

MOLLY SCHWARTZ: Before we get into today's Library Bytegeist, here's Laura Forshay with a few words about METRO, the organization that makes this podcast possible.

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LAURA FORSHAY: Library Bytegeist is brought to you by METRO, the Metropolitan New York Library Council. We're located in Hell's Kitchen and we host workshops and classes, like Podcasting 101 or How to Digitize VHS Tapes. We also have a studio, where you can book time to use equipment. Like our AV Transfer Rack or Audio Recording booth. Which I'm sitting in right now. To learn more about our events, studio, and other services, please visit us online at metro.org. That's m-e-t-r-o dot o-r-g. And thanks!

[INTRO MUSIC]

MOLLY: This is Library Bytegeist. A collection of stories from the frontlines and fringes of libraries. I'm Molly Schwartz, and this podcast is brought to you by the Metropolitan New York Library Council. Where the libraries and archives of New York come together to learn, share ideas, and collaborate.

[END INTRO MUSIC]

MOLLY: Public libraries in New York City have some basic things in common. There have books on bookshelves. Computers with internet access and printers. Restrooms. There are librarians working there.

But even though they have these basic communalities, every library branch in New York also has its own character. Each building has its own history. It reflects the time that it was built and the ideas that people had then about how a library should operate.

This episode of Library Bytegeist is all about New York's public libraries and the people who inhabit them. In a city that has a reputation for being inhospitable, many people have found a makeshift home away from home in the library.

But sometimes, these homes aren't so makeshift. People actually used to have apartments in some branches of New York Public Library. Leila Goldstein brings us the story.

[AMBIENT NOISE OF FOOTSTEPS AND DOORS OPENING]

KRISTY: OK so there are two floors.

LEILA GOLDSTEIN: I've just entered a vacant uninhabited apartment near Washington Square Park. It's got two levels, several bedrooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. There's a clawfoot bathtub with a shower curtain still hanging around the rim. The apartment is in a great location, but there are no plans to rent or sell the space. That's because this apartment is inside the Hudson Park Library, a branch of New York Public Library.

KRISTY: My name is Kristy Raffensburger, I'm a children's librarian at Hudson Park Library.

LEILA: Kristy is giving me a tour of the place. She's a children's librarian at Hudson Park Library. She's worked at four different libraries in the city that have had apartments.

Leila: Yeah, big closet over here. Oh that's nice, walk in closet. I mean this would be like an amazing apartment to have today.

Kristy: You always have a dream that like, you're gonna open a door and find a whole new space in your apartment, and this is kind of like that. [LAUGHTER]

LEILA: Many libraries in New York City used to have live-in custodians and superintendents. The New York Public Library's first superintendent was John H. Fedeler in 1910. The coal furnaces required 24/7 attention. So custodians were given an apartment in the building that they could live in full-time. But as the heating systems were upgraded, the custodians began retiring and the spaces started to be converted into apartments that random families lived in.

KRISTY: And this is the manual dumbwaiter that used to bring up groceries and stuff.

LEILA: Whoa, I didn't realize that. Whoa that's so cool. When do you even see dumbwaiters anymore? It goes down pretty far. It's pretty dark.

LEILA: There's a mystery to it. I've never heard anything about, right behind a door at a local library.

Kristy: It's my favorite library story to tell people, because still there's a lot of people that don't know.

LEILA: Apparently, people didn't know much about the apartments even when people were living in them. Kristy talked to a man who grew up in the Webster branch.

KRISTY: He told me a story about like how a policeman stopped him at the front door. He was like "What are you doing?" he thought he was breaking in. He was like "No I live here." And he had to like take the police person all the way up to the apartment to meet his grandfather and prove that you know, this is his house.

LEILA: She's not positive which branch the last custodian lived in. But...

KRISTY: Yeah, actually in this room, there were pictures of like, ripped out from a magazine of Jason Priestley on the wall. So I feel like it was pretty recent that someone was in here, so.

LEILA: I ask Kristy if any records exist on the library apartments.

KRISTY: As far as like photographs or anything else, I am not sure. I hope there is more and I just don't know about it.

LEILA: I hope there's was more too. So I started making some calls.

[PHONE RINGING]

LEILA: Hi my names Leila ... [audio montage of rejection phone calls, dial tones, unattended phone line messages] I wanted to be put in touch with, Ok I'll call back. I'm just trying to track down where the last one was ...

LEILA: None of the branches I call know where the last custodian lived. So I start contacting divisions at the New York Public Library's research centers. Each one tells me their division doesn't have the materials I'm looking for. Eventually, I'm directed the to Manuscripts and Archives Division, held at the Main Branch on 5th Avenue and 42nd Street.

I walk up the steps through the revolving door, have my bag checked, walk past tourists taking pictures in the stairwells, and have my bag checked again as I entered the Rose Main Reading Room. There's a sign on the glass door, "Please knock for admission,"

and someone had to buzz me in. I'm a bit intimidated. The reference archivist tries to help, but the archives are extensive and she isn't sure what to look for. I come back a week later to follow up, but the archivist says she can't find anything about custodial apartments at the branches I'm looking into.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

LEILA: So I haven't been to find out exactly where the last live-in custodian lived. And I'm wondering why a history that's so fascinating is so hard to access. This is the library after all. A place designed to organize and house information for public use. But looking through an archive isn't like a Google search. And New York Public Library is a huge, decentralized institution. An archive is something you have to sift through, where you might stumble upon something along the way.

[END BACKGROUND MUSIC]

LEILA: I did find someone who was able to fill in some of the history for me. Because she used to live in one of these apartments.

SHARON: My father gave me a library and it opened my world and my eyes to other cultures and places and things I never would've experienced through the books.

LEILA: Sharon Washington grew up in three different libraries in New York City as a child in the 70s. Her father was a library custodian. Sharon's written a play about her time living at the St. Agnes branch. When we meet, it's a week before her show opens. Hanging around her neck is a clock pendant with the words: So many books, so little time.

SHARON: I would spend as much time as possible in the stacks. It was like a babysitter, the library was like a babysitter for me. I would start at one end of the stacks in the children's bookshelf and read to the other end.

LEILA: Sharon's adventures in the library weren't limited to the stories she read.

SHARON: You can play a mean game of hide and seek, and I mean mean sometimes. We had to start giving parameters because there was just too much to search.

LEILA: And then there were the makeshift go-karts.

SHARON: Rolling around on the library shelves that were on rollers, those rolling shelves, we'd have cart races on those. And we would And dreaming up these stories that were swashbuckling and we'd be on top of the book cases and we'd be under the desks. And I'm sure there were librarians who would come in the next day and thought, did I put that stamp there, wait a minute, I don't remember having that out.

LEILA: The fantasy childhood home came with questions from curious patrons.

SHARON: There were definitely times when people were surprised when there was this little girl going in the front door and people would want to come in behind me, even if it said private. Well I live here, what do you mean?

LEILA: The job that allowed them to live there was extremely physically challenging for her father. It required constant monitoring for her father. She remembers her father saying ...

SHARON: People tell me all the time, it must be nice to live rent-free. And he says shoot, this ain't free. I work hard. And so that was back-breaking work. Not just shoveling coal. His job was opening and closing, maintaining the furnace, polishing all those floors and all the wood. It was a lot for a single person. But he managed to keep it sparkling, as he would say. He took great pride in his job.

LEILA: Her imagination as a child transformed how she viewed her father's work.

SHARON: As a little girl I would follow my father, much to my mother's chagrin, I would follow my father downstairs and watch him shovel the coal. And it's a little tiny room with a low ceiling. And it just looks like a dragon's lair, it's like a cave. So when my father was shoveling the coal it always looked to me like he was feeding a dragon because the furnace was big and it was kind of silver, but it also was kind of smoky, and so it looked like kind of dragon scales. And then certainly when it was open and the coals were red hot, it looked like a fire-breathing dragon. And that was the image I always had, my father was feeding the dragon.

LEILA: There were other moments when the fantasy lifted and the reality of the job set in for her.

SHARON: My father had a drinking problem and there was a time I remember having to go downstairs with my mother and sort of help her feed the furnace, help her shovel

some coal. ANd that's when it dawned on me as a little girl just how hard it was, just how hard this job was.

LEILA: Year after year she remembers hearing promises that the St. Agnes branch would convert to a new heating system. But it didn't happen while she lived there. So her father requested a transfer to a branch without a coal furnace.

SHARON: We were really ready for my father not to have to shovel that coal anymore. And I believe St. Agnes was one of the last branches not to convert.

LEILA: The heating systems started to be upgraded and the apartments emptied out as live-in custodians retired. For Sharon, writing the play has been a way to remember this disappearing group of people.

SHARON: It's a love letter to New York and a certain time in the city and a certain working class in the city that is shrinking that I think is in danger of not existing anymore. There's a certain working class that's really gettin squeezed and it's a tribute to those folks.

LEILA: She's not sure why more wasn't documented about the families who lived in the libraries.

SHARON: I know it's been interesting talking to different people at the library about getting access to maybe a floor plan or pictures and it's really only the families who have the photos. I mean we're the ones who have the photos. There's no photos I know of of the custodial apartments like new, like when they were first made.

LEILA: *What do you make of that. I mean it's an institution dedicated to preserving stories and histories but then doesn't really have the documentation of its own history?*

SHARON: You know it's, I find it a little sad because I do think it is a story that every time I tell it people are so excited and want to know more and can I see them? And is their access? I just think it was. I just think it was a big oversight and I feel like as I said some of the folks I've spoken to at the library are almost a little apologetic for that reason that we are this holder of information and a resource and yet our own apartments we don't have that much information about.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

LEILA: These custodians were a central part of keeping the libraries running. They were there 24/7 from 1910 until the early 2000s. But somehow, documentation of their lives, their stories, never ended up in the archive. The story of the library apartments feels less like a mystery to me now and more like, as Sharon puts it, an oversight.

For Library Bytegeist, I'm Leila Goldstein

[END MUSIC]

MOLLY: Sharon Washington's solo play, called Feeding the Dragon, ran at the Cherry Lane Theater in April 2018. You can find a recorded version at [audible.com](https://www.audible.com).

MOLLY: Nobody actually lives in library branches of New York anymore. But sometimes people find a home outside of the place that they live. A home is somewhere that you feel comfortable and accepted.

But creating a space where people feel truly comfortable and at home is a challenge. And it's an even bigger challenge if especially you're a public space where people need to co-exist. Now, Brooklyn Public Library is undertaking an experiment to solve some of these problems through spatial design and furniture. Noam Osband brings us the story.

[AMBIENT NOISE OF CLINTON HILL LIBRARY]

NOAM OSBAND: This is the sound of Brooklyn's Clinton Hill library. For two years, this was my local library, and I grew pretty familiar with the different sounds of the place. Books being checked out, a parent reading to a child, computer terminals at use, some tables, being taken over for group activities. And then there's this one group that shows up almost every afternoon.

Kid 1: The orb that you're here to get is nearby.

NOAM: But it's not always this innocent

Kid 2: I won't do anything. At this rate, I can just sit back and watch you die.

NOAM: It's the group of teenagers that play games each day in the library. Today it's dungeons and dragons.

Kid 3: We have a custom D and D campaign going on so I'm making the character sheets for us, customized.

NOAM: Sometimes it's D and D. Other times it's Magic: The Gathering or Scott Pilgrim. The games change. But their presence in the library each afternoon is a constant.

Kid 1: We started in sophomore year, right?

Kid 3: 6, 7 years

Kid 1: Yeah, so it's been 6 or 7 years.....This was the nearest place to our high school and then we only went here just out of familiarity

Kid 3: We're the nerds of the library. There you go. Like there's always that group of nerds somewhere in the library, the pen and paper nerds.....When we get aggravated we're all telling each other "shhh," be quiet, it's getting loud.

NOAM: Even though they come to the library mostly to play games, they're given access to space like everybody else. And they've used it to build a small community. This is Naqi, one of the gamers -

NAQI: So I had moved from a different neighborhood to here and I had absolutely no friends. Then one day, my Mom was like, "Go to the library up the block. Go get a book and just read. So I went up here and I saw them playing card games and I was like, "This is so cool." You just sit down, you learn one card game, and you're just sucked in from there. You make so many good friends. So many good connections to other people. It's great. It's awesome.

NOAM: Over my time in the neighborhood, I really grew to love the energy they brought to the library. And I also grew to love the kind of library that welcomes their energy.

Kid: It's inspired some of the staff to start a D and D club every Thursday.

Kid 1: How rare it is to find a place to hang out that's indoors and that we'd be able to be here without any sort of payment or like judgment or anything like that.

Kid 5: The nearest card shop, Kings Games, has an upstairs floor. And you have to pay like five dollars to get into it.

Kid 3: And you can barely find a table, everyone's in everyone's business.

NOAM: By now, it's not exactly breaking news that libraries of the 21st century have become these dynamic community spaces. A free space open to all in an era when even parks are becoming privatized. And in New York, the libraries have embraced this change.

And that's what this whole episode of Library Bytegeist is about: designing library spaces to accommodate their new uses. Or, redesigning them.

NICK: A library isn't just a space with books but it's an idea, it's an experiment where everyone is invited for this sort of experiment in democracy. It's one of our last pure democratic spaces where everyone is invited. There's no limitation on age, there's no limitation on ability. It's sort of like what's reflected in your community.

NOAM: That's Nick Higgins. He's the interim chief librarian at Brooklyn Public Library. And he's proud of the fact libraries are so much more than just book repositories.

NICK: We do have people who are coming in to use our branches, frankly just to get out of the cold or to get out of the heat. And that's a great thing to be available to offer a service like that for a very basic human need is wonderful. There's no other organization that can do that.

NOAM: They offer much for than that. The range of services provided is really remarkable. Here's Ames O'Neil, a project manager at Brooklyn Public Library.

AMES O'NEIL: It runs a huge gamut from story time, the traditional early literacy programs.....tax prep for seniors, help with immigration services, help with learning new technology for seniors or for teens, doing tech time and gaming. STEM activities, robotics, things like that.....Most often a branch only has one program room where they do everything.

NOAM: Using one space do so many different things can be challenging. Especially when there's only one librarian to change over rooms between activities. Which is why Brooklyn's library system is trying out a new idea to adapt old buildings to current

realities. It all started around 5 years ago, when an urban think tank undertook a project to reimagine what New York City's public libraries could be.

DAVID GILES: So, my name is David Giles. I came to sort of the subject of libraries five years ago from a urban systems background as a policy researcher for a economic development think tank in New York City called The Center for an Urban Future.... We were commissioned to do a study of the three library systems in New York and their increasing role as educational anchors and community development anchors.

NOAM: As David mentioned, New York public libraries are actually split into three different systems. There's the Brooklyn public library, the queens public library and the New York public library, which serves the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. These are three huge, separate organizations that all work independently from each other. But what David found out is that all three systems are experiencing rapidly rising usership.

DAVID: Writing in detail about the various different things that were happening in public libraries across New York City was enormously exciting. And it was all news to me.....Last year, the Brooklyn Public Library held 65,000 program sessions with nearly a million attendees, that's a huge increase over ten years prior.

NOAM: The research showed a 40 percent spike in the number of people attending library programs over the last decade with 48 different branches at least doubling their annual program attendance. My favorite statistic from the report? The city's various public libraries were welcoming over 40.5 million visitors a year. More than all of the city's professional sports teams and major cultural institutions combined.

And for someone like David, who wasn't coming to this work with a library background, it was really revelatory.

David: I had a very different conception of what a library was. I was at the University of Chicago and spent many, many hours in the giant research library there.... Open stacks, rows and rows of books. Public libraries, as important as books still are for folks, are a very different kind of beast. Unlike many research libraries, their currency is diversity, and the unexpected communities that form in these spaces and activities that happen in them.

NOAM: David's urban think tank, called CUFF, ended up releasing two reports on the libraries, and the second one zoomed in on one particular issue: library infrastructure and how to adapt a library space to the 21st century realities they deal with.

DAVID: You know we have 214 buildings across the city and many of them are struggling to keep the doors open, struggling to keep up with the way libraries are being used today.

NOAM: Ames O'Neill from Brooklyn Public Library has encountered some of these issues firsthand.

AMES: Particularly in New York City, our facilities are rather old. In Brooklyn the average age of our building is 60 years.

NOAM: It wasn't just their age that was a problem. Many of New York's libraries fall into two groups, and each has its own challenges. The first are the Carnegie libraries. In 1901, the Carnegie Corporation agreed to provide the majority of the funds to build over 100 libraries across all of New York City. These are some of New York's grandest libraries. Sometimes they even have a fireplace that's now no longer in use. But, pretty as they are, they have serious limitations.

AMES: The Carnegie branches, over 100 years old, library services have changed dramatically since then. And those buildings were also not designed for modern electrical use either on a basic level. As more and more people bring laptops or we'll supply laptops or other electronics or technology, it becomes a real problem. There's a lot of ad hoc solutions to storage problems and electrical problems and things like that.

NOAM: And then there is the other issue.

David: The problem of the Lyndsay box...These are kinds of shoe box structures with very few windows and little natural light..... hollowed out spaces in the middle.

NOAM: Named after former Mayor John Lindsay, these are the libraries built during Lindsay's time as New York's mayor in the 1960s and 1970s. Architecturally, they are the polar opposite of the grander Carnegie libraries. Instead, they're typified by their poor lighting, poor and ventilation, and low ceilings

DAVID: There are over 60 Lindsay box libraries across New York City. Many of them are less than inspiring. They're easy to surveil and to make sure, from a librarian's standpoint, that nothing untoward or problematic is happening in the branch.

NOAM: The unattractive architecture of these libraries isn't just an aesthetic problem. It also impacts the patron's relationship to the library. Nick Higgins, the interim chief of Brooklyn's library.

Nick: That limits the public's ability to imagine the space for what it could be for their needs.

NOAM: David Giles and his think tank wanted to devise ways to take the existing New York's libraries and transform them into spaces that can be easily used for multiple activities. Places that library patrons can customize and make their own -- which is especially valuable in a city where space is hard to find and even harder to pay for. So they started working with outside architects and designers.

BRAD: My name is Brad Samuels. I'm a partner at SITU.

NOAM: SITU is a design firm based in Brooklyn's Navy Yard.

Brad: ...Libraries that were designed during an era when it was about bestowing knowledge, institutions were delivering knowledge and I think we're living in a time when that model, paradigm has fundamentally shifted to peer to peer knowledge, the sharing of information, the fact there are multivalent way to take in knowledge, deliver knowledge so there was something about the architecture historically of libraries we felt was also not philosophically aligned with contemporary realities, not just in a practical sense but in the world of ideas.

NOAM: Like David, Brad and his team weren't all that familiar with libraries. And they needed to do a lot of research.

BRAD: So, we looked at what's on the schedule, day to day what's happening in different branches. We also looked informally and somewhat anecdotally at the things that are also happening on a regular basis but may not make their way onto the formal roster of programs.

NOAM: They created a chart that compared different activities showing their different needs. Which programs use chairs, which ones need tables, which require wifi or electricity. By breaking down activities into their most basic functional requirements, the SITU team was able to come up with an idea for making flexible spaces at an affordable price. They came up with they called the kit of parts, a collection of different items that could be reassembled in different ways to fit different library spaces and activities.

BRAD: Everything's on wheels so we have a bunch of smaller tables which can gang together to make a longer table. Then also technically one point of connection for power so as long as you're able to connect one desk to a grid above for power, the entire set of desks is now charged up. Curtains that would help separate the room and then retract. Storytime when you'd want to have kids on the floor reading and being read to, what is the kind of carpet and surface that could be picked up and put away. Secure storage, you couldn't have enough of that.

NOAM: The guiding principles here are ease and flexibility. And, empowerment. They wanted to create infrastructure that could be adapted by the very people using it. Like the cabinets, for instance.

BRAD: those cabinets both have perforated doors that can serve as peg boards and things to attach to and also white boards. But we also expect patrons to hack them and change them and clip on to them so they support the kind of appropriation that the local community might bring to the space which is something we're really excited about actually.

NOAM: In the fall of 2014, David Giles, CUFF, and the independent design teams finally began sharing their research and proposals for redesigning New York's libraries. And the work has had a real direct and immediate impact. It led to a major boost in city funding for libraries, both for library operations and infrastructure. In fact, David was such an effective library advocate that he decided to join the team. And now -

DAVID: I am the chief strategy officer at the Brooklyn Public Library.

NOAM: More importantly, the Brooklyn Public Library secured a grant to build the kit of parts. Brad and the SITU team not only designed the kit, but also fabricated it. The library chose to try it out at the Flatbush branch. SITU also built it. It was unveiled this past May at the library branch in Flatbush. They chose this branch partly because it's a Carnegie Library -- that classic design that comes with loads of limitations. And partly because the Flatbush branch houses a Caribbean Literacy and Cultural Center which puts on many different exhibits and performances. A perfect way to test the design's adaptability. Brooklyn Public Library began using the kit this past May. But the only way to gauge its effectiveness is with time and repeated observations.

BRAD: We fully expect that it will be used in ways that we can't anticipate, that the uses will change over time. It's gonna be really interesting to come back in 6 months, in a year and see how it's actually used. So the point is that this isn't really done when it's delivered but that it can be added to and subtracted from over time and it's a way for the

design itself to evolve with the knowledge that's gleaned from observing how the spaces are used.

NOAM: If the kit is successful in Flatbush, the next step will be to deploy it across at least a dozen other branches around the system to see if they work there too. After all New York's library systems are large and variable -- what works in a Carnegie Library might not work in a Lindsay box. But the results this experiment could redefine what our libraries look like in the future. And really, not just our libraries. Although this is an infrastructure project, both SITU and Public Libraries see it as really having a greater meaning.

BRAD: I do think it's a political approach in some sense. We like to think of it as a democratizing approach to libraries. Something really interesting about it is the question of monumentality and where it leaves us. Should libraries be monumental? Should they be magnetic? These are magnetic spaces.

NOAM: *What does that mean for a space to be magnetic?*

BRAD: When I say magnetic I mean through the force of programming, they create a sense of space.

[AMBIENT SOUND FROM LIBRARY]

NOAM: So, while the branches slowly change, the end result remains in some sense an unknown. With the flexibility kit of the parts it's the people themselves, the patrons who can control the space. The kind of process already underway in Clinton Hill.

Kid 4: We wouldn't be as close if I didn't have this library to spend time in with them. I'm grateful for it

Kid 1: Everyone role for initiative...Three....nine

[OUTRO MUSIC]

MOLLY: It's a constant, delicate balance to carve out a space for yourself in a city that's teeming with people. But public spaces help. There are some amazing libraries in New

York. So I challenge you, get out there and find some cool libraries. Maybe you'll stumble upon a Lindsay Box or two.

This podcast was edited by me, Molly Schwartz. And it was mastered by Dalton Harts. The stories were brought to you by Leila Goldstein and Noam Osband. And I met both of them at Radio Club meetups here in New York City -- shout out to Radio Club!

Maybe home is where the hardcover books are, am I right?