

The Municipal Reference and Research Center is Born

New York's Municipal Library in the late 1960s

Mia Bruner

Recently the news site *Democracy Now!* featured a story titled “NYPD Surveillance Unveiled: City Claims to Lose Docs on 1960s Radicals, Then Finds 1 Million Records.”¹ The segment describes Baruch College professor Johanna Fernández’s efforts to access records of New York Police Department (NYPD) surveillance of radical organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. In the early 2000s, Fernández began her search for this material but encountered a major obstacle when the city of New York claimed it had lost them. Sixteen years later, the city contacted Fernández to inform her that these documents were in fact not lost and had been found with more than 520 boxes of related materials in a warehouse in Queens. Upon hearing this, reporter Juan González asks “how does somebody lose and then suddenly find 500 boxes? I mean, where were these boxes? Where were they supposed to be, and how did they suddenly come up with them?”² As anyone familiar with the Municipal Library knows, missing municipal records are not uncommon. Due to huge losses of space and severe staff cuts, New York’s Municipal Library contains thousands of uncatalogued records that are meant to be available to the public. This article will examine changes in the Municipal Library’s administrative structure during the late 1960s to consider how it became what it is today.

The collection and storage of NYC’s municipal documents has a long and largely undocumented history.³ In 1913, William Prendergast, the city’s comptroller, established a municipal reference library to be a depository of publications by city agencies.⁴ Prendergast, along with members of New York City’s business community, hoped it would serve city employees, and the public as a government “fact center.”⁵ However, from its beginnings, the Municipal Library has had difficulty achieving this. Administrative, political and public confusion around the purpose of the library is in large part responsible.

This is documented particularly well in New York Times articles: in 1911, “City Hall Library to be Made Useful”; in 1948, “O’Dwyer In Drive On Useless Files”; in 1976 is “Dungeon-Like Subbasement Yields Dusty Municipal Past”; and in 2014 “A Library Where a Hush Is Over Its Very Existence.”⁶

Administrative organization has always been a challenge for the library. This is in part because of its dual affiliation with city government and the New York Public Library (NYPL). New York’s Municipal Library was initially an agency of the Department of Finance; however, a year after it opened its doors, city officials transferred the library to NYPL.⁷ This article will discuss the organizational structure of New York’s Municipal Library fifty-five years later in the late 1960s: a period when it was undergoing significant changes. In 1968, as part of a massive reorganization of city government, Mayor John Lindsay transferred the library out of NYPL and into the Municipal Service Administration (MSA). Changes made during this transfer were foundational in shaping not only the Municipal Library’s structure and function but also the overall management and handling of municipal documents in New York City. Despite the significance of this period, there is a particular gap in research about the library during the 1960s and 1970s. I will address this gap by examining the circumstances leading up to the transfer of the library. This will center on two critical issues: requests from city agencies for departmental branch libraries and the library’s relationship to the Municipal Archives in the late 1960s.

Early Municipal Reference Libraries

Federal regulations that ensure consistency in depository libraries neglect to mention local government documents, leaving these collections to develop individual histories of their own.⁸ The concept of municipal reference libraries became popular in

the United States in the early 1900s as part of a movement to reform city governments.⁹ Cities were largely unable to respond to growing populations and the period was characterized by negligent law enforcement, exploitation of public utilities, and government corruption.¹⁰ Civic leaders demanded changes to deficient government structures such as the election of councilmen, reductions of state influence in city affairs, and increased municipal ownership of utilities.¹¹

This spirit of reform invoked a vibrant time for libraries. The period saw the establishment of both the American Association of Law Libraries and the Special Libraries Association.¹² Charles McCarthy, an early advocate of American legislative libraries, first proposed the idea of a municipal reference library to the National Municipal League in 1894.¹³ He presented these special libraries as a tool to ensure the success of reforms to city government.¹⁴ McCarthy also pitched these collections as a business investment: a way for corporations to address corruption in city government and to gain access to information relevant to them.¹⁵ Baltimore founded the first municipal reference library in 1907; Philadelphia, Chicago, Honolulu, Milwaukee, and New York followed suit. There is little consistency in the structure of these libraries because they were established in affiliation with different city agencies. Baltimore opened a municipal reference library within the Department of Legislative Reference; Chicago established a library within the Bureau of Statistics. In Cleveland and Detroit, municipal reference libraries operated as branches of the public library.¹⁶

The Municipal Reference Library of the City of New York was opened in 1913 in the New York Department of Finance.¹⁷ Only a year later, the Board of Estimate passed a unanimous resolution which transferred the library from the Department of Finance to the Circulation Department of NYPL.¹⁸ As a branch of the NYPL, the Municipal Library directed its operations as an independent division while building a relationship with local government that varied as administration and politics changed.¹⁹

The Municipal Library in the 1960s

Like the progressive era, the mid to late 1960s present a period focused on reforming city government. Economic, social, and political issues put a spotlight on deficiencies in city services. Just as it had in the past, failures in city government began to strain its relationship to the public. As a mechanism of transparency and communication for the city, the library's functionality came into question. Two major points of concern were the Municipal Library's relationship to the Municipal Archives and requests from city officials for departmental branches of the library.

Departmental Libraries

In the early 1960s, the Municipal Library began to develop department specific collections to accommodate the growing government.²⁰ By 1963, the Municipal Library oversaw nine branches.²¹ There was a growing conversation in city government about a need for more immediately accessible materials to assist the work of city agencies. A report from 1964 quotes an appeal from the Chair of the City Planning Commission for a branch:

We have found that we require a large volume of working material in our office. Often material we need from your library is not available for immediate use. . . . Because of these demands we have had to acquire much of our own library material which is duplicating the planning material you have in your collection. We feel this is inefficient and a waste of City funds. Our mechanism for handling this constantly growing body of material is only improvised, is getting out of hand, and is inadequate for our pressing needs.²²

Without increased budget from the city or NYPL, the library could rarely accommodate requests from city officials.

Often branches were established to provide services to government departments that had already begun independent collections. These collections came to the Municipal Library inconsistently classified, inefficiently circulated, and sporadically documented. In many cases, the library did not have the capacity to rectify this problem and the collections remained chaotic and improperly cared for. An excellent example of this is the library developed by the New York City Planning Commission. From 1938 through the 1950s, the Planning Commission had attempted to establish a library but could not obtain funds to hire a librarian. A staff member tried to run a library himself resulting in a "fiasco": "unorthodox processing and circulation procedures were adopted and things increasingly got out of hand."²³

In 1961, the City Commissioner and the Director of NYPL tentatively assigned library staff to establish a simple classification scheme. But the staff member, who had no background or experience overseeing libraries, rejected this scheme "in favor of a weird geographical scheme he felt more effective." Three years later, little progress had been made. Staff from NYPL had increased to two but most of the collection was still uncatalogued.²⁴

NYPL continued to reluctantly administrate this branch however the growing requests to expand the Municipal

Library's area of service prompted the Chief of Circulation, John Mackenzie Cory, to request a study of the library's service to government agencies headed by Rutherford D. Rogers.²⁵ This report, *The New York Public Library and Service to Municipal Agencies*, was presented to the library in 1963. In it, Rogers recommends NYPL distance itself from the departmental libraries: "the City would benefit from NYPL direction of all agency library service, but the adverse public relations that would result from trying to rationalize the present hodge-podge of libraries makes NYPL assumption of this responsibility inadvisable."²⁶

Still, Rogers does not ever suggest the Municipal Library be transferred to the City government itself. On the contrary, in its executive summary the report recommends that the library remain a branch of NYPL.²⁷

The problem posed by these branch libraries raises a larger question about the administration of municipal documents in New York City: who should be responsible for supporting the library to expand its services in response to the changing needs of city agencies? Roger's recommendation that NYPL distance itself from these branch libraries offered an ineffective answer to this question. It did not address that the information needs of city agencies were no longer being met by the library nor request for serious consideration about the structure of library service to city officials. This hands-off approach to departmental collections encouraged the management of municipal documents in New York City to become more disparate than it previously had been.

The Municipal Archives and Records Center

NYPL's disinclination to oversee the Municipal Archives, a division of the Municipal Library, was also major impetus for the Rogers' study.²⁸ The archives were first discussed in 1938 when Mayor LaGuardia established a Mayor's Municipal Archive Committee to develop a plan to store and preserve city records.²⁹ The Committee submitted a proposal to open Municipal Archives, however, economic shortage created by WWII prevented them from acting on their plans and the committee was dissolved.³⁰ In its absence, the volume of city records grew to alarming rates. Mayor O'Dwyer reinstated the Archives Committee and in 1950, the Municipal Archives Division opened under the temporary supervision of the Municipal Library.³¹ The new division hardly had a chance to establish its work because it was tasked to work on a collaborative study between New York City and the National Records Management Council.³² Newly hired staff surveyed the record management procedures of five Municipal Departments.³³ The project prompted the city to open a third records agency: the

Municipal Records Center. In 1952, the Municipal Archives and the Records Center were joined and renamed the Municipal Archives and Records Center (MAARC).³⁴ The establishment of a third agency to handle New York City municipal documents further decentralized and complicated the overall management of records in New York City.

In 1963, "The Roger's Report" found the archive in disrepair due to neglect from both NYPL and the city: "The lack of effective organization, cataloguing, and physical maintenance . . . probably reflect the lack of support from the City more than a lack of recognition of what needs to be done."³⁵ City support for MAARC became increasingly inconsistent; laws regarding administration of records were ambiguous and granted power to many agencies. Rogers cites the low salaries of archivists and the lack of training or "neglect" of staff as an illustration of "evident frictions between the Municipal Archives and Records Center and its supervising agency The New York Public Libraries."³⁶ To address this, Rogers recommends the City take full responsibility for MAARC:

There is such widespread and deep feelings that the records center operation is an incongruity within NYPL that Dr. Bahmer and I join in urging that the Library disassociate itself from the Municipal Archives and Records Center. . . . Unless the City were willing to change its attitude toward the financial support of the archival operation, the Library would be assuming a heavy burden if the archives were properly run.³⁷

Rogers advises MAARC be treated as "a City housekeeping function without a logical library association" housed under the City Administrator or the Board of Estimate.³⁸ In conversations about MAARC during this time, one senses the struggle of identifying who should be responsible for city documents. The transfer of MAARC to city government proved to be a temporary and ineffective solution to this problem and laid the groundwork for City government to readopt the Municipal Library as well.

The Municipal Reference and Research Center is Born

In 1969, the Municipal Reference Library was transferred out of NYPL. The transfer occurred in 1968 as part of Mayor Lindsay's reorganization of city government. In his campaign for mayor, John Lindsay promised to cut \$300–400 million in city budget by consolidating city agencies. Lindsay's reorganization plan condensed more than fifty agencies into ten "super agencies:" Financial Management, Health Services,

Housing and Development, Human Resources, Recreation and Cultural Affairs, Transportation, Economic Development, Environmental Protection, Corrections and General Services, which would become MSA.³⁹

The Municipal Library's inclusion in this restructuring occurred because of its ties to the archive.⁴⁰ By placing the MRL with MARC in the MSA, city officials aimed to address the disorganized manner in which records were dispersed throughout branches.⁴¹ It was hoped this change would establish coordination and "rigid retention schedules" for city records. On May 15, 1969, Mayor Lindsay signed Local Law 69 transferring the Municipal Library and its employees from the care of NYPL into the newly formed MSA. The library's director, Eugene J. Bockman, announced this change: "As of June 30, 1969, the Municipal Reference Library, a branch of the New York Public Library, goes out of existence and on July 1, 1969, the Municipal Reference and Research Center (MRRC), of the Municipal Service Administration, the City of New York, is born."⁴²

In 1969–77, the library remained in the MSA where it suffered due to budget cuts, neglect, and administration by city officials who had little to no experience managing libraries.⁴³ In 1977, the city transferred the Municipal Library and MAARC to their current home within the newly founded Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS). The transfer of the Municipal Reference Library out of NYPL had devastating effects on the library's services. In no way did it address the disorganized manner in which records were dispersed throughout branches or establish "rigid retention schedules and enforcing recognition of these schedules."⁴⁴ On the contrary, lack of support from both the city and NYPL hindered the library's success preventing it from keeping consistent policies, hours, and services. This has resulted in decades of incomplete projects and temporary initiatives.

Conclusion

Inadequate funds and understaffing at the Municipal Library in part answers Juan Gonzalez's question: "how does somebody lose and then suddenly find 500 boxes?" The transfer of the library played a significant role in creating these conditions because of the ways it altered the library's administrative structure. In 1969, the Municipal Library became entirely tied to the demands of city administrations that did not see it as a valuable resource. When it lost the support of NYPL, the library's fate was to be determined by the attitudes and beliefs of individual mayors. This has resulted in decades of incomplete projects and temporary initiatives. For example, under Mayor Bloomberg, the library lost an entire room which was repurposed as a visitors

center: here agencies within DORIS featured archival exhibits and hosted dinners.⁴⁶ Under Mayor De Blasio, attention is paid to the libraries requests for technology but the Visitor Center is empty.⁴⁷ These changes in administration illustrate how pervasive the effects of this transfer have been in all aspects of the libraries work.

Juan Gonzalez's alarm at the state of the city's records is apt and raises critical questions for information professionals working with municipal documents: how do we take the long-term mission and vision of information professionals committed to increasing the availability and use of government documents and make it work with the mission and information goals of city agencies? Because the relationship between the Municipal Library and the city government seems to be fragile at best, it deserves our attention, study, and use. The Municipal Library's current state begs questions about the value and function of local government documents on a whole: whose lives are impacted when these kinds of records are less accessible? Why are they important? This history demands conversation about our responsibility for this kind of library: if the Municipal Library is not NYPL's responsibility nor the city government's responsibility then who is left?

Mia Bruner (mbrune85@pratt.edu), Library Clerk, Pratt Institute School of Information, and volunteer at New York's Municipal Library.

Notes

1. Juan González and Amy Goodman, "NYPD Surveillance Unveiled: City Claims to Lose Docs on 1960s Radicals, then Finds 1 Million Records" (includes an interview with Johanna Fernández and Gideon Oliver), *Democracy Now!*, June 17, 2016, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/6/17/nypd_surveillance_unveiled_city_claims_to.
2. Ibid.
3. In their article "State and Local Documents Roundup: A Basic Primer on Collecting Local Government Publications," Yvonne Wilson and Debora Richey write "local government documents remain the least collected, written about, and used of government publications." Yvonne Wilson and Debora Richey, "State and Local Documents Roundup: A Basic Primer on Collecting Local Government Publications," *DttP: Documents to the People* 33, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 9.

4. New York Public Library, Municipal Reference Library, *The Library Opening* (New York: M. B. Brown Printing & Binding Co., 1913): 14–15.
5. *Ibid.*, 14
6. “City Hall Library to be made Useful,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1911; O’Dwyer in Drive on Useless Files,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1948; Murray Schumach, “Dungeon-Like Subbasement Yields Dusty Municipal Past,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1976; Stephen Farrell, “A Library Where a Hush is Over its Very Existence” *New York Times*, August 6, 2013: A14.
7. Barry W. Seaver, *A True Politician: Rebecca Browning Rankin, Municipal Reference Librarian of the City of New York, 1920–1952* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 8.
8. Wilson and Richey, “State and Local Documents Roundup,” 9.
9. Seaver, *A True Politician*, 1–3.
10. Leslie Nordby, *Municipal Libraries in the United States*, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Municipal Reference Library, June 1987), 1, “Municipal Reference Library” file, New York Municipal Library.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. Paul D. Healey, “Go and Tell the World: Charles R. McCarthy and the Evolution of the Legislative Reference Movement, 1901–1917,” *Law Library Journal* 99, no. 1 (2007): 833–63.
13. Seaver, *A True Politician*, 1.
14. *Ibid.*, 1.
15. Charles McCarthy, “The City Library as a Business Investment,” *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 2, no. 5 (September 1, 1908): 190–97.
16. Barry W. Seaver, “Rebecca Rankin’s Campaign for a Municipal Archives in New York, 1920–1952,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 45, no. 3 (January 1, 2010): 263–96.
17. New York Public Library, Municipal Reference Library, *The Library Opening*, 1.
18. Seaver, *A True Politician*, 1–3.
19. *Ibid.*
20. This was a practice that had been employed to a much lesser degree since 1916 with the establishment of the Public Health Division. This branch was fairly successful and possessed 10,000 volumes covering fields of public health, personal hygiene, hospitals, sanitation, child care, nursing, food, drugs, and health statistics. Rutherford D. Rogers, *New York Public Library and Service to Municipal Agencies* (New York: New York Public Library, 1963), 61.
21. The branches served the following departments: Municipal Art Commission, Department of Labor, Department of Marine and Aviation, Welfare Department, Police Academy, Chief Medical Examiner, Department of Commerce and Public Events, City Planning and Housing Library. *Ibid.*, 51–68.
22. *Ibid.*, 28.
23. *Report of the Departmental Library Committee*, 1964, Box 1, Municipal Reference Library Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.
24. *Ibid.*, 1–6.
25. Barry Seaver, “A Legacy of Reform: The Municipal Reference Library of the City of New York, 1913–1969,” *Bibliion: The Bulletin of the NYPL* 1 (1992): 142–55, 152.
26. Rogers, *New York Public Library and Service to Municipal Agencies*, 68.
27. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
28. Seaver, “A Legacy of Reform,” 152.
29. Kenneth Cobb, *History—Background of Municipal Archives and Municipal Reference Library*, Municipal Reference Library Vertical File, New York City Municipal Library, City of New York.
30. *Ibid.*, 10.
31. *Ibid.*
32. City of New York, Bureau of the Budget, *The Records Management Program of the City of New York*, 1953.
33. For more information about the early relationship between these two agencies see Jason Horn, “Municipal Archives and Records Center of the City of New York,” *American Archivist* 16, no. 4 (1953): 311–20.
34. *Ibid.*, 314.
35. Rogers, *New York Public Library and Service to Municipal Agencies*, 11.
36. *Ibid.*, 12.
37. *Ibid.*, 13.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
40. The original organizational chart for this plan left the Municipal Reference Library entirely. A revised chart included the Municipal Library but staff at NYPL felt the “addition of the [Municipal Library] was an afterthought from someone’s realization the Municipal Archives had been included.” Jean Godfrey to Edward Geier Freehager, February 14, 1968, Box 1, Transfer to NYC, Municipal Reference Library Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

41. Other accounts of this transfer illustrate different opinions. Jean Godfrey, Chief of the Branch Libraries, expressed apprehension about this transfer as well as apprehension on the part of Bockman's staff. In a letter written on February 14th 1968, Jean Godfrey notes "while Mr. Bockman quite frankly states the personal advantages to him that the transfer holds and while he feels that the rest of MU's staff would benefit accordingly [staff members are] not at all happy about the prospect of such a transfer." Godfrey to Edward Geier Freehager, February 14, 1968, Box 1, Transfer to NYC, Municipal Reference Library Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.
42. Eugene J. Bockman, "The Municipal Reference and Research Center, 1969," *Notes* 43, no. 6 (New York: City of New York, 1969), 41.
43. Seaver, "A Legacy of Reform," 152.
44. *Ibid.*
45. A press release from the MSA in 1975 describes how eight of the fifteen employees at the library had been fired and it only had the funds and capacity to be open two days a week. As mentioned above, DORIS' 2009 *Annual Report* discusses staff cuts that reduced the library's staff by 50 percent. Municipal Service Administration, *City's Reference Library to Close Three Days a Week*, June 16, 1975, Municipal Reference Library Vertical File, New York City Municipal Library, City of New York.
46. Christine Bruzzese, interview by Mia Bruner, New York Municipal Library, October 2016.
47. *Ibid.*