

# Small, Free, and Shared:

a History of Public Bookcases

Carly Sheil

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by Carly Sheil

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# About Public Bookcases

A single public bookcase is powerful, for it can bring an entire neighbourhood together! How it happens is never the same way twice – but like pen pals exchange letters, public bookcases encourage quiet interests. Sometimes they cause us to simply pass each other, like ships in the night, but overall, they encourage us to share our books with others, instead of having them collect dust.

Specifically, public bookcases are unlocked, weatherproof cabinets in accessible areas (such as parks, front yards, alleyways) containing free books for anyone to use at any time. Books can be swapped anonymously or even taken with nothing in return, although it's politely requested that everyone swaps books from the cabinet with one of their own books in order to keep the collection going.

Public bookcases have been around since at least 1991, functioning as a meeting place or landmark to discuss literature, plan meetings, share a coffee, or do maintenance on the cabinet or current collection. Some suggested maintenance tasks include:

- repairing the case
- removing graffiti
- clearing out rubbish
- tidying books
- replacing tattered books.<sup>1</sup>

I love public bookcases because they represent free sharing of information amongst a community, increasing the flow of knowledge while also providing an anonymous place to share books.

We'll keep referring to them as 'public bookcases' for brevity, but you may also have heard these called street libraries, little free libraries, book swaps, book exchanges, *boite à livres* (French), *öffentlicher Bücherschrank* (German), *biblioteca publica* (Spanish), *Kios Buku* (Indonesian), *minibibliotheek* (Dutch), *piccola biblioteca* (Italian), and more. In some neighbourhoods they extend beyond books to include art, food, seeds, clothing – resources covering various community needs.

Notably, they differ from public libraries in that they are not an institution, they have no formal limitations, categorisations or cataloguing of their assets. There is no free or paid membership to access them, as they operate on an honesty system at the whims of the public.



# History of Public Bookcases

## 1990s

Three large artificial granite electrical switchboards were converted into unlocked and weather proof bookcases and placed them in three different neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Graz, Austria.

These bookcases were filled with around 450 books that were collected from direct contact with the local community as a 'portrait' of the neighbourhood. No registration or library card was needed, and anyone at any time could borrow a limited number of books for a limited time before returning them over the course of three months. This was the first case I know of a public bookcase, and was the 1991 **Die Offene Bibliothek** (The Open Public Library) art project presented by artists Michael Clegg (Dublin, 1957) and Martin Guttmann (Jerusalem, 1957)<sup>2</sup>. The artists continued their project in Hamburg, Germany (Kirchdorf-Süd, Barmbek and Volksdorf) in 1993, and then again in Mainz, Germany in 1994. They aimed for no success nor failure, but only wished for an authentic connection with the community surrounding their bookcases.

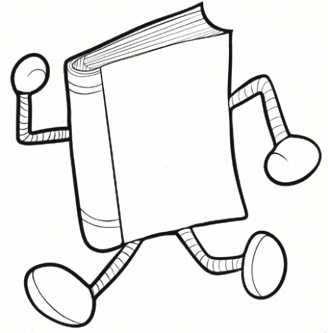
The idea caught on, and a couple of years after that a public bookcase appeared in Darmstadt, Germany in 1996 created by TU Darmstadt architecture student Nikolas Müller. His mother Moniker Müller (then SPD member of the state capital's council) was inspired by his project and established public bookcases in Hanover, Germany<sup>3</sup>. That same year, Michael Ibsen from Darmstadt brought the idea home from Mainz to Johannesviertel and pled a public bookcase created from wooden shelf that he had found in the waste<sup>4</sup>.

The 90s weren't just a decade for bookcases though, as in California a project appeared where visitors could "check out" seeds, grow them, and then return some of the next generation of seeds for someone else to borrow. As well as increasing the diversity of public cabinets in the world, it also helps to encourage genetic diversity of local plants, and to conserve what seeds already exist in the area. This project called the **Bay Area Seed Interchange Library (BASIL)** was created in 1999 and is located at the Berkeley Ecology Center, California in the United States of America (USA)<sup>5</sup>.



## 2000s

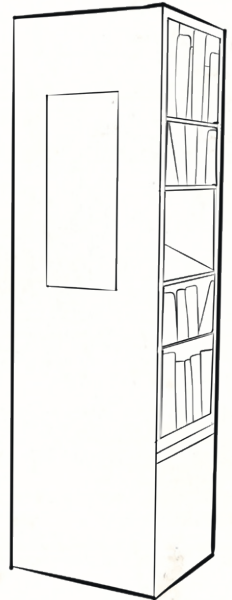
As the world wide web grew over the 2000s, so too did book swapping. On 21 April 2001, **BookCrossing** was launched by USA-based cofounders Ron Hornbaker, Kaori Hornbaker, Bruce Pedersen, and Heather Pedersen. The system was created based on the idea of books being something to share with others. Books are able to be tracked via 'BookCrossing identity numbers' (BCIDs) and released into 'official BookCrossing zones' (OBCZ) to be discovered<sup>6</sup>.



Back in Germany, in 2002 the Bonn Citizens' Foundation held a competition asking residents for ideas, and received over 130 including an idea for a public bookcase project submitted by Trixi Rojheck. On 15 November 2003, a bookcase of her design was built on Poppelsdorfer Allee, Bonn, by the foundation, and then one after that in Beuel, Bonn<sup>7</sup>.

Popularity had increased so much that even royal gardens had begun to participate. In 2004 the Pretlack's Garden House in the Prince George Garden, Darmstadt, was converted into an open bookcase by Karl Weber, who was the director of State Palaces and Gardens of Hesse at the time<sup>8</sup>.

As public bookcases began to age, communities noticed increasing and now expected issues of wear, tear and vandalism. In response to this, in 2007 Cologne architect Hans-Jürgen Greve created the vandal-proof and low maintenance **BOKX** based on Trixi Rojheck's 2003 design to address the issue<sup>9</sup>.



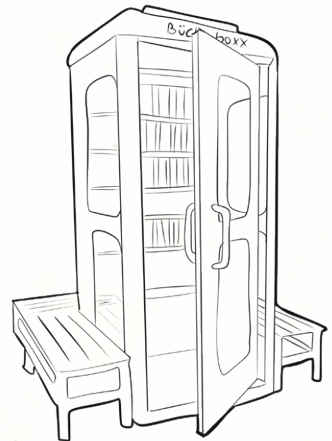


Across the sea in the USA, the **Little Free Library** project began in 2009 when Tod Bol of Hudson, Wisconsin built a public bookcase shaped like a one-room schoolhouse as a tribute to his mother, a teacher who had recently died. He shared the project with his friend Rick Brooks and they built more and installed them through the Midwest. They were inspired by community gift sharing networks, “take a book, leave a book” collections in coffee shops and public spaces, and most especially by the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. Each library is given a number and can be added to their map. Their map allows details to be updated by the user at any time, including statuses about recent book additions, after purchase of a plaque for registration<sup>10</sup>.



## 2010s

The next issue to arise was one of wanting to ensure we protected the planet as well as our knowledge of it. In response to this the **Nachhaltige BücherboXX** (Sustainable Bookcase or BookboXX) project was developed by the Institute for Sustainability in Education, Work and Culture as a professional educational project in 2010. The bookcases were created from sustainable materials, using solar power, or created with other environmentally friendly innovations to have a high standard of educational value and sustainability. Each box is maintained and supported by community volunteer caretakers (Kümmerer)<sup>11, 1-1</sup>.



There have been many attempts at mapping public bookcases by this point, and some quite specific to their country of origin. In the Netherlands there is a map that allows users to register their public bookcase and update their details at any time, including opening hours. The bookcases are often attached to houses and their phrase is “*gratis lenen en ruilen*” (borrow and exchange for free). This project is called **Minibieb** and was founded in April 2013 by Mirjam Goudswaard<sup>12</sup>.

Around New Zealand you might see small house-shaped public bookcases in people's yards. Their casual phrase encourages passers-by to "*take a book now, return or donate one later*". Each library is registered a number and added to their map, and a 'guardian' maintains and stocks the library. These are the **Lilliput Libraries** which started in Dunedin, New Zealand as the 2015-16 project for *Poems in the Waiting Room (NZ)* (which itself began in 2008). 10 Lilliput Libraries were constructed originally by Cargill Enterprises (part of the Otago Disabled Citizens Society) with funding from Creative New Zealand's Creative Communities Scheme (CCS), and the number has grown over time even once they were no longer given out for free.<sup>13, 14</sup>

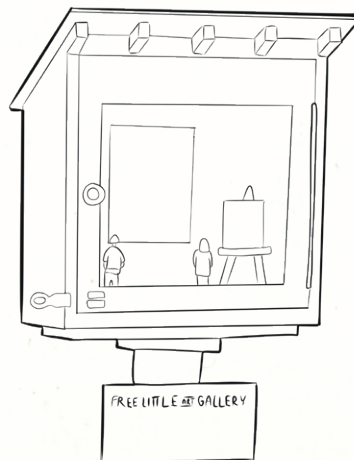
Even in small towns throughout Australia you will also see house shaped bookcases planted in front yards. Each bookcase is registered with a number and is able to be added to their map, and requests to add bookcases to the map can even be made to the same Snap Send Solve app that residents of towns can report potholes and fallen trees to their local councils. Nic Lowe began the **Street Library Australia** project with a small workshop of 30 libraries in 2015 after seeing the Little Free Library project while on a trip in Portland, USA. They encourage you to "*Take a book. Give a book. Share a book*"<sup>15</sup>.

As public bookcases gained popularity, so too did the desire to share food in more places to allow communities the same anonymous honesty system to feed themselves and their families. On 10 May 2016 Jessica McClard launched the pilot project of the **Little Free Pantry** in Fayette, Arkansas in the USA. The concept of free food boxes is one where you give what you can and take what you need. Jessica decided to start the project after seeing Little Free Libraries along her running route and reading *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, which was about how little actions can make big differences. She knew her home state was amongst the most hungry, and this was one small thing she could do to help make a change happen.<sup>16, 17</sup>

## 2020s

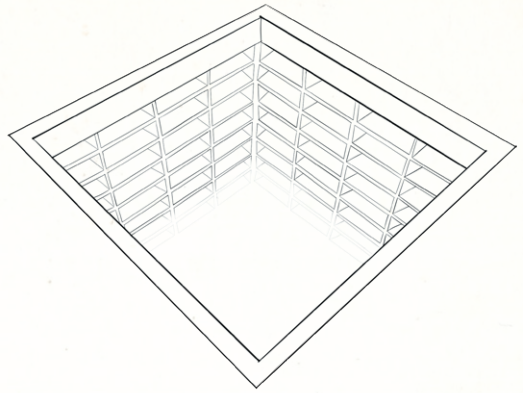
Public bookcases gained some renewed attention over 2020 as a global pandemic led to a greater desire for neighbourhood resources and open-air socialising. They also saw change and innovation occur when people had more time at home and in their communities to come up with new ideas. Stacy Milrany (Seattle, USA), created a miniature gallery in a similar way to how public bookcases appear, and instead of books, artworks were placed and swapped by artists within the community. The **Free Little Art Gallery** (originally Little Free Art Gallery) project was a culmination of a series of events that began with her mother's cancer treatment in March 2019. Every day of her mother's treatment she mailed her an artwork to help her through it. Inspired to shed light on a heavy world in what was a difficult year for many, even after her mother was cancer-free, from March 2020 Stacy continued to evolve the project by mailing artwork to friends, family and followers, and on 13 December 2020 she placed the first Free Little Art Gallery<sup>18, 19</sup>.

Is there yet any international recognition of public bookcases? Since 2021 there has been a Tag des öffentlichen Bücherschranks (**Public Bookcase Day**) celebrated on 15 November. At least, as far as Ulrich Kindermann of the 'Kalenders der kuriosen Feiertage' (Calendar of Curious Holidays) is concerned. The date was chosen because 15 November 2003 was the day the first Bonn bookcase was set up on Poppelsdorfer Allee.<sup>20</sup>



## Final Thoughts

It is important to continue to share books in whatever way is safe for the society you are in, and working to increase access to a diverse balance of information the same as a healthy ecosystem.



One time where this balance of writings was tipped into darkness was on 10 May 1933, where in an act organised by the Hitler Youth and the German Student Union, eight piles of books were burned in the Bebelplatz (then Opernplatz) in Berlin, just one of many other book burnings taking place around Germany at the time. There was a desire to remove knowledge of the past and replace it with propaganda, and Joseph Goebbels, Germany's Reich Minister of Propaganda spoke at the burning to claim that “exaggerated Jewish intellectualism” would now be at an end as the flames took the “intellectual garbage of the past”. The Nazis wanted to remove left-wing, pacifist and Jewish books from the public mind, along with much of culture and science which didn't align with their views<sup>21</sup>.

60 years afterwards, 20 May 1995, a monument was unveiled in the same Bebelplatz. Created by Israeli-born conceptual and installation artist Micha Ullman, *The Empty Library* is a memorial showing the great sadness of an absence of books. Peering down into the pit through a square window, visitors can see a pale room of empty bookshelves filling the void and yet leaving a feeling of emptiness. It's now marked with a plaque that explains what once occurred on the site as well as a quote from German writer Heinrich Heine: “*where books are burned, so one day will people be burned as well*”<sup>22</sup>.

These burnings and the deep feeling of loss following them are a key reason it is important to share books, and embrace a balanced community of knowledge and people. With such a great loss of books, knowledge, and the lives of the people that read them, society suffered for this by losing not only large swathes of community, but also their history. Public bookcases in this way are an object of hope, and a small piece of resistance.

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