoors. In contrast, in the United States there is a perception that Americans suffer from nature deficit disorder, and thus there is a focus on leveraging the library to promote more healthy engagement in outdoor spaces.

This article sets the stage for larger international trends of this emerging trend, which does not seem to be diminishing even as vaccination rates suggest the COVID-19 Pandemic may be entering a new endemic stage. In May 2021, the International Federation of Library Associations, or IFLA, featured architects and library designers from around the world in a webinar on “Outdoor Spaces as Key Assets for Libraries” (IFLA, 2021). Studies such as this one, which contextualize local developments in both national and transnational trends, will help ensure that researchers, policy makers, and educators are able to understand and play a role in shaping or guiding this trend.

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