

# Little Free Library Meets the Museum

MUSEUM NOTES

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POSTED: OCT 16, 2017

A small wooden box full of books on a post in front of a house, in a field, or on a country road may not seem immediately inspirational. Yet, somehow these book exchange boxes popping up everywhere through the [Little Free Library](#) (LFL) have captured imaginations and inspired strangers to share books with others.



Little Free Library at Settergren's hardware store

Ever since I saw my first one outside of Settergren's Hardware in Minneapolis about 7 years ago I've been following the growth of these book hutches with curiosity and interest. Not long after seeing one at Settergren's, I saw one in Richland Center and another one in Mineral Point (WI) and made my then 90-year old parents stop so I could take pictures of them. Knowing of my delight in Little Free Library, my Dutch pen-pal sent me a photo of one in Leeuwarden where she lives.

Little Free Library was started by Todd Bol and Rick Brooks in 2010 in Hudson (WI), just across the river from the Twin Cities. As of fall 2016, there were over 50,000 LFL in all 50 U.S. states and in 70 countries.

LFL's 3 commitments—increasing book access, building community, and sparking creativity—reinforce one another with natural ease.

The on-line introduction to LFL and how to get started are both practical and inspirational. Five easy steps for setting up a library include a material list, plans for building, directions for installing one, and guidelines for finding funds. More tips for building support, filling shelves with books, and replacing them are easy to find. Registering a Library brings with it an official charter sign and charter number.

In sharing the plans, tips, and videos of designs and construction from others, LFL expands the range of solutions for making books accessible, highlights creativity, and supports a community joined by passion, whimsy, and a love of reading. Builders have improvised designs and customized decorations that reflect personal interests, local architectural styles, and regional pride. Libraries are fashioned as an Amish shed, a Vermont covered bridge, and a British phone booth. Some stewards add reading lights and benches; others

create small gardens around the library's post; and some even leave power bars and snacks for hungry readers.

Once books fill the shelves, a library takes on a life of its own, strengthening connections between people



Tudor style library matches its house

who know one another and creating connections between book friends who will probably never meet. Neighbors gather at a library and chat. When passersby stop, browse, take a book, and sometimes leave a book, there's a sense that someone who cares about reading left this book for a reason. Fans and book friends leave notes of thanks. Reluctant readers leave messages about being inspired to read. At least one homeless reader left a note of thanks for access to books.

LFL also inspires significant community efforts. In 2013, the Minneapolis School District collaborated with LFL to establish a library on every block in north Minneapolis, one of the most impoverished districts in the city. A group in Lake Worth (FL) set a goal to place 100 libraries in the city, a project that involved school children, neighbors, and the Vice Mayor. An even bolder vision is being realized by a Sudanese woman who has set a goal to establish 1,000 libraries in her country.

Where are LFL at museums?



The Pink Palace Museum Little Free Library

Museums seem to be natural hosts for libraries with their interest in building community connections, being a good neighbor, activating community partnerships, and in nurturing reading. Several museums have installed libraries on their sites including the following.

- The Little Free Library at the [Blairstown Museum](#) in Blairstown (NJ) is “designed to inspire a love of reading, build community, and spark creativity by fostering a neighborhood book exchange.”
- The Little Free Library in front of the Pink Palace Museum in Memphis (TN) is a replica of the museum’s façade including its distinctive pink Georgia marble and green tile roof. The museum hopes that by hosting a place for people who visit and those living next to exchange books it can be an active part of its community.
- The Children’s Museum in Bloomsburg (PA) is a collaboration between the museum and the 4 county branch libraries.
- The Neville Public Museum in GreenBay (WI) installed a library on its grounds in spring 2017 built to look like its original home.

Almost any museum could install a library in front of its building inviting passersby to pause, browse, and take a book. Selected books could relate to museum exhibits and programs, feature local authors, or celebrate the region's history. Designed to be consistent with the museum’s brand and possibly offering seating, a museum can make its library into an inviting and distinctive place. Inside, libraries might be located in exhibits as book nooks offering visitors opportunities to dig into a topic or pursue a question or read for the joy of it. Designated spots for collecting books can help support the exchange.

For some museums, LFL could be more than a rotating collection of free books. Rather it might be an opportunity to advance a museum’s broader interests and goals and create greater impact for children, families, neighbors, or residents. (Check out LFL’s Impact Library Program.) Just as the LFL organization’s 3 commitments (increasing book access, building community, and sparking creativity) readily reinforce one another, a museum’s LFL initiative could be a strategy aligned with broader goals, linked with other museum initiatives, and at the heart of an established partnership. Goals might include increasing access to books for community members and encouraging a love of reading; building awareness of local resources; strengthening a sense of community; introducing the museum to new audiences; sharing resources; or extending learning beyond the museum’s wall. Partners and collaborators might be a neighborhood group, community clinic, libraries, the parks department, the school district, or a local clinic.

Community-based projects in North Minneapolis, Lake Worth, and Sudan are evidence that these libraries are scalable. They can be laid out across a neighborhood, city, county, or country. The possibilities of a geographic focus are open-ended as an example from Visit Seattle that has 9 LFL library book exchanges shows. A strategy to promote Seattle and invite visits, these libraries are in Austin (TX), Boston (MA), and Chicago (IL). Each library is stocked with books that relate to Seattle (by author, subject, or setting). While a museum might not be marketing to tourists across the country, it may be trying to reach and serve audience in rural areas, connect with a nearby tourist area, or have a sister city relationship in another country. Just as the Visit Seattle libraries are thoroughly Seattle (one is made to look like a Seattle ferry), a museum’s libraries could be made to look like the building, an exhibit, local icon, or a popular landmark.

Book exchange boxes can offer information and activities as well as books. Depending on the focus of the library or selected themes, there could be bookmarks or booklists to pick up; question of the week to investigate; program or event flyers for the museum; simple directions for how to make a book or a cardboard gizmo; or maps of where other libraries are located. Possible extensions are likely to emerge from topics, collaboration, location, and frequenters of the library.



Mineral Point, (WI)

In taking a LFL project out into the neighborhood, community, or countryside, a museum starts a journey that could go almost anywhere. It might be possible for...

- Libraries to be a project in a museum's maker space
- Neighbors to paint the boxes to celebrate their neighborhood
- Community members to study the area proposed for the libraries and decide their locations
- Museum partners to collect books to keep the supply going
- Libraries to be located along a bike trail
- Library users to send photos of themselves and their books

**What other ideas do you have about how museums could use the Little Free Library?**