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# Libraries Dust Off Quiet Image With Innovations

BY **STAV ZIV** 1/31/15 AT 10:13 AM

These aren't your grandmother's libraries. Well, they are, but they're tackling projects that would have been inconceivable two or three decades ago.

On Friday, the Knight Foundation [announced the winners](#) of its latest Knight News Challenge, which asked: "How might we leverage libraries as a platform to build more knowledgeable communities?"

The foundation's fundamental goal is to ask, "How can we make sure Americans have access to the news and information so they can be active participants in our democracy," says John Bracken, vice president for media innovation. "Libraries are really key in improving Americans' ability to know what's going on around them."

Over the past several years, Knight has posed a dozen such questions as calls for proposals, focusing on open government, health data or other areas. "One of the ways we use this contest is to better understand trends," explains Bracken. The [previous round](#) in 2014 had asked, "How can we strengthen the Internet for free expression and innovation?" When three of those winners were libraries, it helped inform the next challenge.

The foundation announced eight winners Friday at the American Library Association's Midwinter Meeting in Chicago. They'll receive grant amounts of between \$130,000 and \$600,000 each. Another set of 14 winners will get smaller grants from Knight's Prototype Fund to test earlier-stage ideas.

"It looks more like a design firm than what the stereotypical approach in libraries is," Bracken said on Thursday, peering at a room where the winners were participating in a design thinking workshop.

The Culture in Transit project, which won \$330,000, will use mobile scanning kits to help individuals and communities as well as smaller museums and heritage organizations that don't have the resources to digitize and archive images.

It's an "opportunity to have digital literacy training" as well as "to democratize the archives and diversify the holdings" in local history collections, says Natalie Milbrodt, director of the Queens Memory Project and part of the Culture in Transit team, which includes the Brooklyn and Queens public libraries and the Metropolitan New York Library Council.

Three new staff members, one based at each of these organizations, will coordinate 10 events at Brooklyn Library branches and 10 at counterparts in Queens, as well as 15 to 20 partnerships with museums, historical societies and other organizations. They'll bring a mobile kit with a scanner, laptop and all the other equipment needed to digitize materials on the spot. The goal is to share the digitized archives with the Empire State Digital Network and subsequently the Digital Public Library of America to make them widely accessible.

"Capturing the exciting, diverse, international culture in Queens is really something we need help from the public to do," Milbrodt says, speaking from a local perspective. She recalls meeting Frank Carrado at a Queens Memory event. The longtime resident of Long Island City has watched the neighborhood undergo rapid transformation, and he captured some of it on camera. He brought before-and-after photos of certain street corners five or 10 years apart that help visualize the changes in the neighborhood.

The initiative is "a wonderful way for us to connect with our customers" and help them preserve the tangible things of their memories, says Milbrodt, and a way to help future researchers gain a fuller and deeper understanding of local history.

In the same city, the New York Public Library received \$380,000 for its Space/Time Directory, what it calls its "time travel service." Over the past few years, the NYPL has already begun working toward this goal by digitizing roughly 26,000 old maps, including 12,000 specific to New York City. Many of these were originally created by insurance companies documenting buildings at great detail to assess damage and construct policies.

"We want to make information about New York City's past as accessible, through the geography and place, as contemporary New York is," says Ben Vershbow, director of NYPL Labs. Building on tools they've already developed, like [Building Inspector](#) and [Map](#)

[Warper](#), to begin extracting data from maps, they hope to assemble various kinds of data to create a “full-fledged historical mapping service,” Vershbow says.

They could add information from years of city directories, which Vershbow calls “proto-White and Yellow Pages,” as well as tax records, census data, newspapers, playbills, menus and more. By marrying all of this data into one environment that relates time and space, he explains, they would create a “time travel service” for the public and researchers of urban planning, architecture, history, economics and other fields. Users could navigate a Google Maps or Google Earth–like system to locate individual people or businesses as well as trends such as where a particular industry was clustered at a given point in time.

The team plans to document its methodology to help make it easier for other cities to tackle similar projects. As with Building Inspector, they’ll continue to ask the public to participate in the project, and seek collaborations with other groups. Vershbow mentions, for example, Culture in Transit, whose focus on archiving local history artifacts could make for a promising partnership.

“There’s an amazing connection between these projects,” he says.

Other winning projects include “[The Library Freedom Project](#): Bringing Privacy Education and Digital Tools to Local Communities Through Libraries,” to help people better understand digital rights and privacy issues; “[Library for All](#): A digital library for the developing world,” which will make library resources available on low-cost mobile devices; and “[From open data to open knowledge](#): Using libraries to turn civic data into a valuable resource for citizens, researchers, and City Hall alike,” which will help Boston make its city data more accessible.

Prototype grants include a group of librarians in Illinois who want to replicate an [interlibrary loan system for maker tools](#) (like 3-D printers) and the Miami-Dade Public Library, which wants to provide freelancers, entrepreneurs and others with [co-working space](#).

“I’m encouraged to see an emerging set of leaders in the library space who are passionate about taking core values as curator of information... [and as] a unique civic institution that’s open to everyone,” says Vershbow, “and couple that with the dynamism and the potential of new technology.”

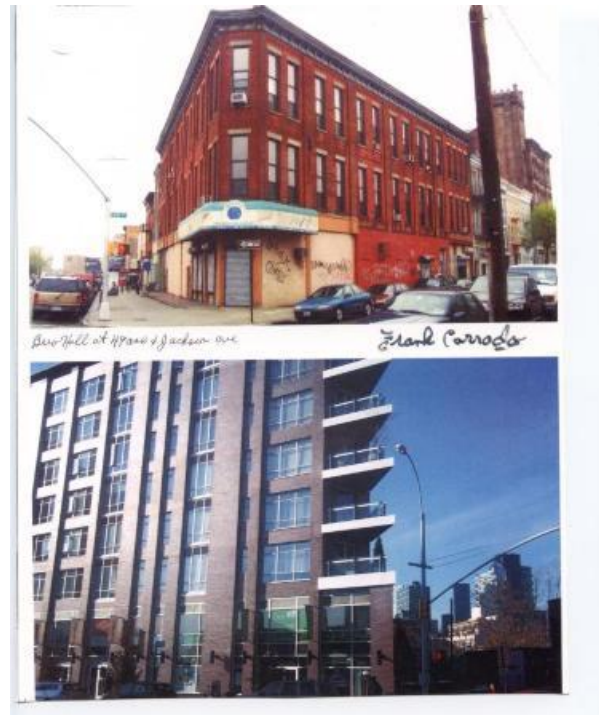
“What an exciting moment this is for libraries,” he says.



Cori Blanco uses a mobile scanning kit to digitize scrapbooks that belong to the Broad Channel Historical Society at the Broad Channel Community Library. NATALIE MILBRODT/QUEENS MEMORY PROJECT



Frank Carrado with Natalie Milbrodt during a Queens Memory event at the Court Square Library in Long Island City on February 11, 2014. Queens Memory staffer Cori Blanco, is in the background at the scanner. CASSIA CAMPBELL/QUEENS MEMORY PROJECT



Two photos showing the same building, located at the corner of Jackson Avenue and 49th Avenue in Long Island City, before and after renovation. It was renovated in 2003. Later, Ever Green Cleaners and Modern Spaces businesses occupy the ground floor. FRANK CARRADO/QUEENS MEMORY PROJECT