



The role of public libraries in culture-led urban regeneration

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to present a research project on public libraries in urban development focusing on how libraries contribute to culture-led urban regeneration as icons, placemakers and community vitalization.

Design/methodology/approach – The research project is based on case studies of new “cutting-edge” public libraries in Europe and North America. These case studies have been conducted through analysis of documents, observation and qualitative interviews with key informants.

Findings – The article finds that new public libraries have re-conceptualized their design, brand and functions as an answer to strategies of culture-led urban regeneration, and at the same time they have actively contributed to urban development by changing the image and identity of urban places, contributing to urban diversity and addressing social and economic problems.

Practical implications – The article provides a framework for development of strategies and legitimization for public libraries and a point of departure for the discussion of the library’s contribution to urban development.

Originality/value – This is the first public presentation of the findings of the results of the research project Public Libraries in Urban Development – Creativity, Innovation and Experience outside the Nordic countries.

Keywords Public libraries, Culture-led urban regeneration, Urban development, Icon, Placemaker, Community vitalization, Urban areas, Europe, North America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Cities in a global competition are today being planned and marketed as experience and creative cities, characterized by new hybrid and performative public spaces and the need for creative environments generating ideas and innovation. These overall urban strategies challenge the traditional cultural institutions, which have to respond to a new urban context. Where, since the 1980s, cultural institutions such as opera houses, concert halls and especially art museums and galleries have been part of an economic strategy based on branding and image (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993), this development now also affects the public library, which must be seen as part of a larger urban landscape.

This article is based on the research project “Public Libraries in Urban Development – Experience, Creativity and Innovation” (Hvenegaard *et al.*, 2011). The overall research questions are connected to the three dimensions place, space and relations:

RQ1. How can the library serve as a catalyst for change and urban development? (Place).



RQ2. How can libraries enhance the creative and innovative city as a space for experiences and new meetings? (Space).

RQ3. How can the library contribute to synergy, connections and transformations through new creative partnerships? (Relations).

In this article the authors focus especially on the first question, looking at the relationship between urban development and the development of new library concepts. In this connection they discuss what roles public libraries play in strategies of culture-led urban regeneration, and to what extent have they have re-conceptualized their design, brand and functions as an answer to these strategies.

Cities in competition

Today cities are in a growing competition and they are to a higher and higher degree planned and designed to attract tourists, inhabitants and businesses. A “cultural turn” (Lash and Urry, 1994) has happened in the cities where there is a growing trend of re-branding and refurbishing cities as cultural havens in an attempt to revitalize economies. This can be seen as a response to how cities fight to survive in the context of globalization and an economy based on creativity and innovation (Mercer, 2006). At the same time cultural policy and urban regeneration have become more and more intertwined (Evans, 2001) and culture-led regeneration emphasizes the social and economic impact of culture (Landry *et al.*, 1996; Evans and Shaw, 2004; Miles and Paddison, 2005; Vickery, 2007).

Whereas cities in the 1950s and 1960s tended to concentrate on stimulating economic growth by creating favorable conditions for trade and industry by planning pedestrian streets and industrial parks, planning in the 1980s and 1990s came to focus on the (re-)establishment of city centers and the extension of high-profile waterfront areas which offer new combinations of consumption and experience. This trend has become further refined in the new millennium, when the idea of “just add culture and stir” has become the recipe for success. As the cultural planner Graeme Evans (2001, p. 2) states in his book *Cultural Planning: An Urban Renaissance?* “The symbolic and political economies of culture have arguably never been so interlinked”. These trends in urban planning and development are provoked by the transition from an industrial use of urban space to a post-industrial one, where digitalization and globalization have given rise to a post-industrial urban profile (Kloosterman, 2009). This can also be seen as a response to how cities fight to survive in the context of globalization and an economy based on creativity and innovation (Mercer, 2006).

The rise of culture-led urban regeneration

In the same period the idea of culture-led regeneration as a policy concept began to occur. As Miles and Paddison (2005, p. 833) state in their introduction “The rise and rise of culture-led urban regeneration” for a special issue of *Urban Studies*:

What is remarkable is not just the speed with which the culture-driven strategies have become advocated by governments and local development agencies as a means of bolstering the urban economy, but also how their diffusion has globalized. Within a little more than two decades, the initiation of culture-driven urban (re)generation has come to occupy a pivotal position for new urban entrepreneurialism.

However, looking at the extensive literature on the subject, they state that the key question is still to be answered, namely “To what extent is culture-led regeneration more about rhetoric than it is about reality?” (Miles and Paddison, 2005, p. 834).

In 2005 the British DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) published the policy statement *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration*. This was part of a consultation document with the attempt to construct “a common way to measure the social, economic and environmental impact of (urban cultural) transformational projects” (DCMS, 2004, p. 3). This report outlines three strategies of culture-led regeneration which can be labeled as:

- (1) cultural icons and landmarks;
- (2) placemaking and urban identity; and
- (3) community consolidation.

Even if these three outlines seem to be “somewhat limited in their conceptual reach” (Vickery, 2007, p. 53), we find that they can function as a relevant framework to analyze and discuss the role of the public library in urban development and regeneration. The categorization seems to be both a practical and a fruitful model to categorize the prevailing tendencies as we have perceived them in our empirical studies of European and North American public libraries. Only, we will rename the last strategy as community vitalization instead of consolidation, as this focuses on a more prevalent role of the library. In the following the authors provide their own definitions of the three strategies, based on theory, and hereafter describe and discuss the functions of new public libraries within these strategies.

Cultural icons

The recent years there has been a worldwide trend for architects to create iconic buildings for cities competing to elevate their image. In particular, cultural institutions have become icons, most successful and discussed Frank Gehry’s hyper-expressive New Guggenheim from 1997, which gave the name to the “Bilbao effect”. As the architect Charles Jencks (2006, p. 8) phrases it, politicians and mayors all over the world now “demand the “wow-effect” in new buildings and explicitly ask for the “Bilbao effect” which brought in millions of dollars to that rust-belt city”. The American architect Anna Klingmann (2010, p. 31) uses the concept “brandsapes” when she describes how “the skylines and urban landscapes throughout the “Global Village” have become staged, composed of towering symbols of corporate identity, where everything seems to be arranged for effect”. Furthermore, she continues that “architecture is increasingly perceived as a commodity, as part of a lifestyle – in fact, it has become a brand”. This she sees as a trend where architecture is perceived as a commodity keyed to the realities of global capitalism “where cities are trying to position themselves favorably in the worldwide marketplace in order to attract capital” (Klingmann, 2010, p. 33).

In the article “Iconic architecture and capitalist globalization” the sociologist Leslie Sklair sees the most common rationale for deliberately created iconic architecture as urban boosterism for cities who want to be easy recognizable for purposes of commerce as well as civic pride. As Sklair (2006, p. 38) states: “Those driving urban boosterism deliberately attempt to create urban architectural icons in order to draw tourists, conventions and mega-event attendees with money to spend and the images they

project are directed to this end". Sklair's definition of iconic is "a building or a space (and perhaps even an architect) that is different and unique, intended to be famous and to have special symbolic/aesthetic qualities" (Sklair, 2006, p. 28).

Based on the concepts above the authors here define icons as buildings which are:

- different and unique;
- famous (or at least intended to be);
- of symbolic/aesthetic quality; and
- part of urban branding.

Libraries as icons

In this context the question is – Why can we find so many examples of iconic operas, art museums and music-venues and so few iconic public libraries? Are libraries as such too conventional to be famous and too mainstream being seen as part of urban boosterism and branding? Or are there actually public libraries with icon-quality, and then: for whom and for where are they iconic? In the following we will give some examples of libraries that are planned to have, or already have iconic status, discerning between a global and a local level.

Iconic libraries on a global level

The Seattle Public Library, opened in 2004, has become a symbol of iconic architecture, at least among librarians all over the world, who have traveled as pilgrims to visit the shrine. It is designed by the renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who has designed a long list of iconic buildings. What is interesting in this connection is that in this competition, the architect was not chosen for his final design, but for his ability to contribute to the process of negotiating with the many stakeholders involved. First, after the principles and functions of the library had been negotiated, the library was designed from the inside out: "A deliberate decision was made that the building's exterior should be second to the functions the building serves, leading to its asymmetrical shape and unusual overhangs" (Berk & Associates, 2005, p. 6). Nevertheless, the result according to the SPL web site was "an avant-garde symphony of glass and steel which innovates form and function". It has absolutely no connotations with the classic "knowledge temple".

Looking at the library from the outside, one must admit it has iconic qualities. It is a complex and intriguing construction in glass and steel, like a roughly cut diamond, and at the same time it seems very futuristic and "cool". As the architecture journalist Regina Hackett (2004, p. 5) writes: "Koolhaas' building has high-tech brain and a retro-futurist heart (. . .). Had he spotted it from the sky on a dark day, Darth Vader could easily have mistaken it for his personal refueling station". There is no doubt that the building contributes to Seattle's image as a progressive and future-orientated city, and the president of the Downtown Seattle Association states: "The greatest economic development impact of the new Central Library is the coolness factor. It makes us cool on an international scale (Berk & Associates, 2005, p. 38).

Iconic libraries at a local level

Peckham in Southwark, South London, is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the UK with more than half of the population of African-Caribbean decent. The

European Union has invested heavily in the regeneration of the area characterized by economic and social problems, and the Peckham Library and Media Center is partly funded by EU. The building, which was designed by the British architect Will Alsop, has won the prestigious RIBA Stirling Prize. When it opened in 2000, it drew attention for helping regenerate a down-at-heel area but was at the same time criticized for the concept of “being a show-off icon rather than an overall regeneration strategy” (SMC Alsop, 2012). The building has the shape of an inverted letter “L” with the upper part supported by pillars set at random angles, thereby creating a public space underneath as a sheltered part of Peckham Square, a focal meeting point in the area. It is clad in copper, which gives a turquoise hue, and it functions as a splash of color in the otherwise monotone area. The building has a playful, post-modern style, but as quoted it “is not an irrelevant post-modern architectural joke. It is a very serious building with a strong mission, where even seemingly irrelevant elements of its design are in fact central to its purpose” (Peckham Library and Media Center, 2012).

According to the criteria for icons above, the Peckham Library can be said to be famous as a landmark in its own district, and it is also putting Peckham “on the map” as a destination in London, especially for librarians, city-planners and architects. As to its symbolic/aesthetic qualities it is more difficult to decipher its meaning. However, with its playful form and facade it is symbolic for a culture and a time: the experience society and the experience city, combining learning with fun. Also, it has contributed to the branding of Peckham, adding new image and identity to the former run-down district.

Can you plan an iconic library?

When looking at the plans for new libraries, it seems to be a trend that the buildings in themselves should be iconic. This is for example the case in the Danish city Aarhus, where the so-called Mediaspace according to the competition program is supposed to be “an icon for Aarhus as a city of knowledge, pulse and roots (New Central Urban Waterfront and Mediaspace in Aarhus, 2008). Another example is the concept design for the new library of Birmingham, which is supposed to be the largest public library in UK. The leader of the council describes the new library as “an icon, instantly recognizable, it will be a means for a million people to say to the outside world – this is a symbol of our city. It will capture our ambition, and our belief in a bright future ahead. It will underpin our credibility to investors and visitors alike, demonstrating we are building key projects, irrespective of the economic climate, and proving we believe that as a global city, our citizens deserve the very best facilities” (Whitby, 2009). In both these examples, the libraries are seen as part of urban branding. Whether they actually will become famous icons of symbolic and aesthetic qualities, the future will show.

Placemaking and urban identity

Cultural institutions have always been part of the construction of an attractive, vibrant and challenging city. However, in the last 10-20 years the conscious use of culture and cultural institutions to boost the competitiveness and attractiveness of specific parts of cities as city centers, as kick-starters in transformation of industrial areas or as magnets to attract people to new urban developments has become an integrated part of urban planning. Theatres, museums and now also libraries are seen as cultural anchors

in cultural districts and mixed-use districts which are seen as lively and attractive areas to live, work and visit (Kloostermann, 2009). Furthermore, they are becoming important attractors and markers of identity for specific locations within cities and for these cities themselves (Rykwert, 2002). At the same time cities compete to attract special segments, and here Florida's (2002) idea of the "power of place" has turned city centers into Mecca's for the café-latte drinking creative class (Skot-Hansen, 2008).

Yet to become placemakers cultural institutions in competition must have something special to offer. They must provide facilities, activities and experiences, which are attractive and interesting and which make a difference. Here the question is – Which functions should they offer and who do they want to attract? Are they cultural havens for the culture-loving middle-classes, for the cool creative class, or for the new digital nomads, the people studying or working in cafés, libraries or other "third places"? Alternatively, are they rather creating broader public domains where cultural and social exchanges happen (Haajer and Reijndorph, 2001) and new performative urban spaces characterized by stages for performance, for learning and for experience (Marling *et al.*, 2009)?

In this context the authors have defined a placemaker as a library that can be seen as:

- active part of urban planning;
- contributing to urban diversity in mixed-use districts; and
- creating "public domain" and new stages for experience.

Libraries as placemakers

Some examples follow of libraries in city centers and former industrial areas, which can be seen as placemakers in the above-mentioned sense. Of course, icon-libraries can also to some extent be seen as placemakers (as in Seattle and Peckham) but not all placemakers have iconic qualities.

Revitalization of city centers

Moshe Safdi is the architect behind the main public libraries in Vancouver and Salt Lake City. Both of these libraries are good examples of libraries, which have brought new life to city centers, threatened to become devoid of visitors and therefore also of shops, restaurants and cafés, all the things that constitute city life. In Vancouver, the library is part of the commercial downtown area, which was experiencing a decline in business. In Salt Lake City, the whole city center had slowly been drained of visitors except for the Mormon Temple in the Northern part of the city. Here the building of the library *vis-à-vis* the Town Hall has functioned as cultural anchor and has attracted a great number of daily visitors to the Southern part of the city center.

In both cities the impressive and very large library buildings are connected to the city with an arcade of cafés, small-scale shops and spaces for community projects. These arcades continue into open, outdoor city space used for informal meetings and more organized cultural events as exhibitions, performances and festivals. In this way, a transzone between the library and the city is established, which at the same time expands the library's space and establishes new, attractive city spaces. In Vancouver the open space around the library is more a public domain, where people meet and

hang out, and in Salt Lake City the Library Plaza is the pivotal point of the annual Gay Parade, and many other local festivals.

Revitalization of former industrial areas

The Dutch architect Jo Cohen's Oppenbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA) is probably the most prominent placemaker library in Europe. The library is part of the top-down development of the Oosterdok Island, a whole new part of town in the heart of Amsterdam, near the Central Station and the historic center of the city. It is part of the Amsterdam docklands, which were abandoned in the 1960 and 1970s, where the increasing size of ships and the containerizations made the former docklands obsolete. The Eastern docklands were quite isolated and the first aim was to open them up to the rest of the city. The city council accepted a memorandum in 1995 where each island in the area was given an identity of its own, and here the Oosterdock Island was conceived as a new cultural anchor for the city.

The library was the first building to open in 2007, and the placement of the library was according to OBA's director part of an overall strategy: "We were the first building in Oosterdock, so they could tell the others – the conservatory and the hotel – that a lot of activity was already happening here". The development of the Oosterdock Island is seemingly a success. The Dutch professor in economic geography Robert Kloosterman (2009, p. 11) writes:

Whereas the Oosterdokseiland was something of a black hole in the city, where almost no one went, it has now become part of the itineraries of many inhabitants and visitors of Amsterdam (. . .) the present success of the Oosterdokseiland can be attributed to its central location, the strength of the cultural anchors, and the quality of the architecture.

The library itself is not an icon, but rather a very well designed landmark in the area. Its function as an urban meeting-point already starts on the plaza in front of the library with its café-life and live performances. Inside the seven-story building you can find 1,375 seating places for the "digital nomads" working with computers or just ordinary people who want to read a magazine or a book. The whole concept of the library is very much a lounge with a minimalistic "mac" style, especially appealing to the young, creative mac-generation, and also the café and the trendy restaurant at the top floor seems to become a meeting place for the creative class. At the same time the library is a stage with a theatre with 275 seats, smaller stages for events within the library and also a large exhibition area and several smaller. All in all, the OBA is experience-orientated, and it underpins the experience city according to Marling *et al.* (2008).

Libraries in community vitalization

Instead of the concept "community consolidation" as used in the report *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration* (DCMS, 2004) mentioned earlier, the authors have chosen the term "community vitalization" to underline the importance of innovation and creativity rather than focusing on problems and disintegration. This definition of community vitalization includes activities that are:

- boosting local identity and cohesion;
- addressing social and economic challenges; and
- initiating local innovation, creativity and co-operation.

Some examples of libraries that take an active part in the vitalization of the local community follow.

Boosting local identity and cohesion

The Norwegian library researcher Ragnar Audunson (2005, pp. 435-436) argues for the need for what he calls low-intensive meeting places, arenas where we meet people with other interests and values than our own. These places can be seen as an alternative to the high-intensive meeting places, which rather create borderlines and differences. As he states: "A viable local community needs arenas that can provide a minimum community in values, meeting places where people can meet, communicate and be active together across generations and social and ethnic belongings as well as arenas for debate and discussion on social and political issues".

The Garage (Garaget) in Malmö in the Southern part of Sweden is an interesting example of a local library, which plays an active role in boosting this type of local identity and cohesion. The Garage is a 100 years old former industrial depot at the intersection of three city districts. It is situated between the inner city and the suburbs, in a multicultural context where over 100 different languages are spoken and where comparatively high income quarters are situated close to some of Malmö's most socially and economically deprived areas. The goals of the Garage are, besides providing local library services, to be a resource for visitor participation and creativity and also a place where dialogue is practiced.

In reaching these goals the Garage has become a very un-traditional library. The objective has been to make the space as open and flexible as possible and at the same time cozy and inviting. Among other things this flexibility means bookshelves on wheels, moveable walls and furniture from the flea market. When the Garage opened in 2009 it was more or less empty and the idea was that it should develop naturally in an ongoing process by meeting the requests and needs of its users. Thus, the development of the Garage, including the relatively small book collection, is built on the demands and interest of the users. The continuously dialogue with the users has also been central for the Garage in establishing open creative workshops and a stage for local events. Actually the whole place can be looked upon as a sort of participatory arena. The project manager of Library Service Garaget describes it as an environment in which opportunities for interaction with patrons are excellent: all kinds of meetings between individuals, cultures and different capabilities happen here.

Addressing social and economic challenges

There is no doubt that the Garage has been heavily inspired by the success of the "Idea Stores" in Tower Hamlets borough in East London. Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse boroughs in London with a very large community of Bangladeshi residents. It is also one of the most deprived boroughs in the city with a high level of unemployment, overcrowding and a lack of educational qualifications significantly higher than the national average. The overall concept behind Idea Stores was both to rethink and re-brand the library so it could play a more active role in addressing the huge social and economic challenges of the borough. Thus, the Idea Stores were designed to deliver in a way that captured the best traditions of the library movement and education sector but presented them in a new and exciting way. Following a large survey to establish just what residents wanted from the Idea Stores, significant service

remodeling and capital investment led to the opening of the first Idea Store in 2002 in Bow. This was followed by Idea Store Crisp Street in 2004, Idea Store Whitechapel in 2005 and Idea Store Canary Wharf in 2006. As well as traditional library service, the Idea Stores today offer a wide range of adult education classes along with other career support, learning laboratories, meeting areas, cafés and arts and leisure pursuits, all brought together in easily accessible spaces which are modeled on commercial retail environments. They are also spaces where individuals and families can come together informally to socialize, as well as they act as venues for community clubs. The Idea Store strategy has resulted in the Tower Hamlets Library and Information Service moving from one of the lowest performing in Britain, to one of the most successful in terms of visitors and engagement.

Initiating local innovation, creativity and co-operation

Having visited the two new libraries Meetingpoint and Library 10 in Helsinki, the library design consultant Aaron Schmidt wrote in his blog *Waking Paper*: “The libraries I saw have overcome their addiction to circulating content. Now they’re all about doing, making, publishing, working, and experiences revolving around content. People are still getting print books and CDs from the library, sure, but other stuff seems more important.” Both of these libraries are oriented towards the young creative entrepreneurs. In Library 10 the users can practice, produce and edit music and videos and at the same time there is a scene where they can perform and the library helps to distribute the products. The library is constantly changing its activities and facilities in cooperation with the users and in this way it is always up-to-date in a constantly changing media world.

At the Meetingpoint you find the UrbanOffice, a space where creative entrepreneurs can book a seat or a workspace or a meeting room to host a meeting. This is an offer for the many creative workers in Helsinki who cannot afford an office. At the same time the Meetingpoint hosts a network for creative entrepreneurs in the city. This can be seen as part of the ideas in the Finnish states report *Mission for Finland* (Country Brand Delegation, 2010), which argues that the libraries of the future must become “tacit factories” where the new digital nomads can meet and work.

Discussion

Three different roles of libraries within strategies of culture-led urban regeneration have been analyzed – the library as an icon, a placemaker and as community vitalization. These three roles do not exclude each other, but in many instances overlap, and even enhance each other.

The library as an icon can contribute to the strengthening or changing of a city or a community’s image. It can endow the city with an image as a future orientated city as in Seattle or offer a playful post modern experience as in Peckham. Yet to define a library building as an icon it must have something “more” than its function. It must be unique in its form and have a symbolic and aesthetic quality. At the same time, as Sklair (2006, p. 31) argues, it is “the institutional structures that dominate the times and places and audiences of buildings, spaces and architects, that make them famous”. Therefore, looking at icons one must ask: iconic for whom, iconic for where and iconic for when?

The role as a placemaker seems to be a much more “natural” role for the public library and here one can find a large number of libraries consciously planned as attractive magnets in the revitalization of city centers and former industrial areas. Even though there often are great expectations concerning economic impact in connection with the building of these strategically placed libraries, this effect has until now not been convincingly evidence-based. The *Seattle Public Library: Economic Benefits Assessment* (Berk & Associates, 2005) reports 16 million dollars extra consumption in the city in the first year of the library and also points at the library’s positive effect on the city’s character, image and identity. The library is seen as “a vibrant anchor” being an important agent in reestablishing Downtown as a cultural district. Yet still, it is not known whether the increased income in Downtown has been taken from other areas of the city or how much the new image is actually worth.

There is no doubt though that many of these libraries contribute to making mixed-use quarters come alive, to change the city’s flow and to develop new parts of the city. Again one has to ask: for whom? Are these libraries designed as cultural havens for the creative class or are they “libraries for all”? Are they contributing to the everyday life and the “livability” of a place for the local inhabitants or are they as regeneration schemes excluding the former residents? In her book *The Cultures of Cities* the American sociologist Sharon Zukin (1995, p. 11) poses the question: “Whose culture? Whose city?”. Here she analyzes the symbolic economy of the city as it is expressed in the public space and she states: “The question of who can occupy public space, and so define the image of a city, is open ended”. In the same way the question of who can occupy the library space is open ended.

The third use of the library in culture-led regeneration is as community vitalization. The examples considered here are smaller and in many ways non-traditional libraries. These libraries aim at boosting local identity and cohesion and addressing local social and economic problems by establishing meeting-space, career support, learning labs and facilities to pursue creative endeavors. You can of course ask whether these libraries really are libraries. They are not, if by a library you mean a quiet place with shelves and a collection of books. However, if you accept that the internet revolution has altered our use of media and that globalization is forcing cities to compete through creativity and innovation, then libraries have a new role to play. The libraries mentioned here may not have found the final solution, but they are all experimenting in different ways aiming at opening the library towards the local communities.

When discussing the role of the public library in urban development the next question is – Have libraries actually re-conceptualized their activities and facilities as an answer to strategies of culture-led regeneration or are they doing “business as usual”? Libraries taking part in culture-led regeneration actually do re-conceptualize their activities. This happens by questioning their traditional point of departure as libraries, by adding new functions, by involving users and local citizens in new ways and by initiating new partnerships. Yet there seems to be a difference in how much “rethinking” is happening within the three different strategies.

If looking at the functions and activities of the icons such as Seattle and Peckham, they are spectacular on the outside, but inside they render quite traditional services. Even though the library in Seattle has a huge “living room” at the entrance and an array of PCs on the top floor, the rest of the library is quite book-oriented with a six-storey high spiral book-case as the core of the library. In many ways, it is a

“knowledge temple” in disguise and still more collection than connection. In the process of using public libraries as placemakers, they have actually re-conceptualized the library through new design, facilities and activities by establishing transzones between the city and the library, offering new performative spaces, and by creating new public domains through inviting living-rooms and lounge areas. The new central library in Amsterdam is functioning as a magnet for the newly developed Oosterdok area not only as a place to lend books and other materials but also because of its many exhibitions, scenes and meeting places, not to forget the high quality restaurant at the top.

However, it is especially within the strategy of community vitalization the libraries have rebranded themselves. This happens at the Garage when the interior design, the facilities and the role of the librarian are radically altered or when the Ideas Stores invents a whole new brand to attract new users. It also happens through the initiation of creative and innovative processes in the community and by user-involving and user-driven activities, where young creative entrepreneurs are using the library’s facilities as we have seen in Helsinki’s Meetingpoint and Library 10. Here the library concept has changed from connection to creativity and collaboration.

Re-inventing the public library

Public libraries are not what they used to be. Even though many critical voices, especially from the cultural elite, mourn the loss of the “knowledge temple”, new public libraries in cities are re-conceptualizing their design, activities and facilities as an answer to new user needs and to the cities attempts to brand themselves, to attract visitors and to strengthen milieus generating ideas and innovation. No matter what the reasons, one thing is sure – the clock cannot be turned back. Apart from the “old reading room’s with chesterfield furniture and a fake fireplace”, you find in some new libraries, the time of the quite library with the all-knowing librarian is over. Public libraries have during the last ten years been changing from collections to connection and now also towards creativity and collaboration.

In this process, the public libraries have not just reacted to the trends of urban planning but also actively contributed to urban development by changing the image and identity of urban places, contributing to urban diversity and addressing social and economic problems. Libraries are “used” in strategies of culture-led regeneration, but this use has also given them a new legitimacy and a new image, which is necessary if they are to survive in a more and more digitalized and globalized world.

An important question is whether this can be seen as an instrumentalization of the library’s rationales, and whether its core mission has been affected. If you see the core mission of the library to enliven and enhance the lives of the citizens, this mission has not disappeared, but is being tested through new design and new concepts.

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