

FINAL REPORT

# DREAM BIG

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A SYMPOSIUM AT THE CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY



CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY  
FOUNDATION

## REPORT ON DREAM BIG: THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES A SYMPOSIUM AT THE CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY

On October 25, 2016, the hottest ticket in Cambridge was a special event at the Main Library: DREAM BIG: THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES. The Lecture Hall was filled to capacity. A lively audience joined Maria McCauley, the new Director of Libraries for the City of Cambridge, and other thought leaders in an exploration of the impact of emerging technologies on library programming, the critical impact of architecture and design in the digital age, and evolving community needs in a rapidly changing environment.

**Maria McCauley** welcomed all, inviting everyone to join the Library to dream big about a shared future. “We seek insights and inspiration – from our esteemed guests and residents on the future of public libraries. We are committed to childhood education and lifelong learning, to social justice and to providing free, unfettered access to information and ideas. As we work to ensure that everyone has access to the Library’s resources, we are open to new ideas and approaches. The public library, both digital and physical, is a cornerstone of our democracy.”



**Nicholas Negroponte** then took the audience on a guided tour of the technical and cultural history of public libraries over the last 20 years, with a focus on the impact of the proliferation of the internet and personal computers as handheld devices. “My prediction is that 2017 is the year when the internet becomes a basic human right,” Negroponte said. “When I think about the future of libraries, I like to think of what is it that market forces will not address? That’s what we should do – make the library of the future a place where we experiment and test new ideas.”

**John Palfrey** heralded the need for public libraries to guarantee universal and equitable access to the internet, observing how this is central to their mission of ensuring social justice. He cautioned people not to assume that the explosion of information resources online makes knowledge more widely available to all. “There are, in fact, too many efforts to restrict digital information, making it harder for some people to get access.” Palfrey added that libraries will need to lead the charge to reform copyright laws to benefit society at large rather than just commercial publishers. “You have instances of them [publishers] wanting a library to only lend a digital book two times – how silly is that?” Palfrey noted also that public libraries will be called upon to curate and preserve the digital records of our time for future generations and to create networks that share access to unique digital collections on a global basis. “We can do amazing things from a democratic perspective if we see these institutions [libraries] as connected, networked and digitized and librarians as the key to entering these very public digital collections.”

*“When I think about the future of libraries, I like to think of what is it that market forces will not address? That’s what we should do – make the library of the future a place where we experiment and test new ideas.”*

NICHOLAS NEGROPONTE, founder of the MIT Media Lab and One Laptop per Child and the author of *Being Digital*

**Sarah Williams Goldhagen** moved the discussion toward what public libraries are going to look like in the future: that is, how their physical structures will meet the demands of changing uses. “Libraries were for shelving books, creating a place for people to sit and read those books — for generations and centuries,” she noted. Today’s libraries have a different set of challenges with a new identity as community center — in both small towns and urban neighborhoods, where uses range from offering immigrants English-language classes to providing shared work spaces, to serving as a destination for children’s programs, fitness classes, community events and even access to social services.

Goldhagen noted that libraries still need quiet spaces, but also places where people can work together in pairs or small groups, or to gather en masse. She described how design can keep libraries accessible to everyone, citing one architect’s proposal for “occupied facades” — sheltered areas with seating outside a library’s front door where people can pick up free Wi-Fi even when the library is closed.

**Jeffrey Schnapp** went into “remix” mode, expanding on others’ ideas, pointing out that libraries must evolve to reflect the hybridity of media. People now access rich information via both books and screens. Electronic databases — while extraordinary tools — will not replace physical libraries because “databases are not places.” Human beings are shaped in profound ways by experience and by knowledge gained in places where other people are also accessing, sharing and exchanging information and ideas. “Libraries were never just about the collection of textual information,” added Schnapp. “Hybridity and multi-modality are the rootstock of libraries. The library at Pergamum had a stage right next to the sacred scrolls. The idea that an information resource could live just in storage without a stage on which those texts could be performed was simply unthinkable in the ancient world.”

Schnapp suggested that libraries circulate books but also tools, musical instruments, software programs, and other “resources that are fundamental to gaining knowledge, to fostering creativity and innovation, and to generating information.” “Everyone gravitates toward where plugs are located,” which are typically along the peripheral walls of a library, he mused. “Why can’t furnishings become part of the electrical system of a structure to make them more flexible and useful for communities of users?”



*“Libraries must evolve to reflect the hybridity of media. People now access rich information via both books and screens. Hybridity and multi-modality are the rootstock of libraries. Everyone gravitates toward where plugs are located. Why can’t furnishings become part of the electrical system of a structure to make them more flexible and useful for communities of users?”*

JEFFREY SCHNAPP, faculty co-director of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, co-author of *The Library Beyond the Book*, and professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design

Negroponete then led a lively discussion among the panelists, encouraging everyone to think in new ways. A brief question and answer session followed. At the evening’s end, it was clear that an important conversation about the future of libraries had really just begun.

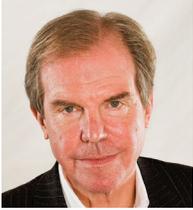
In the days ahead, CPL staff and volunteers invite library users and supporters to join them in dreaming big as we plan for our shared future. As Palfrey noted, “It’s crucial to invest in our libraries now more than ever at this critical period of transition.” With help, libraries can “become even stronger democratic institutions than they’ve ever been in history.”



**SARAH GOLDHAGEN** | Goldhagen is the former architectural critic of *The New Republic*. She has written for *The New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* among other prestigious publications. Her forthcoming book—*Welcome to Your World: How the Built Environment Shapes Our Lives* (Harper; April 2017)—explores how people experience built environments, a critical element in envisioning the future of public libraries.



**MARIA TAESIL HUDSON MCCAULEY** | McCauley is Cambridge’s new Director of Libraries. She comes to the CPL from Santa Monica CA where she served as Director of Libraries. McCauley has also worked for the Somerville Public Library and the libraries at Northeastern University. Her research has been published in *College & Research Libraries*, *Library Management* and *portal*. She is an American Library Association elected Councilor.



**NICHOLAS NEGROPONTE** | Founder of the MIT Media Lab and One Laptop per Child, Negroponte’s 2014 TED talk, *A 30-Year History of the Future*, resonates today as he leads us in focusing on the future of libraries in areas such as technology and institutional transformation. Negroponte is the author of *Being Digital*.



**JOHN PALFREY** | A noted educator, Palfrey is Head of Phillips Academy and former executive director of the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University. He also served as the founding chairman of the Digital Public Library of America. Palfrey is the author of *Biblio TECH: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google* and *Born Digital*.



**JEFFREY SCHNAPP** | Faculty co-director of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, Schnapp co-authored *The Library Beyond the Book*, a work that considers future scenarios for libraries in the digital age. He is also professor of Romance Languages & Literature at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

DREAM BIG was presented by the Cambridge Public Library Foundation.

The Cambridge Public Library Foundation supports Library programs that **EDUCATE**, **INSPIRE** and **RESPOND** to the needs of our diverse community – programs like **DREAM BIG**.  
To join our efforts, visit us at [www.cplfound.org](http://www.cplfound.org).

**CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

- Shippen Page, *President*
- Betsy Rudnick, *Vice President*
- Katie Lapp, *Treasurer*
- David Sandberg, *Secretary*
- Ed Belove | Jill Burrows
- Cathy Chute | Donna Davis
- Junot Diaz | Amy Domini
- Susan Flannery | Gene Kalaw
- Debbie Porter | Alan Steinert
- Anne Stetson | Stan Twarog
- Janet Axelrod, *ex officio*
- Maria McCauley, *ex officio*



[www.cplfound.org](http://www.cplfound.org)