



## LETTERS

---

### *A Reply to Professor Liboff by S. T. Folland.*

Prof. Liboff brings to life his memories of the library on East Broadway on New York City's Lower East Side, which was built in an older, grander, style than our public buildings of today. He also raises the stimulating question: Why don't we build them like this anymore?

Let's agree that public libraries, municipal buildings, and train stations don't look like they used to. My choice of examples for the older, grander buildings would include the Detroit Public Library, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and, from my earlier life, the Carnegie Library in Thief River Falls, Minnesota. New buildings, Liboff argues, are functionally and efficiently built, but they lack the meaning and beauty of those of the earlier era. He asserts that the demise of the old style was caused by the obsession with "efficiency" espoused stridently by MBAs and accountants whose mindset eroded a superior tradition. The goal of this rebuttal is to show that there are several alternatives to his hypothesis, and as a side product I hope to dispel the need to demonize or scapegoat any groups of people.

Can the Professor's conjecture be supported, even partially? I think it can, though its application is very limited. In the 1970s, while studying economics, I noticed that many laymen believed that efficiency was the bailiwick of "efficiency experts." These were people who supposedly roamed corporation hallways on a consulting basis, seeking out lazy

employees, wasted space, and sloppy procedures. Efficiency, in this sense, was at best a foolish fad and a narrow-minded mindset. However, it is a mistaken idea of economic efficiency.

My brother, Nate, who teaches physics at Kansas State, was once surprised to learn that the concept of efficiency in economics is the same as that in physics. If you can identify the “best practice,” then efficiency is defined by the degree to which that best practice is achieved. On the factory floor, the expert in ergonomics replaces the “efficiency expert,” but he studies such things as the arrangement of materials, tools and benches so that the worker’s repeated movements will not only be more productive but also safer and healthier. CEOs generally care about their employees, and all around the country CEOs are most concerned about their employee health care costs.

A familiar example helps to contrast a bastardized versus a correct concept of economic efficiency. For example, if one chose an unworthy goal, perhaps it would be “efficient to achieve this goal with least effort.” Wanting one’s children out of one’s hair, perhaps TV would be the most “efficient” pacifier and entertainer. Kids are attracted to the many colorful TV programs. American children watch a great deal of TV, yet we frequently read reports that these children are bored. Tibor Scitovsky, writing in the latest issue of *Challenge* magazine, argues that not only are they bored, but also this boredom stems from their inability to use leisure time efficiently and is the root cause of teenage violence. Like many critics of children’s TV watching, Scitovsky advises us to disconnect the TV, teach the children crafts, play sports, cards and other games with them. When a deeper sense of entertainment is desired and when your goal is the intellectual and emotional growth of the children, then television is probably the least efficient entertainer. Perhaps home electronic entertainment will become more efficient, as the October issue of *Scientific American* somewhat hopefully suggests, by becoming more library-like, the consumer actively searching large stores for the item he wants. The magazine, however, clearly understands

that efficiency doesn't mean more channels per se, but rather it is created by the household becoming more active in choosing.

If efficiency was not to blame for the demise of grand public buildings, then what was? I can suggest some alternatives. First, many of the grand libraries of Liboff's era were built with private funds; the Carnegie libraries are good examples of the architectural style as well as the funding source. The amassing of private wealth, which enabled the rich to build elegantly, came in part through the frequently monopolized, always freewheeling, and sometimes "robber-baron" free-enterprise system of an earlier day. Whether America should return to that era is another question. We can, however, recognize that many monuments of that time were the grand donations of cowboy capitalism.

Second, the conditions under which public libraries rose to very high public esteem, have modified over time. These libraries were especially valued for bringing learning and culture to those who otherwise could not afford it. The steady rise of people's incomes since the Great Depression and the invention of cheaper book production methods (e.g. the paperback) brought more books into more people's homes. They substituted the pleasures of owning a book for the pleasures of checking one out. The concept of competing technologies applies broadly. For example, the demise of the great railroad stations is probably due less to efficiency, either correctly construed or misconstrued, than to the boom in interstate highways and air travel. Nearly all of us have substituted car or air travel for the train ride of the era Prof. Liboff remembers.

Third, the federal, state and local taxes were a much smaller fraction of people's incomes back in the early 1930s. The Depression brought with it a growing desire for more goods and services to be provided by government. Many of our most valued public programs date back to that time. City budgets for libraries now compete with many more public programs for the same tax dollar. In a sense, the citizenry are the

ones to blame, if they set the local library at a lower priority. While families are clearly richer now than in the 1930s, there are more and more expensive attractions for their dollar as well as many expensive needs for medical and educational products that did not even exist at that time.

When you have competing claims for scarce resources, you don't need an accountant, you need to tighten your belt. Cost-efficiency in this sense was not invented in the 20th Century, but it probably dates back to prehistoric man. We know that "household economy" was a favorite subject of the ancient Greek philosophers; the phrase even gave us the origin of the term "economics".

Finally, tastes in architecture have changed since the days that Prof. Liboff recalls on East Broadway. The shape and ornament of the old style buildings were part of a reflection of both a reverence for the grandeur of ancient culture as well as the limitations imposed by the materials and building techniques available near the beginning of this century. When steel skeleton construction, stronger materials, and functional elevators became available, the limits, both of style and materials, were shed.

Along with this came changes public tastes. Even given our short history, we can look around our campus and see how Oakland University's architectural tastes have changed over time. The steel and glass of O'Dowd has a "modern" look that many like. South and North Foundation seem to have been designed in a utilitarian mode, simple and to the purpose. The Science and Engineering Building is attractive because it subtly emphasizes function over form, reflecting modern science. Would we prefer it to have the look and feel of the Parthenon?

The older, grander style, I admit, is not to my taste, though perhaps had I grown up on Delancey instead of rural Minnesota, things would be different. My favorite style of public library is the library two blocks down the street here in Romeo. The building—partly Tudor, dark brick, black metal railings, towering shade trees, plenty of overstuffed chairs next

to the fireplace, lots of CDs, magazines, novels, romance and otherwise—is not monumental, but it’s cozy in the winter.

No single hypothesis presented here is so good that it must be true, so we must withhold judgment until data can help to sort them out, if this is even possible. Prof. Liboff’s story of growing up on Delancey is enjoyable and it generates a stimulating question: Where have all these grand, old buildings gone? What MBAs and accountants have to do with this question is beyond me. Probably nothing more than the writer’s desire to let off some steam. By the way, in real life, the graduates of our MBA and accounting programs at Oakland have been a source of great pride for the University, though the details of what these individuals have done may be unknown to many faculty and students.