

Featured Views

Published on Sunday, August 10, 2003 by CommonDreams.org

Selling Out: Our Public Space, Universal Services Under Assault

by Ralph Nader

Public space, universal community services and their historic traditions which bind our nation together are all under assault. A Presidential Commission recommends that the U.S. Postal Service obtain commercial appraisals of their post offices and land with the view of selling the property off to help pay its expenses. The smaller postal services can find a place in a commercial mall to handle its "customers", advised this Bush-appointed Commission, dominated by corporate executives.

The Government Printing Office (GPO), established by President Abraham Lincoln who named it "The People's Printer" to educate the public by providing all kinds of government documents, reports, and hearings at a very cheap price, just announced it is closing its 23 retail stores in major cities all over the country.

Reason? A GPO spokesman, Andrew M. Sherman, said that their online operation is draining the retail end of its operations. Sales have dropped fifty percent. The GPO said they would save the princely sum of \$1.5 million annually with all the closures.

Aggressive real estate developers are eyeing public libraries and their urban branches with the aim of enveloping them under multi-use projects that include stores, cinemas and condos. In return, these tax sheltered developers will offer to pay for a portion or all of a new library structure.

Is there anything wrong with these trends? Plenty, and they revolve around the difference between commercial and civic values right down to the neighborhood level.

For over two centuries, free standing Post Office buildings have anchored communities of all sizes. In small towns and rural areas, it is a vital force, a place to access all kinds of government information and notices, a gathering spot to chat briefly and meet your friends and neighbors, a place to send and receive mail and parcels. This is something both tangibly and intangibly different than going to an enclave in a sprawling corporate Mall. People in small town-rural America see the Post Office as a symbol of Uncle Sam, of what the New York Times called "the national community." It is hard to imagine people rallying to save the Postal enclave in a Mall, as they do to save their little Post Office.

Budget-reduced public libraries are under increasing pressure to rebuild their libraries under multi-use projects. City Hall sees multi-use as relieving its library

budget. And the federal government can continue to spend more every 48 hours in Iraq than its entire support of libraries in America over one year.

Again, the loss of free-standing library structures and their landscaping means families and individuals entering and leaving libraries must navigate between people with shopping bags and carts negotiating adjacent stores, parking, and all the noise. Commercial minds do not appreciate the sanctuaries of such public institutions. They do understand dependency, however, as well as the proverbial foot in the door toward privatization (better called corporatization).

The Edison company which aspires to corporatize a goodly part of the \$400 billion annual public school budget, has suggested that schools could be on floors of office buildings. What is so sacrosanct about a free-standing school-house, anyway, it argues?

Then there are the GPO stores. Maybe if the GPO had a better sense of promoting the dazzling variety of fascinating and important government publications, it could have avoided these stores closures all together. To be sure, there needs to be some enabling changes in the GPO's statutory base; but was there any excuse for the GPO shredding 1500 of the historic Watergate prosecutor's report years ago instead of letting people know how to get this increasingly valuable historic document?

Rather than discounting, or giving away its surplus reports, the GPO often shreds and gets a few pennies per pound for scrap paper.

The GPO store in Denver was 29 years old. The manager, Kathleen Moss, said many of her patrons "are appalled that we're shutting down. A lot of people would still rather come in and see the books on the shelf." This is otherwise known as browsing with others, something some human beings might prefer to a computer screen.

One patron of the store, who was looking for books on Gen. George Armstrong Custer, said: "they think everybody would rather have a computer in their lap than a book." All this to save \$1.5 million dollars, instead of actually expanding its market.

It is permissible to think that Abraham Lincoln would have disapproved.

###

FAIR USE NOTICE

This site contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available in our efforts to advance understanding of environmental, political, human rights, economic, democracy, scientific, and social justice issues, etc. We believe this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, the material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>. If you wish to use copyrighted material from this site for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use', you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.