On the Importance of 'Spaciousness' in LIS: Meditations on the Pandemic, Place, and a Post-Eurocentric Future

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ABSTRACT

More than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that we consider how this context has affected the field of library and information science (LIS). While the pandemic's effects can seem endless, I focus specifically on the existential fear the pandemic has generated and its implications for our field. I link this existential fear particularly with our ability to share physical space together. To this end, we must reinvigorate concepts such as *library as place*. This paper shows how a contemplative focus in our profession can help in this regard. However, this contemplative focus needs to move beyond Eurocentrism to truly expand the narrative in our field. As such, I show how *vāstu* and its focus on inner 'spaciousness' can highlight new approaches to not just repair the damage wrought by neoliberalism and the pandemic, but to also find new ways to thrive both individually and collectively.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education of information professionals; Information service; Sociocultural perspectives

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic; library as place; spaciousness; contemplative studies; vāstu

INTRODUCTION

Now over two years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that we consider how the pandemic has affected the field of library and information science (LIS) and LIS education. While for many in the world the pandemic appears to be ending (or at least reaching its waning stages), the after-effects of the pandemic may be with us for years to come. For instance, we can see how the pandemic has had differential effects on people, with poorer populations suffering higher rates of mortality and income inequality worsening both globally and within nations (Green & Fazi, 2021). Moreover, mental health issues are on the rise, with many feeling an increasing sense of isolation and loneliness (Lee et al., 2020). These crises do not even address other pressing concerns such as the fragmentation of the public over issues such as vaccine mandates and passports, and distrust/skepticism of government and public health officials.

While the pandemic's effects can seem endless, I focus more specifically on the existential fear the pandemic has generated and its implications for our field. As the psychologist Ernest Becker (1997) has discussed, humanity's deepest fear is that of death; in fact, the "denial of death" (p. xvii) arguably animates much of human endeavor. In the face of a pandemic, this denial cannot be credibly maintained – mortality (or at least the possibility of severe illness) no longer is something we can so easily repress. With regard to LIS, I link this existential fear particularly with our ability to share physical space together. As a field and a profession that emphasizes the importance of *place* and *space*, how we can overcome this fear and revivify our collective experience? To this end, we cannot forget important concepts such as *library as place*; however, we must reinvigorate these concepts in light of decades of neoliberal ideology and now the corrosive effects of the pandemic. As part of this reinvigoration, I also show how a contemplative focus in our profession can help in this regard. However, we cannot limit this important 'contemplative turn' in our field to Western epistemological traditions; as such, I introduce a focus on 'spaciousness' that relies on the Indian spiritual tradition of *vāstu*. This expansion of the narrative in LIS can highlight new approaches to not just repair the damage wrought by neoliberalism and the pandemic, but to also find new ways to thrive both individually and collectively.

WHY PLACE MATTERS: BEING TOGETHER AGAIN

The concept of *library as place* (Leckie, 2004, p. 233) has been a popular and important one in LIS for several years. Much of this discourse around *library as place* has centered on the roles of public libraries in supporting the "public sphere" (Habermas, 1964, p. 50), with an emphasis on the intersection between libraries, information, and democracy. While this connection between libraries and democracy can be contested (Buschman, 2017; Wiegand, 2016), public libraries in particular have a strong symbolic connection with democratic and inclusive ideals.

Thus, despite the challenges of the pandemic, public librarians have been doing admirable work to support their patrons through remote access to collections and safe access to physical spaces. While this work is significant, I wonder if in a post-pandemic world the public that uses the library has also changed. Similar to John Buschman's (2017) questioning of how neoliberalism may be creating a public that prefers individual, consumer choice over the collective funding of public institutions, might we be witnessing a 'post-pandemic public' that is qualitatively different than before? The neoliberal agenda, with its focus on privatization, deregulation, individual choice, and defunding of public institutions, has affected library services and education for decades (Blanke, 1989; Trosow, 2014). The pandemic, by furthering isolating people from one another (despite the infection control benefits of such measures), can ironically reinforce these neoliberal tendencies, with certain aspects of the public (particularly the professional classes) preferring to work remotely and access services (such as public libraries) from the comfort of their own private homes. Therefore, the potential exists for an erosion of the belief in the benefits of shared public space.

Similar to public libraries, universities have been subject to neoliberal pressures for decades. In fact, universities in North America increasingly act as corporations in the 'business' of research and education (Johnson et al., 2003). Faculty life within LIS (and in the university

community more broadly) is often isolating, individualized, and wracked by an unceasing need for 'busyness'. For instance, I was recently a member of the Annual Performance Evaluation (APE) committee for my Faculty and was dispirited by the neoliberal immiseration of university life. At the end of the day, most of us faculty members are dutiful neoliberal subjects, busy documenting all the work that we have done – papers published, books published, talks given, media interviews, reconfiguring courses for emergency online teaching, etc., etc. The image I have is one of endless work and disconnection from others, even as we yearn for recognition, validation, and acceptance from our peers. For many of us (especially during the pandemic), we are working in our private homes, chasing the life-draining goal of constant and endless productivity. Furthermore, our campus spaces (particularly shared faculty spaces) have gone dead during the pandemic (understandably so); however, many faculty spaces were often lifeless even pre-pandemic. I worry that in a post-pandemic world, building place-based community amongst faculty members may become even more challenging. Given these concerns, the next section explores how insights from contemplative studies can provide us with some hope.

CONTEMPLATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON SPACE

For us to embody physical space in a wholesome manner, both for our patrons (as librarians) and colleagues/students (as faculty members), insights from the field of contemplative studies are useful. While an emerging field, contemplative studies has been slowly making inroads in LIS (see Latham et al., 2020; Pyati, 2019). At the heart of contemplative studies is the focus on contemplative practices, both in their personal and societal aspects. Contemplative practices can include meditation, mindfulness, yoga, prayer, pilgrimages, vigils, and so forth (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, n.d.). The religious studies scholar Louis Komjathy (2018) emphasizes the general characteristics of contemplative practice to be "attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose" (p. 55). Contemplative studies as a field looks at how contemplative practices interact with personal, communal, political, and socio-economic factors in the world. As such, meaning, purpose, introspection, transformative potential, and renewed engagement with the world are at the heart of this field.

Intersections between LIS and contemplative studies can be seen in efforts to understand how to interact with information and communication technology (ICT) in a more healthy and balanced way to combat the effects of attentional fragmentation and the general acceleration of life (Levy, 2016). Moreover, we can see how a focus on contemplation can bring a greater focus on wisdom in our field, beyond a focus on data, information, and knowledge (Latham et al., 2020). In addition, we can highlight the introspective and reflective components of our field, such as supporting meditation programs at public libraries (Pyati, 2019) and allowing patrons a place of refuge from the incessant informational demands of our age (Gorichanaz, 2021).

In terms of the existential fear that the pandemic has raised, a contemplative focus can help us understand better – as faculty, practitioners, and students – how to better manage and cope with this fear. Slowing down, being able to witness our emotions, and then taking calmer and clearer actions based on a deeper discernment of our fears and worries is at the core of a meditative approach and the contemplative experience. As such, we can find ways to cope with this fear in healthier ways, rather than retreating into our privatized spaces and potentially depriving our shared/collective spaces of nourishment, care, and attention.

However, despite the benefits of an approach based on contemplative studies, we must be aware of the Eurocentric biases of modern approaches to contemplation. Issues of cultural appropriation (particularly of Asian spiritual traditions) can come to the surface, as well as the 'whiteness' of the field (Komjathy, 2018). Additionally, many of the founding members of contemplative studies come from a secular tradition that has a generally negative orientation towards organized religion, focusing often instead on a more 'scientific' and 'rational' neo-Buddhist approach (Komjathy, 2018). Therefore, ethnic communities of color (who for instance make up the majority of the world's Buddhist population) can feel left out of modern contemplative approaches. With this point in mind, the next section takes up the issue of a post-Eurocentric contemplative approach that LIS scholars and practitioners can benefit from.

POST-EUROCENTRIC VIEWS ON SPACE

In keeping with the theme of expanding the narrative in LIS, it is crucial for us to examine the Eurocentric biases of our field. A contemplative approach to repairing and reinvigorating our sensed of shared/collective and public space is one way to expand the narrative, but as noted above, contemplative studies is plagued by its own Eurocentric blind spots. Scholarship in LIS has recognized this Eurocentric bias of the field for many years (Honma, 2005; Hudson, 2016); however, there is hardly any sustained discussion of what a non-Eurocentric approach to our field might look like.

Keeping this fact in mind, I introduce here the ancient Indian spiritual art of *vāstu* as a way to reformulate our relationship to space and place in LIS. *Vāstu* (which could be described as the Indian counterpart to the Chinese *feng shui*) is concerned with how the physical spaces we inhabit affect the inner 'space' within us. As someone of Indian background and as a novice student of *vāstu*, I am aware of basic principles such as the need to keep a certain amount of empty space in the center of any room for there to be an adequate flow of energy (*prāna* in Sanskrit) (Svoboda, 2013). A consequence of *prāna* flowing in a wholesome manner in our physical spaces is that the *prāna* inside of us can also flow better (Svoboda, 2013). This basic idea connects to the larger concept in the Indian Vedic tradition of how the microcosm is linked to the macrocosm; in other words, whatever happens outside of us is also happening inside, and vice versa (Svoboda, 1992). Hence, if I am not able to create adequate, wholesome *spaciousness* inside myself, how can I expect these qualities to effortlessly appear in the physical spaces that I occupy?

I am aware that my discussion of *vāstu* has a certain cultural and spiritual resonance for me. In this case, it is understandable that someone without this same background may feel hesitant to embrace this concept and/or may feel a sense of cultural appropriation if they do so. Despite these potential reservations, however, it is worth noting how a similar concept of linking our inner worlds with the world around us can be found in Western traditions as well. For instance, the great Trappist monk and contemplative activist Thomas Merton (1966) (writing in the context of the tumult of the 1960s) notes how "if there is a stupid war in Vietnam because nobody trusts anybody, this is in part because I myself am defensive, suspicious, untrusting…" (para. 9). Moreover, the depth psychologist James Hollis (2018) writes, "…is it not the

beginning of wisdom to recognize that what is wrong in the world is also wrong in me and that what must be righted in the world begins with me, rather than preaching to my neighbor?" (p. 92). Thus, what appears to be an insight from a particular wisdom tradition also has a universal resonance.

CONCLUSION

  Coming back to our relationship to space and place in LIS, I ultimately bring the concept of creating inner 'spaciousness' into the discussion. Simply put, we must find the spaciousness inside ourselves to explore our own fears and begin the work of post-pandemic healing. In essence, we need to focus much more on *being* rather than doing. This orientation pushes back against neoliberal logics and creates the space needed for us to be together in a more present way. Rather than staying apart from others, cultivating inner spaciousness brings us in closer communion with our colleagues, patrons, students, and communities.

  More healing and recovery work is certainly needed, not just for our field but for society as a whole. However, a contemplative focus that is also inclusive of non-Western approaches expands the narrative and the realm of possibilities in LIS. Perhaps this focus may also help us to grow in wisdom, such that we become the change we want to see in the world and can bring more life into the spaces we inhabit – library, university, or otherwise.

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