



**Going Green in North American Public Libraries:
A Critical Snapshot of Policy and Practice**

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Abstract:

In recent years, the global library community has recognized that reversing the human impact on the environment is part of its social responsibility. This presentation examines this ethic within the context of the North American library community with particular attention to analysis of related policy and practice in five major metropolitan areas. Topics treated include the development of “green” policies, procedures, strategic plans, mission statements, vision statements, and values statements; and, “green librarianship” apparent at the service level of select library associations and institutions. Findings indicate that there is an exciting emergent library discourse on “green” policy and actions. However: (1) public libraries are implementing “green” measures at the service and programming levels, but not yet encoding a green ethic in official institutional language; and, (2) library associations are generally remiss in addressing environmental responsibility in any form or manner in their policies. Audience contribution is encouraged on how to build better green momentum in North American librarianship, as well as how to develop a more socially responsible global profession in general. To what extent is the slim and slow greening of libraries reflective of the status of grassroots and activist librarianship in general?

In 1962, Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, provided a wakeup call for humanity, emphasising the important role we play in affecting our planet and our environment. Since then the environmental movement has gained momentum, and more people want to make changes at home and at work – ensuring they live a sustainable lifestyle. This societal shift has been adopted by the library community, with associations and institutions increasingly taking steps to make their organizations environmentally sustainable. For example, in 1989 the American Library Association established the Task Force on the Environment (TFoE) as "one of the issues-oriented task forces that comprise the Social Responsibility Round Table (SRRT)" (ALA, TFoE). The TFoE demonstrates the library community's commitment to "promote awareness of environmental issues," and play a leadership role to ensure librarianship is environmentally sustainable. This essay examines the development of 'green' policies and practices in North American library associations and five public libraries in Canada and in the United States.

Methodology

This study is not intended to serve as a comprehensive resource on the topic. Rather, the project offers a broad perspective on the current development of 'green librarianship' in North American public libraries. For this project, 'green librarianship' refers to services and policies meant to positively affect the environment; and 'green libraries' are library institutions that employ these services, practices, and policies. Our study is limited to national and regional library associations and to public libraries in five major metropolitan areas of Canada and the United States. We reviewed policies, practices and initiatives as found in their official statements of commitment, including policies, strategic plans, managerial or administrative decisions, as well as programming, products, and services that reflect significant commitment by the corporate body concerning 'green librarianship' or 'green libraries'.

The parameters of our search evolved as we completed our literature review, but the methodology and search terms remained constant throughout. Our review included electronic databases, Internet search engines, and library and library association websites. To collect the most relevant material, we used the following search terms and phrases: *green, going green, sustainability, eco, environmentalism and recycle*.¹ While these terms are not necessarily interchangeable, they all relate to 'green' concepts. It should also be noted, that the project focuses only on policies and documents that were readily available online.

Literature Review

Literature on 'green libraries' took root in the early 1990s in publications such as *The Green Library Journal* and from the work of authors like C. Atton (Antonelli 2). After this initial rush, the subject's popularity cooled until 2003, when "going green" was again recognized as an important topic. Publications such as the Oregon Library Association Quarterly (OLA Quarterly Winter 2007) have devoted entire issues to the subject, while trade journals, blogs, and other grassroots publications have increasingly encouraged libraries to practice green librarianship (Antonelli 2-3).

¹ Monika Antonelli describes these terms in her article *The Green Library Movement*.

Green Facilities

One of the key messages in the literature is the need for library associations to encourage the construction of sustainable library buildings. The reason for this is simple. Bill Brown writes:

Well-designed green buildings cost less to operate and maintain than conventionally constructed buildings. They use less energy and natural resources. They are better integrated into their sites and communities. They are more comfortable, enjoy more daylight, and are more attractive to customers and employees. (Brown 61)

And, as Wanda Urbanska notes: "Building a green library may represent the largest public statement any community can make to show its support for sustainability" (53).

LEED certification (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) is the most commonly accepted standard for environmentally-friendly building design. The literature profiles numerous libraries that have obtained LEED certification. In 2004, Fayetteville Public Library (AR) and the Semiahmoo Branch of Surrey Public Library (BC) became two of the first LEED certified library buildings in North America (Miller; Urbanska). Sources like *The Green Library Blog* focus entirely on "library facilities, substantive general work relating to Green Buildings and Sustainability", and there are many other articles about 'green' building construction and certification (Brown; Mikkelsen). Interestingly, the literature makes almost no reference to other standards for 'green' buildings – such as Green Globes, Build It Green, and BOMA BEST.

The literature also notes that municipalities, both in Canada and the United States, support 'green buildings' with policies that require new civic buildings to achieve LEED certification (e.g. Chicago, IL and Calgary, AB). These municipal policies will, no doubt, increase the number of 'green' public library buildings in the years to come.

Green Initiatives

While the literature on green libraries has primarily focused on infrastructure certification, the literature has also highlighted smaller initiatives that libraries take in their quest to "go green." Monika Antonelli notes that not all libraries can afford to pursue extravagant renovations and should be encouraged to implement even small environmentally responsible changes into their operations (Antonelli 4). Furthermore, Wanda Urbanska states that "[r]educing, reusing, and recycling paper tends to be the first order of business when a library goes green" and these small steps can be the beginning of something much larger. Along these lines, Judith Norton discusses how a library can conduct an environmental audit to determine the ways that they may develop sustainable policies; Rebekkah Smith Adrich argues that libraries should obtain the services of a "sustainable building advisor." Megan Coder and Meredith Walker outline small, but significant, changes that librarians can implement for "greener" buildings, such as choosing appliances and electronics with eco-labels.

The literature about 'green librarianship' also notes that libraries and librarians are public educators and leaders, making even small steps toward sustainability a clear demonstration of this leadership (Deeper Green, The Green Library Blog, Becken). The literature acknowledges libraries as leaders in implementing 'green' activities including: providing access to electronic material, using energy efficient products, providing collections on the environment, offering opportunities to telecommute, suggestions for 'green' transportation, and processing e-waste (Going Green @your Library Blog, Antonelli, OLA Quarterly). Overall, the literature has offered suggestions and examples of how libraries can "go green" and adapt their policies and procedures to be environmental leaders in their communities.

Research Findings

The Canadian Experience

The study found almost one hundred citations about official 'green' policies, plans, and practices among Canadian library associations and public libraries. References to 'green' planning and practices by library associations were relatively small in number and none of the library associations addressed 'green' issues in their mission, values, or strategic plans, and for two of the regional associations there were no 'green' references found. Both the Canadian and Ontario Library Associations referred to 'green' issues in their policies, but these references were in passing, and were not entrenched in their mission, values or library policies. This said, our review did reveal at least one strength among Canadian library associations, that being their push to host regional and national conferences as 'green events' by making positive environmental choices when planning and organizing the conference. The Ontario Library Association leads its peers in this regard with a full slate of 'green' initiatives for their annual conference. These include encouraging delegates to utilize reusable bags, posting documents to a conference website (in place of printed handouts), hosting a green blog, providing recycling service, offering online conference registration, and highlighting 'green initiatives' by commercial exhibitors (OLA Super Conference 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). While other library association conferences are taking similar steps, the Ontario Library Association is clear and consistent in their efforts to host a 'green' conference.

References to 'green' actions and policies are more prevalent at the public library level, but the majority still lack 'green' values in their mission and values statements, or current strategic plans. Ottawa and Calgary were the only public libraries to have established 'green' policies; however, the "Environmental Sustainability" policy from Ottawa Public Library merely states that "the Library's practices for environmental sustainability are not inconsistent with those of the City of Ottawa" (OPL Environmental Sustainability, CPL Board Policies). The Vancouver and Toronto Public Libraries also include "sustainability" as a strategic focus, but only as applied to funding, workforce, and client support, not the environment (VPL Vision and Plan 2015, TPL Strategic Plan 2008-2011, OPL Environmental Sustainability). Unfortunately, no references to 'green librarianship' could be found from the Réseau des Bibliothèques de Montreal, in spite of searches in English and French.

While library associations have been slow to adopt official policies on 'green librarianship' Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa public libraries have each adopted a 'green plan' (EPL Board Meeting; CPL Eco-Action blog; White Paper on Greening). The Calgary and Edmonton plans were inaccessible to the public, and Ottawa's "Go Green" plan appeared to

be an assessment of current initiatives by other public libraries (with possible directions for Ottawa Public Library). Nonetheless, the existence of these ‘green’ plans suggests that these organizations are committed to transforming themselves from the inside out.

Beyond plans and policies, Canadian public libraries have many ‘green’ initiatives, ranging from the building of LEED-certified facilities to publicity campaigns and an "Eco-Action" blog. To understand the overall focus and impact of these projects, they were classified according to the following seven categories: buildings, waste, transportation, food, pollution, landscapes, and procurement. Table 1 demonstrates that green infrastructure was the most commonly cited type of initiative, followed by reducing waste (especially paper, printing, and recycling issues). There were relatively few references to transportation, food, pollution, or procurement found in the study. References to landscapes were mostly about two specific public libraries that have created *green roofs* (roof-top gardens) at their institutions (Central Library FAQ).

Buildings	Waste	Transportation	Food	Pollution	Landscapes	Procurement
20	9	5	1	2	6	3

Table 1: Web references by Canadian public libraries to ‘green’ projects

In general, Canadian libraries are implementing many different initiatives that address environmental sustainability. Some of these are, just recently, being linked through institutional ‘green plans.’ Meanwhile, public library boards are starting to adopt sustainability as part of the guiding principles. However, library associations lag behind their institutional and individual members in adopting broad environmental principles and practices.

The American Experience

To gain an understanding of environmental policy and activities in the American library community, the study reviewed various library associations and the five largest municipal public libraries. This review focused on the American Library Association, regional associations, and some state associations that have shown an interest in ‘green’ activities.

The American Library Association remains a leader in promoting environmental responsibility in North America. In 1989, the ALA established the Task Force on the Environment as a part of their Social Responsibility Round Table (ALA TFOE). The Task Force was created to “promote” environmental issues and to "unite librarians and informational professionals" (ALA TFOE). Today, TFOE demonstrates the American Library Association's commitment to ‘green libraries’ and education through programs such as "Grassroots Greening" and Earth Wind and Fire @ Your Library (TFOE, SRRT, Grassroots Greening). From a public library perspective, the ALA and its sub organization the Public Library Association, promote the education of patrons in "environmental literacy" through library programs that connects users with "green volunteer opportunities" (PLA Environmental Literacy). In terms of actions taken or adopted by other library associations in the United States, the only relevant reference is from the 2009 Pacific Northwest Library Association conference, when attendees were asked to bring bags they had received during

previous conferences from home and the conference held a contest for the oldest bag and the bag that traveled the furthest (PNLA, Greening your Library).

To understand 'green' policies and practices among American public libraries, we reviewed the Los Angeles, New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago public libraries; including official documents as well as information about 'green' practices and activities in our search. The results demonstrate that American public libraries are taking action to 'green' their infrastructure, activities and educational programs in an effort to represent their community's wants and needs, but very few have changed their formal statements to reflect these actions.

As with public libraries in Canada, there is a shift toward *building green*. The New York Public Library, Chicago Public Library, Los Angeles Public Library and the Philadelphia Free library have all incorporated 'green buildings' and "eco-construction" to lessen the environmental impact of their new and renovated branches (Los Angeles' Public Library Silver Lake Branch, New York's Bronx Library Centre and Philadelphia's Parkway Central to name a few) and the Detroit Public Library is currently in the process of improving their facilities to meet "green initiatives" (Detroit Green Task Force meeting minutes). The individual libraries have promoted and supported their 'green' buildings by announcing their construction in strategic plans, annual reports, and board minutes, as achievements or goals for the institution (Los Angeles Public Library Strategic Plan, 2007-2010 and New York Public Library Annual report, 2007) or through establishing committees to oversee these projects, as in the case of Chicago Public Library (Chicago Board of Directors meeting January 2010).

In their construction, many of the new buildings have been created using recyclable or recycled material and much of the removed material is recycled or sold and reused by other organizations (American Libraries *Green Libraries*; LA Times, *Libraries to Recycle Bricks, Windows*; LA 1998 Library Board Program; Rooflite, *Philadelphia Free Library Green Roof Install Video*). Many of these buildings have met LEED standards including silver certification for the Bronx Library Centre, gold certification for the Silver Lake Branch and Platinum certification for the Lake View Terrace Branch of Los Angeles' Public Library (American Libraries, Green Libraries and NYPL Bronx Centre).

While most of the references from these American public libraries focused on 'green buildings', there is also a clear presence of other 'green' initiatives adopted by these institutions. For example, the Chicago Public Library has a drop off point for battery recycling (City of Chicago How to Recycle Batteries) and the Philadelphia Public Library sells donated books through their "Friends of the Library", or gives donated books back to the community through a "Books for friends" program that reuses nearly twelve thousand books annually (Friends of the Free Library Philadelphia, The book corner).

Many of the libraries in these American cities have also offered 'green' or sustainability themed programming; including programs about creating jewellery from recycled material, reading 'green' literature, and engaging with the outdoors. Both the Chicago and New York public libraries have established environmental education programs to engage the community. Specifically, the Chicago Public Library is offering "Read Green, Live Green", which encourages Chicagoans to read material that discusses the environment and "ways to work toward creating a healthier planet" (CPL Read Green, Live Green) and the New York Public Library is offering a new outdoor learning environment to provide educational and

programming opportunities for children and families outdoors (American Libraries New York Breaks New Ground).

Discussion & Analysis: Are North American public libraries green enough?

Disappointingly, regional library associations in the United States and Canada have done little towards developing official 'green' policies or practices. This said, many state and provincial library associations, including Oregon, New York, California, Ontario, and British Columbia, are incorporating environmental practices into their conferences and programming (OLA, NYLA, CLA, OLA, BCLA). With the exception of the American Library Association, we found no other national library association with a formal statement on the responsibility of libraries to the environment. Adopting formal policies or positions statements would cement the library community's support for environmental responsibility and would validate initiatives that put environmental responsibility into action (IFLA Statement on Libraries and Sustainable Development). This applies directly to Canada, where the national association currently has no such position statement.

There are obvious similarities when comparing 'green' initiatives by libraries in Canada and the United States. Libraries in both countries have increasingly achieved LEED certification for new buildings, and public libraries in both countries promote 'green' initiatives and offer 'green' programs. However, there was a striking difference in official statements about environmental responsibility among public libraries in the two countries. While none of the five public libraries in the United States directly mentioned environmental issues in their mission, vision or publicly-available policies, almost all the Canadian libraries did. Two Canadian libraries (Calgary and Ottawa) had policy statements and three Canadian libraries have developed 'green' plans to implement their environmental responsibility (Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa). This discrepancy suggests that public libraries in the United States need to add 'green' considerations to their formal policies and statements. However, for some American libraries, their connection with the municipality and civic policies may be another reason why 'going green' has yet to emerge in official library policy. Their relationship with the municipality may allow them to piggy back on the formal statements already in place (e.g. the City of Chicago has developed its own environmental building standards and Los Angeles Public Library, who participate in a recycling program developed by the county of Los Angeles, see County of Los Angeles Strategic plan). Likewise, public libraries such as New York have established value statements committing themselves to strengthening the community, which may be considered a promise to act on behalf of their communities in every respect including the environment (We're Going Green! New York Public Library).

The actions among the five public libraries in Canada and the United States can be considered representative of the actions being undertaken throughout North America. In 2009, a library school student from the University of North Carolina created a directory of North American libraries that have implemented 'green' building, planning and policies. The map plots school, academic and public libraries, as well as other educational institutions, and includes links to their 'green' buildings and 'green' features (Green Directories). This resource, while not complete, provides an important list of references and includes analysis regarding the 'greening' of North American libraries.

The resource provides a list of six steps a library should take, noting that staff should continue to “monitor the library's progress in the measures you have implemented,” and “return to step one to identify additional areas for improvement. Green planning is never done!” (Green Directory).

Another theme found in the Canadian and American examples, is the notion that public libraries are inherently ‘green.’ Libraries share resources across the community (such as books) and they foster a number of sustainable initiatives such as reusing, recycling, and reducing. These are ‘green’ activities and public libraries have started to market themselves as ‘green’ based on these basic principles both of librarianship and of environmental responsibility. This line of argument suggests that libraries can make a ‘greener world’ simply by raising their profile and being better libraries. The Calgary Public Library promoted this image with a publicity campaign titled “Green, Before Green Was Cool”. While there is merit to this argument, public libraries should be wary of ‘green washing’—making environmental claims beyond the substance of their efforts (Koh). Public libraries may provide ‘green’ services, but this does not absolve public libraries from taking steps to increase their environmental responsibility and decrease their environmental footprint.

By creating environmentally sustainable facilities and offering environmentally focused programming, libraries in both Canada and the United States have connected themselves with the developing ideals of the communities they serve and represent. Thomas Frey, in his report *The Future of Libraries: Beginning the Great Transformation*, argues that libraries will move from being “a center of information to a center of culture.” Antonelli builds on this argument suggesting that “[e]conomic instability, energy depletion, and planetary degradation are transforming society, and in turn transforming libraries” (7). The resources we collected reflect this transformation as ‘green libraries’ and ‘green librarianship’ are striking “a chord with the community” and public libraries are designing their buildings and programs to reflect this spirit. Although the evidence of ‘green’ library policies is not overwhelming, a movement towards ‘green’ policies is evident.

Our findings did not indicate where this push toward ‘green’ policies comes from, but it seems clear that most ‘green’ initiatives were developed by enthusiastic and dedicated librarians and library staff at the ‘grassroots’ level, while some other projects may have come from user requests, Board interest, City councils, or in response to market surveys. The next step will be to develop official statements and policies to reflect the desires of patrons and individual libraries, for, as mentioned in the Ottawa Public Library “Go Green” plan “successfully adopting sustainability in the OPL requires the recognition that greening touches upon the entire organizational structure” (OPL).

Conclusion

As our research and findings demonstrate, libraries in both Canada and the United States are clearly taking steps to reduce their impact on the environment and to promote environmental responsibility in the communities they serve. We found that most changes are happening at a local level through initiatives undertaken by librarians and library staff. The next steps require library associations in Canada and the United States, at state, provincial, regional and even national levels, to adopt formal statements on environmental responsibility. As well, public libraries in both countries should adopt environmental responsibility as part of their

institutional principles and make their intentions clearly known to the public. These gestures will position public libraries in North America as advocates for environmental responsibility.

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