Library Visits:

Mechanics’ Institute Library and Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture

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For my library visits, I was excited to choose two small public libraries in the Bay Area. The first, the Mechanics’ Institute Library, charmed me during one of my first trips to the Financial District in downtown San Francisco. I had never been in a general-interest, membership-supported public library before visiting the Mechanics’ Institute Library. At the time, I was the resource librarian of an architectural firm a few blocks away, and my supervisor wanted me to do some research at the Mechanics’ Institute Library. I showed up at Wednesday at noon for their weekly tour, and from the moment the chess club was mentioned, I was in love. For the next year, I would spend my lunch hours at the Mechanics’ Institute Library Café, and occasionally conduct research in the warm, cozy, and quiet confines of the library stacks.

The Mechanics’ Institute Library was established in 1854 to support the vocational and technical classes taught at the Institute. It is one of the oldest libraries on the West Coast, although, like most of downtown San Francisco, its original building was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and ensuing fire. The new building at 57 Post is still an older building relative to those around it, and its majestic marble and wood lobby is a welcome respite among the ultra-modernity of much of the downtown area.

The library’s main space is large with tall windows and double-height ceilings. There are open stacks on all five floors of the library, although it is significantly taller than it is wide. Still, the space is hardly claustrophobic, and there is ample, comfortable seating provided. There are also a few public workstations and free wireless internet. The space is incredibly quiet, a stark contrast to the world just outside its large windows.

There are approximately 4,700 members of the Mechanics’ Institute Library, and these members enjoy borrowing privileges as well as free admission to the library’s many events, including its CinemaLit film series as well as writing and book clubs. The member base is primarily comprised of people who work in the Financial District. Most members are long-term San Francisco residents, and there is a significant number of patrons whose membership goes back generations.

The Mechanics’ Institute Library’s [website](http://www.milibrary.org) was redone completely over the summer. It now is much easier for library staff to maintain and update. The catalog is integrated as well as the events calendar, and staff use Facebook and Twitter regularly to communicate with patrons and to garner new members. My only complaint about the new website is that it no longer contains a complete staff listing, frustrating for information-gatherers.

The Mechanics’ Institute Library staff is led by Sharon Miller and comprised of 6 full-time librarians, 3 full-time paraprofessionals, 6 part-time paraprofessionals, and 5 volunteers. Some of the staff members do double-duty as Institute workers as well. For example, the person I interviewed is a reference librarian as well as in member relations and marketing for the Institute. The Institute, Library, and Chess Club are all run by a Board of Directors. Funding comes from three sources: one-third is from membership dues, one-third is from other tenants in the building, which the Institute owns and therefore can lease out for revenue, and one-third is from their endowment’s interest and generous donations.

There are two public service desks in the library. The circulation desk is staffed by paraprofessionals, although occasionally a librarian will cover in cases of short-staffing. The reference desk is staffed only by librarians. The non-public departments are Membership, Human Resources, and General Institute Staff, which includes building management and operations. The print collection is comprised of 165,000 volumes, including monographs, periodicals, compact discs, and DVDs. The library also subscribes to a small number of online databases. Because of the longevity of the Institute, the library maintains a few very special collections, such as the San Francisco city directories, predecessors of the modern telephone book, in which residents were listed by address and had their occupations listed as well. Other special collections include documents relevant to the Institute’s history, and ephemeral collections of the Pan-Pacific and Golden Gate Exhibitions.

As the Mechanics’ Institute Library is a membership library, yearly dues must be paid. The fee schedule is as follows:

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| **Student: $35 per year** **For full-time students**, who are enrolled at an accredited educational institution, taking 12 units minimum for undergraduates and 9 units minimum for graduates. Must provide proof of enrollment such as a current class schedule. | **Individual: $95 per year** For one adult. |
| **Family: $150 per year** For two adults and their children under the age of 22 living at the same address. | **Associate: $250 per year** For entire family.  Free print subscription to the Library’s monthly publication, The Stereopticon, and to the Institute’s bi-monthly MI Calendar included. |
| **Patron: $500 per year** For entire family.  Free print subscription to the Library’s monthly publication, The Stereopticon, and to the Institute’s bi-monthly MI Calendar included. | **Benefactor: $1000 per year** For entire family.  Free print subscription to the Library’s monthly publication, The Stereopticon, and to the Institute’s bi-monthly MI Calendar included. |

Although the library does not belong to any consortia, interlibrary loan is offered at $10 per item.

The Mechanics’ Institute Library is undergoing a renaissance right now, but the usual challenge of remaining current and relevant remains. Also, rental income from the Institute’s building’s tenants has decreased, which impacts part of the library’s budget.

To contrast to my Mechanics’ Institute Library experience, I chose another marvelous gem in San Francisco, tucked away in sprawling Golden Gate Park’s Strybing Arboretum. The San Francisco Botanical Garden Society, a non-profit organization in San Francisco, opened the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture in 1972. The Garden Society leases the building from the City and County of San Francisco, who also owns the grounds. Patrons of this subject-specific public library are usually gardeners or local authors, but approximately 50% of patrons are people who just wander by on their way through the Park. Most of the reference questions have to do with gardening, plant identification, or specific lookups in the Botanical Garden’s plant database.

The Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture has a modest [website](http://www.sfbotanicalgarden.org/library/) mainly devoted to searching the catalog and announcing current events. The website lacks deep information about the collection, and searching the catalog is cumbersome.

There are only two employees of the library: one full-time librarian, who also runs the library, and one part-time library assistant and receptionist. The library relies heavily on its staff of twenty volunteers to keep it running on a daily basis. The Botanical Garden itself relies on 4-500 volunteers, as well. Funding comes from donations, proceeds from art exhibits, and the sale of used books that are donated to the library. The San Francisco Botanical Garden Society is run by a board of directors, and the librarian reports to the executive director of the Society.

There are no departments in this library due to its size, and there are no circulating materials. Still, the collection contains 24,000 books, 25,000 article citations, and 2,500 botanical images that are free for the public to use within the library. The collection is subject-specific, with a primary focus on horticulture and botany with some natural history and agriculture.

The Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture faces the usual challenge in today’s economy: the Society cannot afford to increase staffing, and so the library remains dependent on its volunteer workforce to continue to offer its collection to the public for free.

The Mechanics’ Institute Library and the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture are both small public libraries that are not as well-known as their civically-funded counterparts, but that is where their similarities end. The Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture is housed in a modest building that it shares with other Garden Society offices, while the Mechanics’ Institute owns its own large building in a prime real estate location in downtown San Francisco. The Mechanics’ Institute Library’s membership fees and building rentals provides them with two-thirds of their funding, whereas the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture is reliant on generous monetary and book donations for its funding. As a result, the Mechanics’ Institute Library is able to offer a larger, more diverse collection and more programming, both attractive to current members and prospective ones alike. However, the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture brings a continual influx of new patrons and potential donors with its used-book sales and art exhibits. Both libraries depend on volunteers, but the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture requires volunteer help to continue offering library services to the public for free. While I would hope that the Helen Crocker Russell Library of Horticulture would always be able to remain free to the public, I understand the membership model and how the Mechanics’ Institute Library would not be able to survive without it.

This assignment was particularly intriguing to me because it showed me how useful it is to ask specific questions about the concrete aspects of a library to develop a clear and thorough picture of the library’s strengths and weaknesses. Also, when speaking with a member of a library’s staff, one can learn a great deal about the working environment just by observing how the staff member talks about her or his workplace. As I interviewed for a position at the Mechanics’ Institute Library earlier this year, I made sure to scour the website and go on a tour to refresh my knowledge of the library before I went to the interview. I would never walk into an interview “cold” but especially not an interview for a library job; if there is anyone who could see through an uninformed job candidate, it is a librarian.