

Learn to Live with Others at the Library

Libraries from Chandigarh to San Francisco show why they are the ideal learning grounds for convivencia, the capability for co-existence.



Tommi Laitio · [Follow](#)

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Illustration: Nene Tsuboi

By Tommi Laitio & Sebastián Cortesi

Public spaces across the globe face challenges arising from increasing inequality, complexity, polarization, and diversity. Holding space for intellectual freedom or sharing space across differences raises questions among public space leadership and staff:

- Is the future of libraries limited to dealing with problems?
- What does it mean to be a place for everyone in a divided city?
- What is the responsibility that public libraries should and can carry for societal challenges?

At the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University, we are conducting a comparative case study research on public space partnerships in Amsterdam (NL), Fortaleza (BRA), Los Angeles (USA, Mecklenburg County (USA), and Philadelphia (USA) to develop new strategies for public institutions. We want to do research that resonates with public sector practice. That is why Tommi Laitio as the principal investigator has engaged in numerous engagements with library staff and leadership in North America and Europe and hosted a monthly global convening of 18 library leaders on partnerships to reflect on our preliminary research findings. In October 2023, we hosted a workshop in the Metropolitan Libraries conference in Buenos Aires, where ten libraries from Europe, North America, and Asia shared good partnership practices on fostering co-existence in library spaces.



Library leaders at the MetLib Conference in Buenos Aires. From left: Tommi Laitio (Johns Hopkins University), Chris Sigaloff (Amsterdam), Mathilde Servet (Paris), Lisa Radha Vohra (Toronto), Anki Mölläri (Helsinki), Neeza Singh (Chandigarh), Marjan Marinkovic (Belgrade), Michelle Jeffers (San Francisco), Laura Heller (Bremen), Susan Buttaccio (Buffalo), Sebastián Cortesi (Johns Hopkins University), and Eva Mitnick (Los Angeles)

Based on these engagements, we suggest the Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese speaking) concept of *convivencia* as a strategic framework for public libraries in a world of divisions. *Convivencia* is a cooperative state between harmony and open conflict, which emphasizes practice, effort, negotiation, and accommodation. To strive for *convivencia* is approaching public life as a dance, an active and constant negotiation where a diverse set of actors learns over time to share public goods and spaces but where mistakes and friction are an inevitable part of public life. *Convivencia* does not have a good equivalent in English. It is different than its English “cousin” *conviviality*, which is often used to convey bourgeoisie happiness, festivity,

and fun. (Wise and Noble 2016). We distinguish convivencia conceptually from urban marketing approaches that seek harmony at the cost of diversity.

There is a difference between seeking harmony and seeking convivencia.

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Behavior	Harmony	Urban Marketing	Naive
		Friction	Convivencia

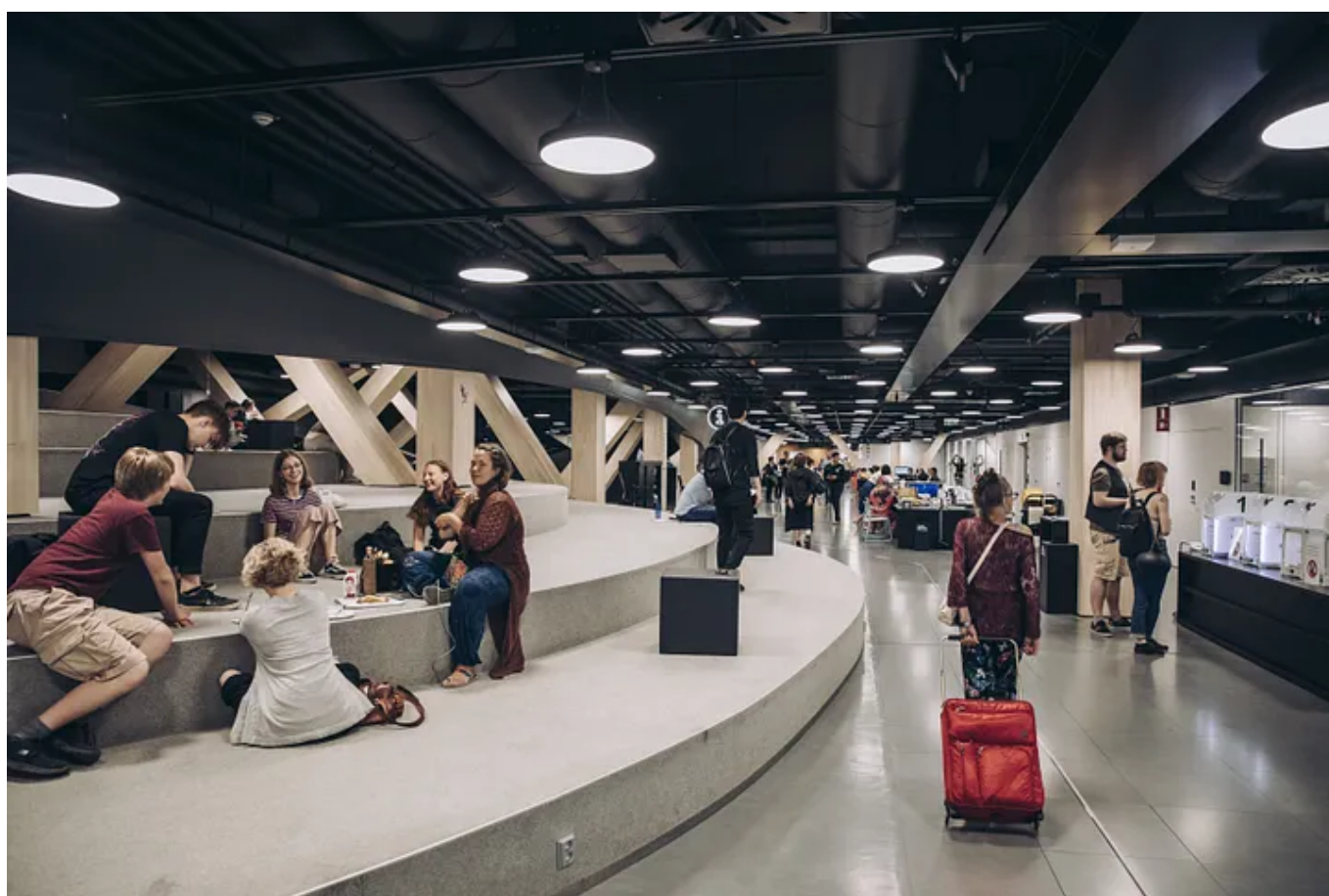
We do not wish to romanticize friction. We are not claiming that adopting convivencia as a guiding principle would make living across differences easy and smooth. Too much friction leads to undemocratic dominance or open conflict. But striving for harmony is as risky. Harmony is usually achieved at the cost of exclusion. We see convivencia as a tactical strategy to build our confidence and resilience to engage in public life. Convivencia is a set of capabilities that both institutions and individuals can learn and resource. In other words, these are skills meant to help us be “at ease” with the unpredictability and messiness of it all. (Rishbeth & Rogaly 2017)



Something in Common Exhibition at Los Angeles Public Library.

Public libraries and parks as beloved spaces which people use on a voluntary basis have an incredible potential to be the ultimate learning grounds for

convivencia. Social scientific research shows that more robust civic communities enhance the performance of democratic institutions (Putnam et al. 1994). By building the capabilities of staff and visitors to feel at ease with friction, convivencia-led policies enhance the city's overall quality of life. Libraries provide opportunities for encounters within difference without forcing people to take part in shared activities. They are 'spaces apart', in which the possibility to be indifferent to different behaviors and people can open us to otherness (Barker et al. 2019).



Helsinki's Central Library Oodi. Image: City of Helsinki.

Inspired by multicultural/conviviality research conducted in Britain (Back & Sinha 2016), we suggest a set of five convivencia principles for public libraries as a pragmatic way to operationalize the concept into a institutional policies. We advocate for institutions to develop programs and policies that

use convivencia as a lens for stakeholder engagement, programming, spatial design, community engagement, and staff development.

Convivência Skills as Organizational Capabilities

Conviviality Principle (Back and Sinha 2016)	Application to libraries (Laitio 2023)
Attentiveness and curiosity	Having the skills and processes to pay attention to the community outside the institution and approaching the world without judgment.
Care for the life of the city	Demonstrating commitment to the wellbeing of the entire community. Pooling knowledge and resources. Recognizing resource and value differences.
Worldliness	Building and maintaining regional, national, and international networks. Enriching programming, design, and collections with voices and experiences both familiar and distant.
Aversion to the pleasures of hating	Gaining control over reactions to criticism, mistrust, or resentment. Having the capabilities for mediation and conflict resolution.
Make connections and build a home in a landscape of division and social damage	Taking concrete action with others building on local assets. Remaining hopeful in the face of resource deficiency and social damage.

Convivencia is a forgiving yet ambitious framework for thinking about successful public spaces. While libraries as public institutions have a moral and legal responsibility to advance equity and democracy, public libraries alone cannot be expected to solve the societal divisions affecting them. Convivencia is a way for libraries to position themselves as critical civic infrastructures for democracy, to communicate their commitment to innovation, and open themselves to partnerships — while not departing from their core mission and legacy as places of learning.



Reading at the Square library kiosk on Seu Zequinha neighborhood in Fortaleza.

To conclude, there's good news. First, in our multiple engagements, we have learned that libraries are exceptionally skillful in turning abstract frameworks into inspiring programming, spaces, and services. Second, as you can see below, libraries across the world are already developing innovative solutions from intellectual freedom and equity statements in Toronto to cross-generational library spaces in Chandigarh, from social mediation teams to reach out to remote neighborhoods in Fortaleza to better strategies to engage with large numbers of young people in Buffalo's central library, from using artistic interventions to prompt conversations in San Francisco to testing new library concepts in pop-up labs in Southeast Amsterdam, from equity-focused community kitchens in Edmonton to new collections policies in Paris. Third, as we have learned through our monthly exchanges, libraries are extraordinarily generous organizations not in competition with each other and therefore willing to share their discoveries and struggles openly with others. And finally, none of the libraries claim that they have it "figured out". But that's just the point. Convivencia is a commitment to active practice.

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Examples from Libraries

Belgrade City Library

Belgrade, Serbia

Example: Diverse Cultures Hub

To provide opportunities to connect to other cultures, Belgrade City Library

is utilizing partnerships with embassies, nonprofits, foreign libraries, and cultural institutions to become a hub for an inclusive, intercultural society. It is intentionally looking for ways to enrich and diversify its programming, collections, services, and exhibitions.

Biblioteca Estadual do Ceará

Fortaleza, Brazil

Example: Social Mediation Team

Next to operating the recently renovated public library Bece in the cultural center of Fortaleza, the library supports approximately 70–100 community-run libraries in neighborhoods with book donations and training. Recently, the library initiated a social mediation team, which builds trust and relationships with the library activists in neighborhoods. The multi-disciplinary team consists of community experts with a background in social activism and the community library movement. Events organized together with community libraries bring storytellers and artists to the neighborhoods and invite groups from the neighborhoods to its downtown location.

Bibliothèques de la Ville de Paris

Paris, France

Project: Events and Collections Policy

The library network of the City of Paris is developing policies for cultural events and collections following interruptions of programming and challenges to collections across France. The library is developing guidelines that guarantee pluralism and equal access according to the Robert law.

Buffalo & Erie County Public Library

Buffalo, USA

Example: Central Library

The Central Library has seen an influx of young visitors, resulting in

increased noise and conflicts. The library has collaborated with youth engagement and conflict resolution organizations and engaged with school administrators and law enforcement to comprehensively address the situation. Additional spaces and programming for children and teens have been introduced and the library conducts surveys to understand their preferences.



New Main Library in Charlotte shares the lobby with the theater. Image: Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

Charlotte, USA

Example: New Main Library Project

The new main library's design incorporates practical solutions and thoughtful elements to create a welcoming, non-segregated space. The new library project combines practicality, intentional design, and a public commons strategy to cater to diverse user types, emphasizing inclusivity and a sense of belonging for all visitors. The library encourages social mixing, for instance by functioning as the lobby for the connected theater.

Hangzhou Public Library

Hangzhou, China

Example: Barrier-free Reading Space

Hangzhou Library recognized the information gap faced by visually impaired individuals and took steps to promote inclusivity. They established an accessible reading space with over 1000 books for the blind and advanced technology catering to different levels of vision impairment. Emphasizing “convivencia,” librarians aim to accommodate diverse groups in a rapidly changing society and bridge the digital divide, promoting information literacy. These initiatives empower disabled individuals to integrate into society and gain support from the wider community.

Helsingin kaupunkikirjasto

Helsinki, Finland

Project: Celebrating cultural diversity and strengthening the sense of belonging — Case Itäkeskus library

Located in a multicultural area, the library addresses the needs of multilingual user groups through collaborations with NGOs, cultural events, and workshops. They aim to create spaces that encourage interaction and learning between Finnish-speaking individuals and language minorities, fostering diversity and a sense of community. To handle potential tensions, librarians and management are trained in conflict resolution, active listening, and community engagement skills.



Senior Librarian Roman Antonio fixing a stuck copying machine at the Panorama City library in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles Public Library

Los Angeles, USA

Example: Library Experience Office

The Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) faced rising inappropriate and violent behavior, impacting staff and guest safety and comfort. To address this, LAPL established the Library Experience Office, emphasizing staff training in trauma-informed interactions and de-escalation techniques. They also added social workers and community service representatives to support and connect guests to relevant services. LAPL's approach seeks to balance community service with safety and inclusivity, addressing root causes and fostering a positive, welcoming atmosphere where everyone can thrive and belong.



New library concepts are developed in temporary library labs in Amsterdam.

Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Example: OBA NEXT: The development of a library for the future in the Southeast of Amsterdam

OBA Next is going to be a cutting-edge library in Amsterdam's South East. The concept is developed in OBA Next Labs, physical spaces managed and programmed with the community partners. OBA Next aims to contribute to neighborhood renewal while avoiding gentrification. Through the Labs, they are creating a community-driven space that respects the local context, promotes dialogue, and positively impacts the neighborhood, adhering to core library values.



San Francisco Public Library

San Francisco, USA

Example: Finding the Middle Ground

San Francisco's Main Library in the Tenderloin neighborhood faces challenges related to homelessness and the opioid crisis, affecting its reputation and discouraging some community members from visiting. To address this, the San Francisco Public Library partnered with The Exploratorium to create Middle Ground, an interactive exhibit focusing on social science experiments led by BIPOC community ambassadors. The goal is to encourage prosocial behavior, challenge biases, and promote acceptance of the library's diverse visitors. Visitors are encouraged to confront biases and broaden their understanding of others, aiming to reignite camaraderie and community understanding within the library.

Stadtbibliothek Bremen

Bremen, Germany

Example: Co-existence in a library branch in a hotspot

The library branch faces challenges involving two distinct groups: local residents and counseling service seekers, leading to language barriers, unsupervised children, and tensions. To address this, they've designated a separate room for counseling and implemented clear, multi-language rules using pictograms. The goal is to create a welcoming and respectful space where everyone can pursue their interests without disruption, addressing tensions between visitor groups.



Book Sanctuary at Toronto Public Library

Toronto Public Library

Toronto, Canada

Project: Equity and Intellectual Freedom Statements

The statements set a board-approved framework for how the largest public library system in North America approaches intellectual freedom and equity as mutually reinforcing goals. It acknowledges global challenges to intellectual freedom, particularly in Canada, affecting marginalized groups' rights. The statements are backed with staff training, new programming and a standardized process for library patrons to challenge the library's position. Challenges are reported annually to the Board.



Children's areas are used for adults during the day.

T.S. Central State Library

Chandigarh, India

Example: Children Library space used by Senior citizens (Cross Generational usage of spaces)

The Children's Library faces low weekday child usage due to school commitments, while senior citizens lack digital skills and a designated learning space. To address this, they've introduced a weekday program focusing on digital literacy for seniors. It includes computer and smartphone learning sessions, fostering intergenerational connections through storytelling and craft classes. Senior citizens share their life stories with children, and they teach crochet and knitting, promoting social interaction.

The program aims to bring seniors to the library, encouraging children to respect and learn from them, fostering interest in intergenerational topics.

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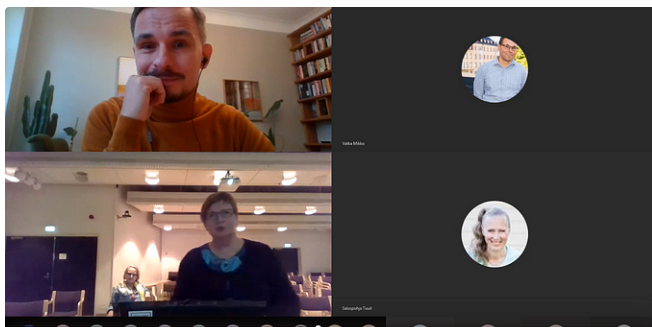
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Used to run libraries, culture, youth and sports for Helsinki. Currently research on parks and libraries at Johns Hopkins. Views are my own.

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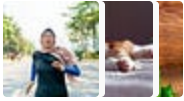
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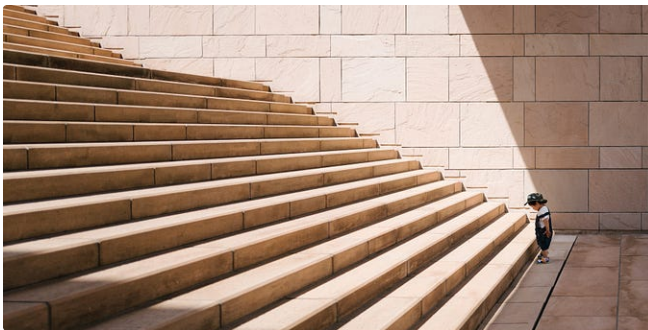
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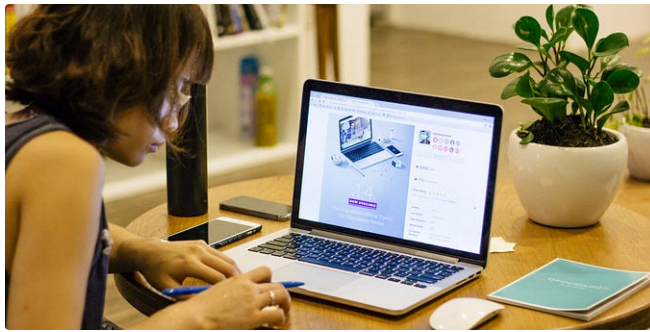
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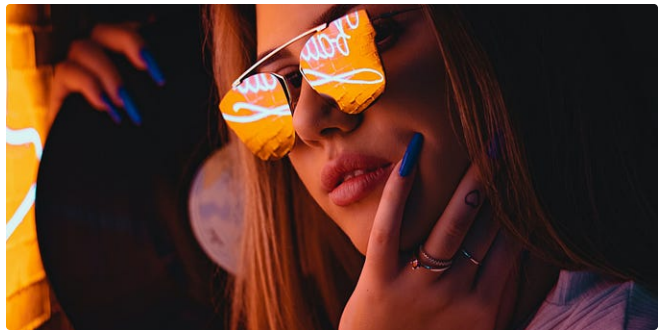
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