town colony, where settlers were given land grants and offered political inclusion; the book highlights a General Assembly in 1619 that "effectively gave all adult men a say in the laws and institutions governing the colony." It was, Robinson and Acemoglu write, a powerful precedent: "Ultimately the good economic institutions of the United States resulted from the political institutions that gradually emerged after 1619."

That, they say, is the difference: countries like the United States have benefited from a history of inclusive institutions that have provided for economic prosperity; Latin America—like the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa—has been damned by traditions of rulers seeking gratification at the cost of the majority.

Some have questioned the depth of their work, Robinson reports. At a recent speech at Britain's Department for International Development, an audience member stood and accused Robinson of being "simplistic." "In social science, simple frameworks are very powerful for organizing thinking," he says. "I don't think we deny that geography or culture can be important in some contexts, but we think that isn't the big story—that isn't what explains these big patterns. And so let's focus on these big patterns, and here's a way of thinking about them." Besides, he says, their frame-work is based on more than a decade of academic work and dozens of academic papers: "So it is an abstraction, it is a simplification. But it is based on a lot of research."

As for Jared Diamond, whose geography theory inspired the duo's counterargument, he is thanked in the acknowledgments of *Why Nations Fail*. "He is a good friend of mine," says Robinson, noting that the pair have since co-edited books and set up academic conferences together. "He and I have spent hours arguing about the evidence. We just disagree." ∼DAN MORRELL

The Library Test Kitchen

"**W**HAT IF YOU thought seriously about the library as a laboratory, as a place where people do things, where they make things?" asks Jeffrey Schnapp, addressing his "Library Test Kitchen" class. Libraries as centers of knowledge and learning have a rich history—but an uncharted future. The digital revolution, besides changing the nature of books, is transforming the role of libraries in preserving and disseminating information. "What if the Library of Congress were to become a digital library?" continues Schnapp. "What, then, is the role of the physical public library? This is a source of enormous anxiety at the local level because public libraries" face increas-

Timeslice lets library users post event announcements containing graphics to a digital community calendar.

ing political pressure, including budget cuts, but "play absolutely fundamental civic roles, often as the only public space that remains in smaller communities."

Last fall, Schnapp, a professor of Romance languages and literatures who is deeply interested in design questions triggered by the digital revolution (see "The Humanities, Digitized," May-June 2012, page 40), teamed up with then Ess professor of law John Palfrey (who chairs the steering committee of the national Digital Public Library of America project), to teach a seminar at the Graduate School of Design (GSD) exploring what form the library of the twenty-first century might take. The seminar was "both an attempt to get the design community interested" in this question, Schnapp says, and to have a "historically informed, design-driven conversation that was in dialogue with Harvard's big, institution-wide conversation about the reorganization of its own library sys-

A WiFi cold spot, the project of student instructor Ben Brady, is a radically designed mini-room intended to be a place for reflection or refuge from an increasingly connected world.

tem" (see "Gutenberg 2.0" May-June 2010, page 36.)

The success of the fall seminar—two class-sponsored discussions drew more than a hundred people—led to a renewed incarnation as the "Library Test Kitchen" this spring,

a "rapid prototyping studio" at the GSD. During the semester, students designed, built, and deployed novel devices and objects in an attempt to model the library of the future; Schnapp's co-instructors were Jeff Goldenson of the Harvard Library Lab (which fosters innovation in library services), GSD library director Ann Whiteside, and GSD student Ben Brady, who'd taken the fall class.
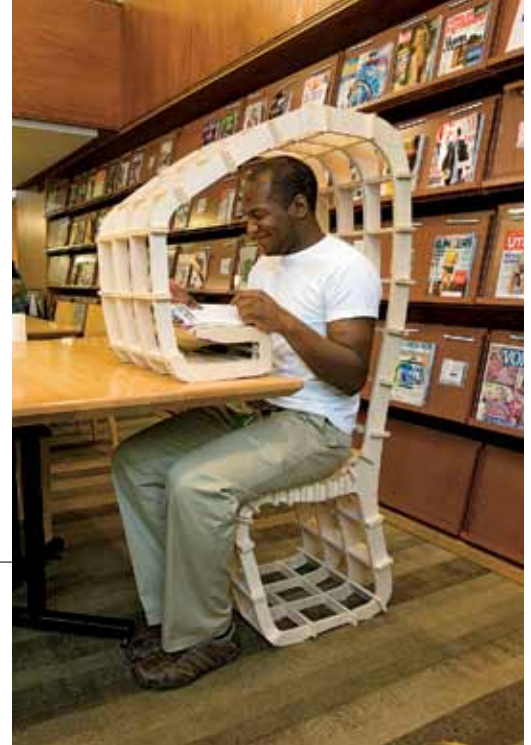
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In the seminar's freewheeling atmosphere, ideas flew like cream pies at a food fight. What if behind-the-scenes work could take place in the open instead, suggested Matthew Battles, a fellow at the Berkman Center. "What if you set up somebody processing medieval manuscripts in Widener or Lamont—a processing station in a public space?" Battles had just come from a used-furniture depository, where he'd been scavenging for shelves that could be repurposed for use as curator stations, places where faculty members or librarians could be asked to curate small collections of books. "What about a mobile, inflatable library?" suggested Goldenson. "What would that do?" Or how about an "Artist in Reference," he continued. "We could bring in experts in a particular subject to serve as guest reference librarians in their area of expertise." Schnapp, running with the idea, noted that "Widener contains collections in fields that haven't been taught at Harvard in a hundred years, where we have the best collections of materials."

By semester's end, the brainstorming sessions had generated dozens of good ideas, and a few had become student projects: Biblio, a conceptualization of a handheld device for scanning books that tracks and shares research and even makes bibliographic recommendations for further study (see the online video); Timeslice, a "graphical electronic bulletin board" that lets library users post event announcements to a community calendar that incorporates digital graphics; Neo-Carrel, a study chair with a raised platform in front that doubles as a laptop stand and a comfortable place to rest one's head for a nap (now installed in Lamont library); and a WiFi cold spot, a radically designed room (opposite) for reflection or refuge from an increasingly connected world.

Biblio, a handheld book scanner (above), helps users track, share, and expand their research. The Neo-carrel (right) does triple duty as chair, laptop stand, and comfortable napping station.

"We think this is an opportunity to be real catalysts for thoughtful change that can't easily come from other quarters," explains Schnapp. "Because we're not librarians, but instead a community of artists, scholars, engineers—people interested in knowledge—we come at the questions a little bit differently. So we think we can be innovative and breathe some fresh air into a conversation that often is about how many jobs are going to be cut, or what will happen to all the space that is freed up once the stacks move out to the Harvard Depository. That's a conversation that may have to happen, but it would be a tragedy if that were the only framework in which we thought about the possibilities for enhancing the mission of libraries."

~JONATHAN SHAW

LIBRARY TEST KITCHEN WEBSITE:
www.librarytestkitchen.org

When Having Babies Beats Marriage

IN FEBRUARY *The New York Times* ran a story under the provocative headline, "For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside of Marriage." The article suggested childbearing outside of marriage was the "new normal"—that recently released data signaled a "coming generational change" in Americans' attitudes toward family formation. It was a dramatic story, but sociologist Kathryn Edin says it obscured the truth about how childbearing is changing in the United States.

"What the article essentially got wrong is that this is an *education* story, not an *age* story," explains Edin, professor of public policy and management at Harvard Kennedy School and a prominent scholar of the American family. She points out that 94 percent of births to college-educated women today occur within marriage (a rate virtually unchanged from a generation ago), whereas the *real* change has taken place at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. In 1960 it didn't matter whether you were rich or poor, college-educated or a high-school dropout—almost all American women waited until they were married to have kids. Now 57 percent of women with high-school degrees or less education are unmarried when they bear their first child.

The decoupling of marriage from childbearing among lower-income Americans is arguably the most profound social trend