Beverly Hills Public Library’s Art Research Library

The Writing on the Wall
In this economy, in this world, there is some handwriting on the wall for most libraries.

In a New York Times piece from September 26, 2010, David Streitfeld wrote about the corporatization of libraries, including several branches of Los Angeles County Library, by Library Systems & Services. The company’s chief executive has pledged to save the city of Santa Clarita $1 million a year by cutting overhead and replacing union employees. “There’s this American flag, apple pie thing about libraries,” he says. “Somehow they have been put in the category of a sacred organization…A lot of libraries are atrocious. Their policies are all about job security…You can go to a library for 35 years and never have to do anything and then have your retirement. We’re not running our company that way. You come to us, you’re going to have to work.”
Follow me up these stairs that lead to the Fine Arts Collection, including the Art Research Library, at Beverly Hills Public Library.
“…The Department maintains a non-circulating fine art research collection as well as a circulating fine arts collection for a diverse population of general users, students and professional persons (e.g. appraisers, designers, gallery personnel, teachers). The emphasis is on significant titles in 19th and 20th century painting, sculpture, decorative arts, architecture, photography, and performance art.”

This description that used to be on our website is no longer there.

I refer you to the handout for statistics describing the Art Research Library in the Fall of 2006 and in 2010:
The handout also shows the statistics for the circulating collection in Fine Arts.
Fine Arts on the 2nd floor of our library was the home of the Audio Visual collection until it was moved to the lobby area last year in order to be in closer proximity of the Circulation Desk and more conveniently located. This was the first major collection migration after our library started to evolve in the manner evoked by
Bruce McCall’s vision of “The Reading Room” in the April 9 edition of The New Yorker in 2007.
When I came to work at Beverly Hills Public Library 7 ½ years ago, freshly equipped with masters degrees in Library Science and in Art History and Museum Studies, the Art Desk, where I worked exclusively, looked like this.
The library engaged futurist Joan Frye Williams to assess our library and envision how we should remake ourselves and step forward into the 21st century.

Following her intervention, the management and administration of the library determined that Reference Services, which was located in the lobby area, should be moved upstairs and enfolded with the Art Desk as General Reference Services at one location.

While this migration would address the noise issue downstairs for reference interviews, the tradeoff will be the loss of the quiet study area upstairs.

Therefore, Management is considering moving telephone reference to an assigned librarian in a back office cubicle.

The lack of a librarian downstairs to field information requests for patrons entering the lobby is being weighed by management with a possible assignment of a “roving” librarian, perhaps armed with an IPAD for OPAC consultation while dealing with patrons on the move.

With the audio visual collection supplanted by the Reference collection, reference services on the 2nd floor will place librarians close by Reference books, but it forces patrons who wish more complete reference service than they may expect to receive from a roving librarian to go down the hall and upstairs.

Staffing will be easier at one desk instead of two, although adding a librarian to answer a back room phone and a roving librarian downstairs must be figured into the total staffing needs.
In the Summer of 2009, I identified a threat to one of our special collections, valued by opera lovers, but not appreciated by management who don’t work at the public service desks. When the music CD’s moved downstairs, the file of librettos that were kept separate but could be checked out when requested, wasn’t assigned a location adjacent to the new location of the CD’s downstairs. Therefore they were going to be weeded. The Fine Arts librarians were not informed and not consulted in this decision. I found out about the plan to withdraw the librettos and managed to save them to a truck close by the opera CD’s, knowing that many opera lovers require a libretto to more thoroughly appreciate opera broadcasts.

Dance videos were weeded without my knowledge, so I was unable to request DVD replacements for those titles. When I learned that those videos had been withdrawn, I created two plans to present to the Collection Development Manager for rebuilding our fine arts DVD collections.
In Plan A: The “Customer Service” Approach, I articulated that:

Our videotape collection is degrading.
Fewer patrons request titles on videotape, unless DVD’s are unavailable.
As AV moves downstairs, we anticipate that our videotape collection will be withdrawn.
Circulation statistics show that DVD’s are heavily borrowed.
AV materials may not be borrowed by a patron, using ILL.
We want to offer our patrons the classic and most popular TV shows on DVD’s unless they are available for circulation at Santa Monica Public Library or At a branch of LAPL or Los Angeles County Library easily accessible to those who live in Beverly Hills.

Plan B: The “Frugal Library” Approach
Differed from Plan A in including Glendale Public Libraries and Pasadena Public Libraries to the pool of libraries to which we would refer our patrons looking for DVD’s when they are unable to find them at Beverly Hills Public Library.
Neither of these plans was adopted.

Meanwhile, our library of the 21st century has recently added a computer area where the old Audio Visual desk was located.
Another relocated collection when AV moved downstairs was the Play File which had been downstairs but no longer fit. When it moved upstairs, it required the splitting of our collection of music Scores. Management decided that only those scores that circulated most frequently should remain in the public area. The rest would be moved to a storage area in the back room. They were therefore no longer browsable. I vigorously protested this decision based upon my experience observing the browsing behavior of patrons using our scores. I pointed out that circulation statistics did not reflect usage because many patrons find the music they need and then copy the sheet music instead of checking the music out. Many patrons need to look at the tessitura of a vocal score before deciding whether it fits comfortably within their range. Instrumentalists often wish to browse our collection of string quartets, for instance, instead of asking specifically for a particular item to check out. My recommendation was to offer the entire collection to either the Brand Library, which has an outstanding music library, or Los Angeles Public Library. Both expressed interest in acquiring our collection which contains many scores unavailable elsewhere in the state. Our managers said “no” to this idea, for fear of the negative response of our patrons. We began keeping statistics whenever patrons ask to browse subject areas in “storage” or ask for specific music they can’t find on accessible shelving. This happens frequently because the spine labels of the scores relocated in the storage area were never changed, so shelvers don’t know whether they should be reshelved in the public area or in the storage area.
When the Reference collection moved upstairs it was reduced from 11,000 items to 9,500 items, following significant weeding two years prior.

There has since been further weeding of our Reference standing orders reducing the collection even further.
It has been rumored that all circulating books on the 2nd floor, including Fine Arts and Sports and Recreation, will be relocated downstairs, converting the 2nd floor to closed stacks within 5 years. At that point no staff will be necessary upstairs.
Before that happens significant weeding of Circulating 700’s would be required. Our managers would want anything that hasn’t circulated within the past 4 years to be withdrawn, notwithstanding the belief among many art librarians that circulation statistics are not the only heuristics to be used for an Art Reference Library.
In 2003 there were 8 Adult librarians, including one Senior Librarian and 2 Fine Arts librarians, one of which was at the level of Librarian III.
In 2005 there were 7 Adult Librarians, including one Senior Librarian and one Fine Arts librarian.
Now there are 2 Adult Librarians, including my position as Fine Arts Librarian.

The other big difference in the organizational structure is that there are now 2 mid-level Manager Librarians, and 2 upper-level Managers, in addition to the Library Director.
When I started working at Beverly Hills as a full-time Fine Arts librarian, I began working vigorously and pro-actively to publicize our collection to the Beverly Hills and neighboring community galleries and dealers by visiting them individually and sharing information about the Art Research Library and our Art Librarians and by keeping in touch through a mailing list database of all galleries and dealers in the metropolitan area.
I curated this exhibition of Artists’ Books from our collection in exhibition cases owned by Profiles in History when that vendor needed a break from their contracted schedule of exhibitions in the library.
I saw this as an opportunity to promote our Artists’ Books collection and publicize its existence and, at the same time, attempt to secure the long-term security of that collection in our library.
I created a pathfinder to assist patrons as well as generalist librarians in researching art at our library. When I was hired as a Fine Arts librarian, I only worked at the Art Desk. Now I typically work only 2 hours a day at the Art Desk. The other hours I work at the public service desk downstairs, fielding general Reference questions. General Reference librarians and hourly part-time librarians share the remaining hours at the Art Desk. I felt the necessity of training librarians who don’t have an advanced degree in art or professional experience in the performing arts to better equip them in answering fine arts related questions.
Along the lower left side of the print is a signature seal.
Because of the quality, depth, and rarity of some of the books in our collection, we receive research questions from around the world.
However, we are faced with ever tightening budgets and those in positions of power may not agree that the Art Research Library is a vital organ of Beverly Hills Public Library that must be protected. This is reflected in the budget for Collections Services over the past 4 years:

2006/2007 -- $1,400,590  
2007/2008 -- $2,911,614  
2008/2009 -- $3,086,074  
2009/2010 -- $822,322.95

Our library’s budget in this past fiscal year has reflected a 14% cut in the City’s budget. All City offices were ordered closed in the days between Christmas and New Year’s this past holiday season with all City workers furloughed 5 days. However, in the last 10 days before the scheduled closure, a youth soccer organization offered $14,000 to keep the library open. The Friends of the Library came up with the remaining funds necessary to keep our doors open with a minimal staff while the rest of the City was closed. We were cheered by this testimony to the value of the library in the lives of the citizens of Beverly Hills.
Inspired by the University of Ohio’s mash-up of public sculpture on campus with the library catalogue, I promoted a similar idea to our library director, the City’s Cultural Affairs office, and the library’s webmaster. I created comprehensive bibliographies of our collection resources that support the artists represented in City and Library art and constructed a framework for webpages of the mash-up.
When the City announced a Public Art Fair in late winter of 2010, I updated the bibliography to reflect the current collection and decided to mount it in the template we use for our book displays in the lobby. Each work of art has a separate bibliography and a map that associates the work of art with its location in the City or Library and is illustrated by an image of the work of art and images of the books in the collection. In all, there were 59 bibliographies for associated works of art assembled for the June Public Art Fair.
The bibliographies needed further editing when I discovered in March, 2010, that a generalist librarian had been given the task of weeding the circulating 700’s, without my knowledge and without consulting me, based upon circulation statistics and the condition of the items.
Books that are listed in bibliographies are identified as such inside the front cover in order to protect them from being weeded.
I requested a meeting with my supervisor and with the Library Services Manager, formerly the Collections Development Manager. I prepared for the meeting by laying out all the bibliographies that are consulted before annotating a book in our collection, including:

- World Painting Index
- Balay’s Guide to Reference Books
- Marmor’s Guide to the Literature of Art History
- Arntzen and Rainwater’s Guide to the Literature of Art History
- Freitag’s Art Books: a Basic Bibliography of Monographs on Artists
- Sculpture Index and
- Photography Index

By the time I discovered the ill-informed and reckless weeding done without my knowledge and without having consulted the specific directives in the Fine Arts Manual I wrote, 26 items from the first row of Circulating 700’s were gone. These books are no longer available through our vendor. Because of our current budget crunch, they are not recoverable.

I have therefore gone back to the annotations in the bibliographies and removed the annotations for those items that have been lost.

This task is not yet completed and may never be completed since we are told that shelvers are to be given the task of rounding up all items that have not circulated in the past four years and removing them from the shelves.
The full-time librarians were informed last summer that we would be cross-trained in Childrens’ Services. I objected and expressed my belief that cross-training was prohibited by our Memorandum of Understanding because my job posting was specifically for a Fine Arts Librarian, which requires special skills. Our union representative responded:

I just spoke with Mr. Wexler our attorney this morning. He reviewed the issue and job description and as I suspected he didn't see a problem with it, because all of the work is within the job description. It is not a cross training issue per-se, as it isn't two different job titles. He gave an example of a mechanic that worked on police cars and was now going to work on Public Works trucks. It is within the job description to work on either vehicles. If you would like to talk any further about this issue feel free to give me a call on my cell.

The other Childrens’ and Adult Reference librarians were subsequently “cross-trained,” but so far, I have escaped that fate.
I was honored last month by the City Council for exceptional public service after one of our regular patron/dealers wrote a letter to the library director describing help I gave her when she came to use our auction catalogue databases. My husband said I could mention this to you only if I also shared with you a haiku he wrote, which will shed light on my librarianship at home:

The girl of my dreams
is a librarian, but
I need a shelver.

At the library, my work as a subject specialist is being supplanted by the work I’m asked to do as a generalist.
I’m now taking a 4 week online course with InfoPeople called “Rethinking Reference.” We are asked to focus on the reference collections in our individual libraries as we completed the weekly assignments. While the other Adult Services librarian at Beverly Hills is using the generic “Reference” area as his laboratory, I’m limiting my focus to the Art Research Library as my petrie dish. In the 3rd week the instructor revealed his philosophy of turning all but the most essential “ready reference” material into circulating items and asked us to propose a circulation policy for our own reference collections.

Armed with the newly published HANDBOOK OF ART AND DESIGN LIBRARIANSHIP, edited by Amanda Gluibizzi and Paul Glassman, I will argue why the Art Research Library at Beverly Hills cannot become a circulating collection without redefining the collection altogether.

I quote from pp. 64-65 of their book:

“In art and design libraries the criteria informing de-accessioning efforts are often more complex than in science, engineering, business and general reference collections…The availability of electronic full-text journals, e-books and online reference sources has reduced the need for print editions of many science and reference titles. Art journals and monographs, however, are largely unaffected by this trend…users’ need for high-quality colour images along with text makes it unlikely that art e-books and e-journals will become the standard anytime soon…The major difference between weeding in a general collection and weeding in an art collection is the assessment of what constitutes ‘outdated’ materials. In general, art and design books and journals are like those in other humanities fields, in that they ‘tend to have a much slower rate of obsolescence’ compared with science, business, or reference…Texts written by authors whose perspectives have become outdated are useful to art historians, especially for studies of the art history canon and how it has evolved over time and when the text represents contemporary criticism of an artist or period. Research libraries whose collections have long histories have reason to keep these items when others would not.”
In the first years I worked at Beverly Hills my conference attendance was subsidized by City funds. In the past 2 years I have been given no funds to attend the Arlis conference, although I’m happy to report that my days at the conference are, so far, still counted as work days.

I’ve tried to give you a picture of the situation at my beautiful, wonderful library and what sort of finger fate is giving us -- moving finger; I mean, of course, which is writing on the walls of the second floor of the Beverly Hills Public Library, a floor that used to be humming with an art reference desk, a full-time fine arts librarian, and art patrons from Beverly Hills and all over the world, and may soon be closed to the public.

I can't talk any more about the handwriting on the wall for the Fine Arts Library at BHPL; it's too sad. I'll just conclude by noting ruefully that the handwriting is on the wall for me, too. My patrons will disperse, to UCLA or the Brand or the LA Public Library. Some of them may just stay home and google art. I'll be manning a general reference desk, fielding an occasional art query. It's unlikely I'll continue getting comp time to come to ARLIS, even if I pay my own way as I do now, if back in Beverly Hills there's no there there, no real Fine Arts Library for me to represent, nurture, protect, and improve.

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

Thank you.