

# Graduation Project

## A Dynamic Library

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The Importance and and The Violence of Classification Systems

3

The Urgency of Serendipity

4

A Dynamic Library

5

Contents: The Struggle of Sampling

6

How to organise initially?

6

Designing for Serendipity - Navigating a Paradox

7

Design Directionality - Why and for whom?

7

Rewarding Reordering

10

Positioning on AI and Libraries

11

Presenting the Concept Library in a Boxing Ring

11

Conclusion and Reflection

13

## The Importance and and The Violence of Classification Systems

*A general classification is, then, a map of the universe within and without the mind of man; it covers all things we may have known, know or can know. In the language of metaphysics then, it covers all being*” (Sayers 65).

Quite important then, these classifications. Especially when we consider that they are, by their very nature, exclusionary. They are bounded systems that marginalise or exclude groups and topics that diverge from the norm. As a social construct, a classification system reflects the culture that creates it. If that culture is marked by stratification, the classification system will be too. Because of the variety of relationships that may be drawn between concepts, “classifications will give more advantageous space in the overall structure to some concepts than to others” (Olson 236). If there is to be only one classification, like is the case for libraries, its structure will, by logic of utility, come to reflect the most mainstream of these relationships. This is why 80% of the space for *religion* in the North American *Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)* is allocated to Christian texts (Olson 242). Or why the *Library of Congress Classification System* allocates almost 7x more shelf space to heterosexual sex-related content than it does to homosexual sex-related content (Scad Libraries). They are also incredibly resistant to change, as illustrated nicely by *concubinage* still residing in the category *customs* right next to concepts such as *dating* in the DDC (Olson 248).

Essentially, classifications are developed by the most powerful discourses in a society. This is a process of *poiesis*, a creation or construction of reality that “determines not only what is knowable, but whose voices are heard (Olson 245 ) In creating a classification you create a system in which some forms of knowledge are central and others are peripheral. In a library, location “delineates what we may hold as knowable and, following Foucault, renders certain experiences “true”and “scientific” while excluding others” (Foucault 178). Where a text is placed in a library, and more fundamentally, whether a text is placed in a library at all, has significance for the perceived meaning and legitimacy of that text.

Adler claims that the underlying logic for the three main classification systems is both Eurocentric and “a male heterosexual universal against which to arrange all other subjects that deviate from that norm” (Adler 158). It therefore comes as no surprise that research shows that women, Puerto Ricans, Chinese and Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, Jews, Native Americans, the developing world (including Africa, the Middle East, and Melanesia), gays, teenagers, senior citizens, people with disabilities amongst others, are structurally disenfranchised by library classification systems (Olson 234; Adler).

Of course, one may argue that classificationists are only products of their time, arranging concepts according to dominant cultural discourses. To improve classification systems we must simply refine the categorisations to capture more contemporary knowledges, e.g. those surrounding queerness, right? Yes and no. In this we mustn’t forget that by adding more specific categories to classifications we “make more precise the instrument (classification systems) by which they are rendered objects of knowledge” in the first place. We must instead think about ways to make visible minority culture and knowledges that do not place them within “existing, dominant systems of value” (Adler 154) **That said, the status quo would already be improved if classification systems were continuously negotiated and updated but, as mentioned, they are largely inert.** When they do periodically get updated this “construction of information” lies on the

shoulders of very few classificationists, which, even with the best will in the world, “opens the door to all the abuses of a despot”(Duchein 25).

All of this taken together, is it not time to think about a library classification system that is created by the many not the few, both evolving with and playing a part in cultural discourses? Can we design a library that frees knowledge from normative categories, allowing instead for interactions between disparate texts and users to create an environment where order is negotiated and serendipitous discovery is facilitated? And if the process of *pioesis* is a locational one, where reality is constructed by “gathering, scattering, and juxtaposing topics in relation to each other”, perhaps we should negotiate and design this dynamic classification in space (Olson 245).

Therefore: *In what ways could an implementation of a dynamic, user-driven library design promote serendipitous discovery and challenge traditional, exclusionary classification methods?*

### **The Urgency of Serendipity**

Modern life has become increasingly commodified, engineered and predictable. Yelp is great for crafting impressive, well-reviewed travel itineraries but hardly encourages aimless wandering. The way back home is efficient not meandering, via Google Maps. Dating happens via an app that learns your preferences. These factors all contribute to a situation where experiences are increasingly pre-arranged and customised, where “discovery” is more about algorithms than accidents, and where the unpredictability that sometimes adds the richness to life, is as smoothed over as a possum’s brain. In such a context, the act of creating spaces and opportunities for serendipity almost becomes an act of defiance.

Libraries are often praised as model environments for serendipitous discovery, where “arrangement of books and materials, combined with the broad spectrum of subjects available, makes it easy for patrons to come across information they were not actively seeking” (Orleans, 96; McKibbon and McKibbon). I disagree, and argue that are actually designed for targeted searching or information retrieval, with an expected user behaviour of efficiency rather than meandering. They are designed for convergent (goal-directed) rather than divergent (exploratory) information behaviour (Björneborn, *Serendipity Dimensions*). In a space defined by such strict locational categories and hierarchies, can we even speak of the chance encounters that make up serendipity? Also, the spatial delineation of topics does not allow for interaction between them, limiting accidental connections and essentially discouraging interdisciplinary relations between readers and texts. *Much like sowing many fields of different monocultures does not make a farm a biodiverse environment, having many rows of different books in distinct categories does not make a library a serendipitous environment.*

Library classifications and their ever more fine-grained (sub)categories could therefore be argued to be both symptom and partial cause of a phenomenon Weber already warned us about in 1946: The fragmentation of knowledge leading to a loss of holistic understanding (Weber 134). Serendipitous knowledge environments have the potential to ameliorate this, hence the growing interest of the potential for serendipity to expand our

personal “information horizons”: For example by counteracting online filter bubbles that we increasingly find ourselves in, which have been linked to societal polarisation (Björneborn, *Serendipity Dimensions*).

## A Dynamic Library

In order to investigate the research question I am speculatively reimagining the library. The crucial difference being that books are not ordered alphabetically nor arranged according to subject matter. Nor are there any shelves. Instead books are free to be constantly ordered and reordered by users of the library. Over time, the library’s order will come to reflect people’s associations and connections between otherwise disparate texts, themes and fields of knowledge. It will present a semantic map of knowledge and a cultural snapshot, if you will. It will also become an environment for serendipitous discovery and learning, with users, perhaps quite literally, stumbling over books they otherwise may not have encountered. As the collective mind has placed them together, these books may carry unexpected relevance to the user’s research e.g. *A user doing some light reading on domestic gardening notices a book on volcanic rock to her left knee and wonders why. Discovering volcanic rocks’ standout water retention properties, she never buys another bag of mulch again.*

In order to track the emergent order of the books, a camera watches from above. The images from this camera are analysed by an image recognition algorithm that detects the covers of the books and tracks their position in the room. Information is recorded about which books were often in close proximity to one another, allowing me to analyse what themes and topics users associate with one another and how these compare with traditional classification systems.

Please note: The word limit on this paper does not allow me to detail the development of the object detection algorithm that tracks the books. This will be included on the Practice document. If feel this is justifiable as the design choices in its development were limited (see Figure 1)

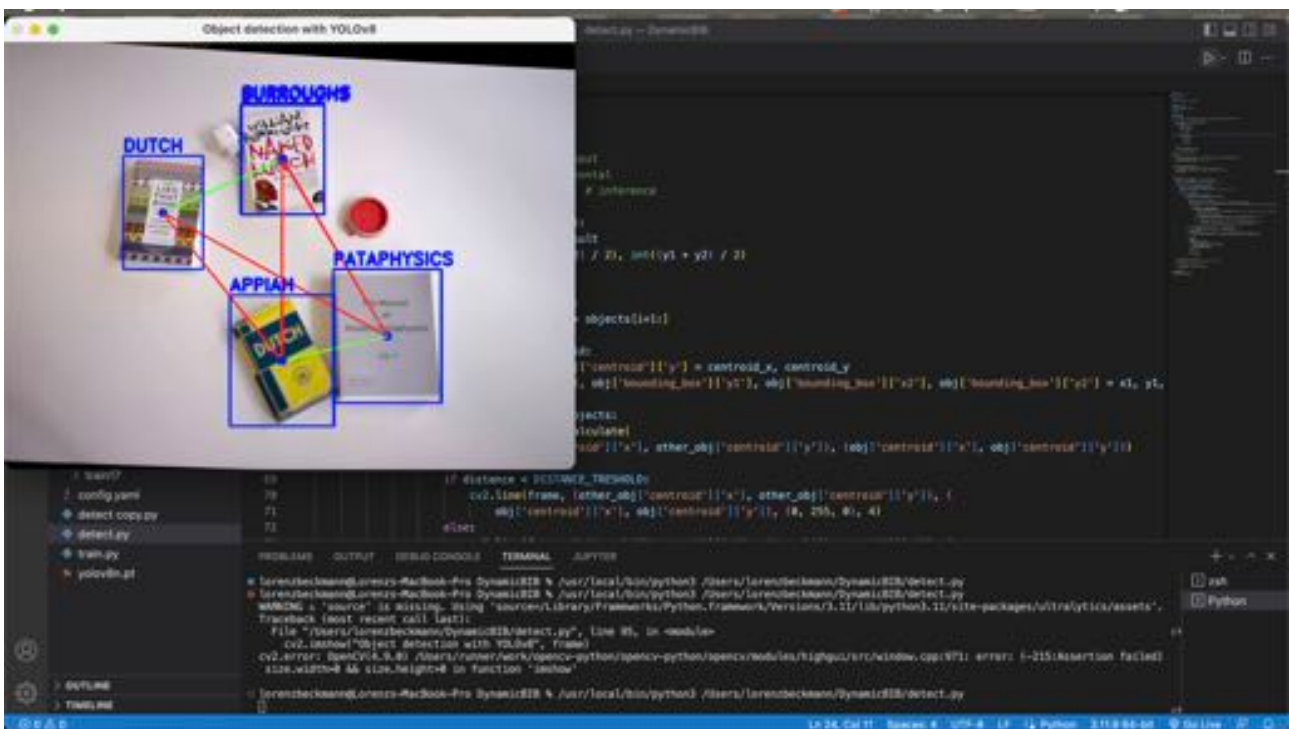


Figure 1: Screenshot showing an the visual output and code of an early version of the detection algorithm

## Contents: The Struggle of Sampling

The books in the concept dynamic library are a convenience sample. The financial and time scope of the project dictates that. That said, I will make efforts to include as diverse a selection of material as possible, both because of personal belief in the values of inclusivity and representativeness but also because more diversifiable environments invite more serendipity (see also *Design Considerations*). A graphic offering insight into the composition of the collection will be part of the final presentation. In future developments of the dynamic library, the sampling of literature will be a core consideration.

## How to organise initially?

The initial state of the library, before patrons are allowed to change the order, required serious consideration as the initial state will influence the shape of its derivatives. The initial state must invite the users to engage with the books without immediately highlighting some books over others. In initial tests I “tiled” the floor of the environment with books. My thinking was that users would not want to step on the books and would therefore create paths through to engage with them. The opposite was true as users were deterred by the way the books were laid out, remaining in the periphery of the environment rather than traversing it and, according to one tester, “looking for an order in the tiled books” instead of seeking to reorder them. Opposite of the intention then (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: books in “tiled” format



Figure 3: books in “tiled” format with traversable path

In a second trial run, I randomly created paths between the books (Figure 3). This solved the problem of traversability as all 6 testers entered the field of books without prompt. However they were still hesitant to slow or sit down. In the talks afterwards it seemed the paths suggested a directionality to the users, leading them into the library but also out again (no *slowability*, see *Design section*).

Hereafter, I briefly explored the idea of having the books outside of the library space, inviting people to take them into the “ring” in order to engage with them and relate them to each other. I stopped that trial after realising that this just shifted the location of the puzzle of initial organisation to outside the ring rather than addressing it.

Another successful test for initial organisation came when the randomly generated paths included and were connected by small circles, just big enough to sit in. These resulted in testers sitting down when they had found a book and also rotating on their own axis to explore at ground level. However, based on user feedback and my own impressions I concluded that a random, non-tiled, non-path initial arrangement would best fulfil the affordances for serendipity detailed below.

### **Designing for Serendipity - Navigating a Paradox**

Serendipity is a vague word but what is agreed upon generally is that it involves three things: an element of chance, a degree of preparedness on the part of the serendipidist and an outcome perceived as fortuitous or valuable to the serendipidist (Walpole, 1754 in Merton and Barber, 2004, p. 2). Therefore, instances of serendipity by design or artificial serendipity seem to present a paradox: Does designing an unplanned experience not ruin its essential feature (Van Andel, 1994)?

Contrary positions argue that the locus of serendipity is within the experiencing individual not the environment. There are thus two viewpoints, that of the designer who creates the environment and that of the serendipidist who experiences serendipity. As Björneborn aptly formulate it: “serendipity may be intended by designers but must always be unplanned by users” (1068). If it is planned it is not serendipitous, therefore, we strive to “create opportunities for users to have experiences they might (subjectively) perceive as serendipitous” (Makri et al., 2181).

This throws up the important question of designer intention nevertheless, a factor called *directionality* by Smets (594). Directionality refers to the direction of the design intent and thus questions: Who wants what kind of serendipity for whom? Only rarely does the designer design solely for the serendipidist's serendipity. Say we compare the design intentions of a library and a bookshop: In a library the designer wants to promote the discovery of books. In a bookshop, the designer wants to promote the discovery of books AND influence a purchasing decision. Similar environments, but in a bookshop, serendipity is no longer the main design intent. Serendipity becomes a mean not an end.

It is therefore important to determine what the design intention or the directionality of the dynamic library is:

### **Design Directionality - Why and for whom?**

Building on Smets typology, the intent for the dynamic library is to forward serendipity both as an *ideal* and as a *common good* (2022). Holding serendipity as an ideal “implies that designers intend to design for serendipity because they value the **valuable outcome** recognised by the serendipidist”(ibid). The expected value of the dynamic library is value to the serendipidist, maybe in terms of creativity, knowledge or innovation for them.

Similarly, holding serendipity as a *common good* puts the focus not on the individual, but on the societal impact of many individuals experiencing serendipity: e.g. when urbanists speak of serendipity in cities, e.g. the interaction of individuals from different social strata, as being essential to the social fabric of a city.

Within this project, serendipity also takes on the role of a mediator, whereby I am also interested in the “eventual consequence of the serendipidist experiencing serendipity”(Smets ). As mentioned I have an interest in the order that emerges through the publics’ conscious or unconscious categorisation efforts. This gives the project another directionality as I am collecting data about this behaviour to find patterns that may inform the design of future knowledge production and learning environments.

### **Designing for Serendipity - Practical Design Considerations**

Björneborn created a framework for affordances for environmental serendipity. An affordance refers to the possibility of an act with an object or space. An elevator button affords to be pressed, a chair affords to be sat on. How do we create an environment that affords having serendipitous experiences in? (See Figure 4)



Affordance	Explanation	Experimentation/Documentation	Implementation
<b>Traversability</b>	<p>Relates to "player mobility": Basically what are the opportunities to move through an environment and reach different resources.</p> <p>Sub-factors of traversability are: accessibility, modifiability, exploitability, and serendipity</p> <p>The factor of serendipity "deals with to what degree the topology of a given environment invites us to slow down, stop, look closer, and examine potentially interesting encountered resources"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may be achieved in a number of ways ranging from providing seating to providing friction to movement through irregularities in a pathway.</li> </ul>		<p>Motivation cushion seating added to aid serendipity (themselves easy to move).</p> <p>Original, tessellated "tile" layout limited traversability.</p> <p>Pads were added to encourage stepping into the minefield of books. These helped but also added a directionality to the exploration which led people out of the environment again.</p>
<b>Diversifiability</b>	<p>Relates to the diversity of the materials inside an environment and how much you are invited to recombine these and relate them to one another.</p> <p>"The higher the degree of diversifiability in an environment, the easier the contents of this environment can be reconfigured, i.e., removed, recombined, repositioned, etc., by different actors; possibly providing more affordances for serendipity (Björneborn, 2017)."</p> <p>Diversity is a core factor here as: "Serendipity may happen when dissimilar resources (information, things, people, etc.) meet or collide across contact surfaces, edges, intersections, etc.</p>		<p>Original, tessellated "tile" layout limited perceptions of diversifiability amongst users. People were looking for the meaning in the existing order rather than reconsidering books themselves. This layout had a "mosaic" or even "collage" quality to it which did not encourage experimentation.</p> <p>Too much order to really invite introducing "disorder". Implies that books must be edge to edge in all future scenarios according to users.</p> <p>Finally books were arranged in non tessellated format with no discernible physical pattern in the beginning.</p>
<b>Sensorability</b>	<p>Relates to the capacity of an object or environment of being perceivable by the senses.</p> <p>How can we perceive the resources in an environment? Can we only see them or also touch and smell?</p> <p>Considerations here are exposure, contrasts and pointers. Namely how an environment displays its contents (exposure) and whether it allows for things to stand out in sensorially interesting variation, for example through the use of different zones (contrast) or narrower more specific highlighting techniques such as spotlighting (pointers).</p>		<p>Tests were done with different lighting conditions. Including two spots who's position I would change periodically.</p> <p>In relation to the dynamic library concept I have chosen to avoid contrast or pointers as not too reintroduce a form of top-down categorisation or hierarchy between different literary works. Therefore the lighting will be unchanging and homogeneous.</p> <p>The concept affords a high degree of sensorability nonetheless with patterns not only being invited but encouraged to physically interact with the books.</p> <p>The manner in which the books are presented with the cover facing the browsing person has also been linked to impulsive interactions (Björneborn, 2008). It must be acknowledged that cover-up presentation of the books may favour those with more striking, attractive covers.</p>

Figure 4: Affordances for Environmental Serendipity (Experimentation and Implementation Graphic) (Björneborn)

## Rewarding Reordering

The library is only valuable if people engage in the process of reordering. Here I expected some hurdles and performed tests in order to avoid them: Firstly, patrons may not understand the purpose or desire outcomes of reordering, leading to confusion, hesitancy or disinterest. A respect for traditional library practices or fear of misplacing resources may increase this hesitancy. The lack of structure and sheer number of choices may also overwhelm some users.

To pre-empt this, several strategies came to mind: Gamification may be effective but would give further directionality to the experiment and is therefore undesirable. An educational workshop on, say the benefits of serendipity may put counterproductive pressure on the experience for users: *“Come on! Why are none of you being serendipitous yet?”*

Therefore in testing, I settled on *social proof/testimonials* and *making impact visible*. I therefore showcased examples from users who have enjoyed the experience or made fortuitous discoveries as video messages. Respondents commented that this felt quite forced and

added a counter productive expectation of value to the experience. Also, a live visualisation of the relations between the books is shown to the user showing the immediate impact that users reordering efforts have on the library’s composition (see Figure 5). See also: *Presenting the Concept Library in a Boxing Ring*

Additionally, I showed a time-lapse video of the changes in the library, in the belief that the knowledge of contributing to a larger narrative will motivate users. Several users found this not to be motivating but instructive as they were figuring out the purpose of the space. To the same end, a description of the history of classification systems and their general inadequacy for modern knowledge practices will be presented as part of the final presentation.



Figure 5: Test setup visualising and displaying the spatial relations between books.

## **Positioning on AI and Libraries**

The application of technology, especially involving AI and cameras requires careful consideration in any use case. The first question should always be: Is it necessary?

The justification for the use of an object recognition model this case are:

- a) To retain some of the search-ability normal library i.e. a user can independently locate a book without an exhaustive manual search (otherwise the project is arguably just a room full of books)
- b) To track the positions of books relative to each other over time in order to learn what classificatory and associative patterns emerge and how these may inform the design of future knowledge spaces
- c) To visualise the immediate impact that patron's reordering efforts have on the library's composition

A drawback is that the use of cameras and AI in this context could contribute to a broader culture of surveillance, where individuals feel monitored in what should be a free space. Via observer effects, users might be deterred from exploring sensitive or controversial topics, thereby ironically hindering intellectual freedom in an environment that seeks to promote those values. There is therefore a tension between hiding the camera and minimising observer effects and being transparent about the collection of data in the library. Adler also makes arguments as to "how reading rooms can be a panoptic space and the impact this can have on researchers" (Pierce 261).

There may also be issues around how consent is obtained for tracking reading habits. Users might not be fully aware of what data is being collected, how it is being used, and who has access to it. Lack of transparency on this part could lead to distrust. There is also significant potential for bias with the use of object detection algorithms, not just in that they may perpetuate biases found in their training, data but they have also been shown to perform significantly better on large vs small objects (Diwan et al). Spatial and therefore associative data between smaller books may therefore not be recorded accurately, potentially compromising the dataset and with it the accuracy of the findings.

Beyond that, object detection algorithms are also very resource intensive, requiring a significant amount of computational processing power (Diwan et al.). The benefit of implementing them should therefore always be critically assessed in relation to the costs, lest we fall into technocratic trap of: "*AI will fix that*".

## **Presenting the Concept Library in a Boxing Ring**

Situating the conceptual library within a boxing ring acknowledges that classification systems are nearly always a site of violence, almost inevitably so (Adler, *Cruising the Library*). It appropriates a hyper masculine environment to uncover the patriarchal structures that underly our knowledge practices, offering almost an ironic look at these. We are reminded that, whilst we may be challenging the logics underlying systems of classification, we are doing this within, and as subjects of a patriarchal system.

The close quarters of a boxing ring force encounters between people and books. Inviting people to step into a ring and take an active role in knowledge organisation implies that this will be no easy or clean fight. A ring acknowledges that this is a space for disciplines, ideas and classifications to clash.

There is also a fun contrast between the dramatic anticipation that arises when seeing a fully lit boxing ring only to realise it is simply filled with books. This anti-climax nicely mirrors the importance of the subject of classification but also its outward dullness. The hyper-visibility of such an environment emphasises that the renegotiation of epistemological classifications must be performed in the open and be subject to public scrutiny.

A boxing ring begs the question of who is facing off against whom? Within my ring the metaphorical "face-off" isn't between individuals, as in a traditional boxing match, but rather between ideas, disciplines, or even broader concepts like traditional versus unconventional ways of organising knowledge. Here are just a few ways to think about "opponents" in this intellectual arena:

*Disciplines vs. Disciplines:* Different intellectual disciplines could be seen as facing off against each other, challenging each other's methods, assumptions, and conclusions. Illustrating how different disciplines complement or contradict each other, leading to a richer understanding of subjects.

*Reader vs. Reader:* While not directly antagonistic, the space could also represent a silent "debate" between readers based on the books they choose and where they place them, reflecting differing opinions, interests, associations and personal philosophies.

*Passive Consumption vs. Active Engagement:* The ring could symbolise the battle between passive consumption of information and an active, engaged learning where readers create their own intuitive, associative, or cross-disciplinary paths through the material available.

**Testing:** The ring needed user testing, of course. In general, test readers commented that stepping into the ring added a sense of drama and importance to the event, but also a degree of pressure. As in previous tests the remark was made that the live visual of the connections between the books motivated the users to engage with them. However, another reader commented that this also made them aware of the fleetingness of the order and their contributions. This made me realise that there was no possibility to pass user generated clusters of books (and the knowledge that comes with this) forwards in time. So in a final, test in the boxing ring I offered to photograph, print and hang book clusters which users considered especially important or meaningful (see Figure 8). This not only allowed important connections to be recorded indefinitely, but according to two testers, gave them a sense of ownership of the library which may prove to be good for

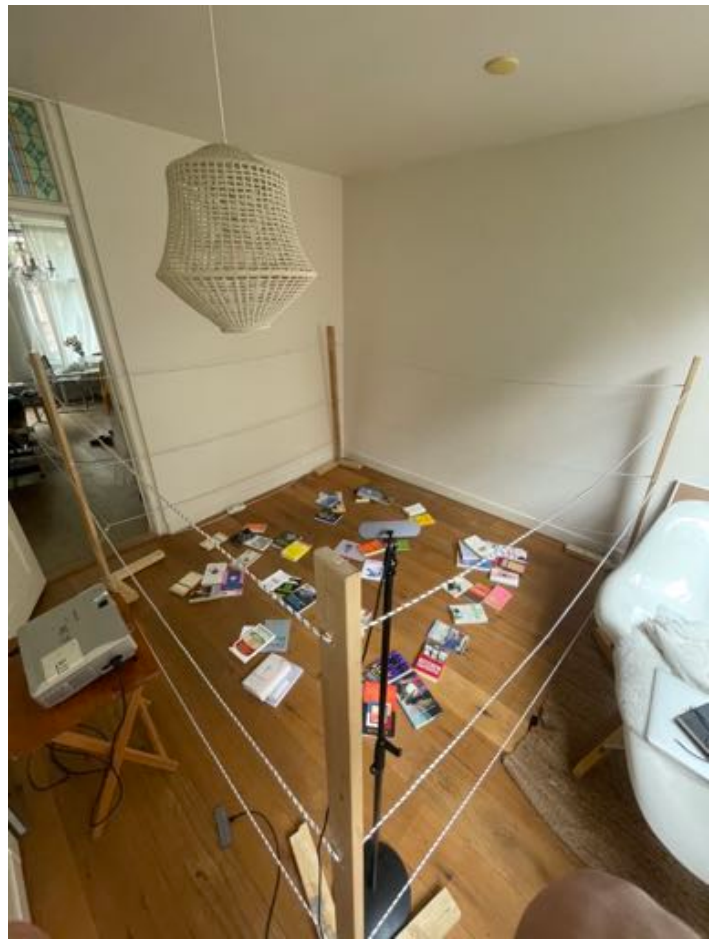


Figure 6: Boxing ring library set up in my room



Figure 8: Important user clusters hung on ring



Figure 7: Screenshot from a time-lapse showing a reader in the ring

engagement. Subjectively I also feel that the hung photographs add a certain comforting domesticity to the scene as they remind me of drying laundry. The final graduation version will most definitely feature a way for users to record their connections in the space.

Whichever face-off you read into it, a boxing ring as the setting for this dynamic library project emphasises the active, engaged, and often confrontational nature of learning, intellectual exploration and the construction of knowledge. It challenges the tradition of libraries as quiet, passive and even oppressive environments and reimagines them as active, dynamic arenas for intellectual engagement worthy of public attention and excitement.

### Conclusion and Reflection

The original intention for this project was to design a library concept that allowed for interaction between knowledge domains that could not occur in a conventional library classification system. At this point, I believed library classification systems to be limited in terms of facilitating serendipitous discovery and interdisciplinary thinking. The investigation has showed me that they are more deeply flawed than that: They are an inflexible, systematic manifestation of a Eurocentric male norm which serves the standard against which all knowledge is judged and organised, in theory, in physical space and therefore also in the minds of the people. Upon discovery, the severity of this epistemological inequality demanded my immediate and complete attention. I tried shifting the goal of the dynamic library to addressing this injustice, a scope so large it nearly derailed the investigation: Simply, the systemic problems of library classifications are too

complex for me to sit here and claim with any conviction, that a small-scale, convenience-sampled dynamic library concept might contribute significantly to their solution. However, the ideals of serendipity and equality are related: Melissa Adler posits that, in the library, our desire for knowledge runs into disciplinary lines based on patriarchal orientations. Learning in a library space therefore “requires a submission to sets of rules and ordering techniques that may fuel, interrupt, or stifle one’s pursuits”. She therefore proposes a practice of *weaving* connections “across and within the patriarchal structures that organise” libraries arguing that this could be a “political project based in the desire of the reader”(Adler, *Eros in the Library*).

Similarly, in concluding what a serendipity-facilitating environment might look like based his framework principles, Björneborn states that: “A library with a high degree of diversifiability – containing a rich variety of media, genres, topics, etc.; (...) that lets these resources “meet across boundaries”, facilitates serendipitous discovery by erasing topical boundaries. Such a project would give a voice to historically marginalised material whilst also providing a “public forum to display and discuss the ways in which these (interdisciplinary) readings cut across the lines drawn by the library”. Also emphasising the communitarian potential, Adler argues that this practice would result in a “reparative performance [that] may reclaim the library for readers by enacting the desires of many” (Adler, *Eros in the Library*).

Much like Adler I hope that such a library can be a public forum for ideas, dialogue and demonstration “that might serve as a support structure for variously crossing threads” of knowledge that is currently constrained within rigid categorisations. This is what I hope to achieve with this project, in graduation and thereafter: To “dramatise intersectionality through intertextuality and reader relations” by highlighting classifications as power-knowledge technologies and inviting readers to break their shackles (Adler, *Eros in the Library*).

Finally, I’d like to mention that, whilst I have learned a great deal during this investigation, the project will not end with my graduation. The research question reflects this ambition. As mentioned, the format of the boxing ring is a dramatisation of intertextuality and intersectionality, but may not be wholly conducive to candid reordering efforts by the public. As an environment, it is exposed and hyper visible. So, after graduation, the focus of the investigation will shift away from a dramatisation and towards taking this technique and promoting serendipitous, anti-categorical and interdisciplinary learning in established reading and knowledge spaces (much like a restaurant may invite an external kitchen crew for a pop-up to disrupt their normal flow). Ideas for this include appropriating parts of public library’s collections for collective reordering or taking a defined, highly diverse collection of literature and placing it in different socio-political contexts to analyse how the emergent orders changes contextually. To this end, I have applied to the regeling Experiment of the Stimuleringsfond.

Potential partners for the continued investigation include: Sitterwerk Katalog, Kiosk Rotterdam, Leessaal West, The Anarchist Library, The Embassy of the Free Mind but also more institutionalised libraries such as OBA

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