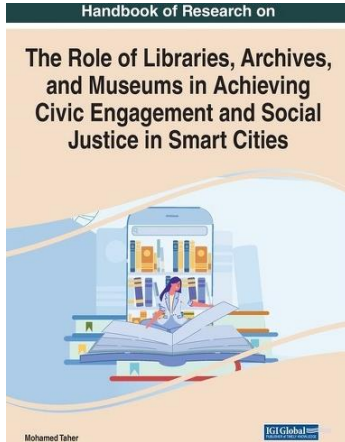




IJIDI: Book Review



Taher, M. (Ed.). (2022). *Handbook of research on the role of libraries, archives, and museums in achieving civic engagement and social justice in smart cities*. IGI Global.

ISBN: 978-1799883630. 620 pp. \$292.50 US.

Reviewer: Fiona Collins, Worcester Art Museum, USA
Book Review Editors: Halie Kerns, Binghamton University, USA
Stephanie Robertson, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, USA

Keywords: archives, information, libraries, museums, smart cities

Publication Type: book review

“Some librarian brought the first printed book into the library; another brought the first microfiche reader. Some librarians brought in the first game, and the first scroll, and the first illuminated manuscript. They did this to enhance access, yes, but also to expand the capabilities of the communities they served.... help, not document the world, but to change it.”
(Lankes, 2013, p. 1)

How does community engagement shape the purpose of libraries, archives, and museums? How do libraries, archives, and museums bolster the communities around them? The *Handbook of Research on the Role of Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Achieving Civic Engagement and Social Justice in Smart Cities*, edited by Mohamed Taher (2022), suggests that the roles of information professionals are delineated by their ability to ask these questions of themselves and their institutions, and then adapt accordingly.

The concept of community development has been woven into the Western conceptualization of libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) since the 19th century (Lankes, 2013). More specifically, the concept has its historical roots in the establishment of public collections in the late Victorian period—their vast array of services became a hallmark of what is known as the Progressive Era (Asher, 2011). These services resulted in unprecedented access to information for the average person, and for the first time, LAM collections were being built with a communal user base in mind. What we may consider the modern relationship between librarian and patron was heavily influenced early on by this symbiotic support of one another (be it financial, intellectual, or social) and is now often expressed in a cycle of outreach and *inreach*—a term essentially referring to institutional self-contemplation of the mechanisms supporting outreach (Germain, 2006).

In his *Handbook*, Taher presents a roster of international scholars and practitioners whose research explores the successes and failures of modern LAM as impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and global crises of inequity in intellectual spaces as a byproduct of capitalism. By extension, social justice initiatives are used as a metric for the success of community outreach initiatives in what the book calls “trusted institutions,” or in other

words, those considered to be trusted sources of information. Compiling the research of 34 contributors from 12 countries, each of the 22 chapters, report compelling case studies to bring attention to changing cultural dynamics and sociopolitical change—focusing on what is known as “smart cities.” The text explores a wide range of topics, from conservation practices for community engagement in Indonesia to the digitized cultural heritage practices of smart cities in Hungary and confronting fake news and disinformation in the smart cities of India. Still, the chapters can be treated as part of a larger narrative documenting the evolution and adaptation of reference services when habitually reaffirming institutional inclusivity.

This is not to say that the contents of every chapter are connected just thematically. Instead, several methodological approaches to inclusivity become a thread through various scenarios. Perhaps the best example of this is the topic of digital literacy. *Handbook* continually promotes digital literacy as a catalyst for communal and civic engagement. The latter is defined in Chapter 11 as “the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (p. 255). In other words, when information professionals teach their patron base how to access and use resources available to them, it can help individuals to connect with their histories, more broadly aggregate information to bolster community aspirations (either virtually or in-person), or proactively combat the disadvantages experienced by marginalized citizens in smart cities and beyond. Given that most readers from the information science profession will be interested in implementing solutions to common issues, the different case studies would help them interpret if the solutions presented are a good fit for their library’s collection and community.

The case studies that are used to elucidate community engagement measures used by LAM are pulled from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse smart cities around the globe. The narratives provided in each chapter frame the chapter’s research and serve as a microcosm of the four themes of the book: LAM and the workplace, LAM in practice, LAM and community outreach, and LAM in smart cities.

Section 1, “LAM in the Workspace,” begins with the technical aspects of outreach and how information professionals can reconcile their limitations with the needs of their community. It deals with the recognition of and approach to the individual needs of LAM institutions based on their collections, resources, and patrons—and back-end processes, which is perhaps the most significant consideration because such processes tend to be the most segregated from community function. The chapter also discusses issues in adjacent disciplines like preservation, which are designed to protect cultural heritage objects and information but too often remain unengaged with the culture from which they originated. In acknowledging such limitations, the authors open up space to critically discuss opportunities for growth.

Section 2, “LAM in the Community: Weaving Inclusive Participation in Practice,” comprises seven chapters that delve deeper into how community outreach can specifically impact inclusivity initiatives and catalyze institutional social justice reform. This section undoubtedly is the most confrontational regarding what co-author Ramya A.V. from Chapter 7, “Digital Divide Among the Tribals of Kerala: A Comparative Study of Kannavam and Thavinjhal Village,” has called an “apartheid” created when one group in the community has comparatively advanced digital literacy skills compared to those who do not. As a result, digital literacy training is treated as an essential function of LAM as well as a necessary

foundation to lay before the start of community outreach with the goal of reform and education. This section also deals with the necessity of digital literacy in preventing the perpetuation of misinformation and bias in the digital era. Another stand-out chapter is Roderic Vassie's "Helping Communities Confront Extremism: A Role for Librarians in Debunking the Claims of Extremists on Social Media."

Section 3, "LAM in the Community: Theory Relating to Facets," is a natural progression from the themes of Section 2 and focuses on the larger-scale impact of digital literacy generated by LAM community outreach on individuals and groups. More focus is on representation, recognition, and the challenges a rural patron base faces.

Section 4, "LAM in the Smart City," shifts focus from digital literacy and community generation in a broad sense to specifically identifying densely packed communities of smart cities—both in person and digital. There are six chapters focusing on transforming information and data in digital spaces. Social justice and civic engagement both once again factor into the research of this section, where impacts by the development of technology over the years and how it plays a role in connecting people with ties to a LAM institution are discussed.

The case studies in *Handbook* present a different facet of the complex and ever-changing landscape of LAM community outreach. "Community needs" is positioned as indelibly connected to an institution's approach to access and collection development. The chapters' compilation is almost epistemic, all contributing to a greater narrative. This approach ensures that the book's message speaks to a global audience and could serve as inspiration, if not a framework, for information professionals trying to evaluate the challenges of intersectionality in diverse contexts worldwide.

The opinionated language used by the book can also help information professionals navigate topical or sensitive subjects about discrimination or inequality faced by patrons of their institutions. If not stated directly, a consistent argument is felt that LAM cannot and should not exist in a cultural vacuum to serve its patrons. By nature of the patron-to-library symbiotic relationship, LAM institutions must participate in services that encourage citizen participation in civic life. Some authors even go as far as to call LAM social justice institutions because of their inherent connection to community outreach and the sociopolitical repercussions that this connection espouses. Even if readers do not identify their institution (that they are affiliated with professionally or socially) with such a label, *Handbook* is an excellent way to become engaged with the topic and navigate more difficult discussions on how information can inform their professional identity and practice with not just the subject itself, but the world at large.

Taher's *Handbook of Research on the Role of Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Achieving Civic Engagement and Social Justice in Smart Cities* is an accessible read that covers a vast amount of ground on the intersecting topics of community engagement, digital literacy, and social justice in LAM. Taher has edited a book that is an excellent choice for LAM professionals and those interested in how public cultural institutions shape the development of the cities where they thrive. Taher's *Handbook* is highly relevant to the post-COVID-19 world, as the examples illustrated throughout the work show that our differences connect us more than divide us.

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Fiona Collins (fecollins27@gmail.com) is a Curatorial Assistant of Asian Art at the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. She earned a B.F.A. in the History of Art and Design from Pratt Institute, New York, USA, and an M.A. with Distinction in East Asian Languages and Cultures from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, England. Collins has a professional background in material culture preservation; her research interests include premodern Japanese design and material culture studies. Her most recent projects have focused on the canonical prioritization of art in art historical institutions based on Western collecting practices. Fiona is based out of Providence, Rhode Island, USA.