



The History of Children's Library Design: Continuities and Discontinuities

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ABSTRACT:

Paying close attention to the various purposes that have underpinned children's library work over the past century as well as certain broad developments in architecture and design, this paper examines, mostly in a British context, the design history of a building-type that has existed for little more than a century. Our analysis is divided into four periods: before the First World War; the inter-war years; the post-Second World War decades to about 1980; and the post-1980 period. Each of these periods is characterised by distinct design themes, these being, respectively, the children's library as: School and Shelter; Middle-Class Domesticity and Constructive Play; Open Plan and Modern Office; Domestic Comfort Zone and Pop Culture Playground. Taking an overview of these themes and periods, certain continuities and discontinuities present themselves. The early shelter function of the children's library can be seen today in its role as a cocooned comfort zone. The original schoolroom image, though still visible in the 1920s and 1930s, and even detectable in the era of the children's library as 'modern office' in the 1960s, has now diminished. The open plan of post-war modernism was, naturally, in keeping with contemporary developments in office design, although it also reflected the emergence of the open-plan house, re-enacting the link of the children's library with the domestic sphere. Design for constructive play in the inter-war period has undergone a metamorphosis and has re-emerged in the early-twentieth century in the form of the children's library as 'playground'. Heavy references to the domestic environment in the 1920s and 1930s has recently re-appeared under the guise of the high-styled IKEA-like environments for young library users; while, in keeping with the trend towards cocooning, the open-plan, free-flow interface with adult sections seems to have lost some of its appeal.

Like all technology, buildings are a product of society's beliefs and aspirations. Thus, the built form of the children's library, a distinct 'designed space' or 'building type' since the late-nineteenth century, can only be fully understood if studied in relation to accompanying social forms. Accordingly, this paper pays close attention to the various purposes that have underpinned children's library work over the past century – purposes articulated by librarians, library providers, reformers and commentators that were inevitably rooted in broader social, economic, political and cultural developments. In setting the scene, it is also appropriate at various points in the discussion to say something about certain broad developments in architecture and design that might be seen to have impacted on the design of the children's library.

Our analysis is divided into four periods: before the First World War; the inter-war years; the post-Second World War decades to about 1980; and the post-1980 period. Each of these periods of children's library design is characterised by distinct themes, some of which were at the time new, some of which had manifested themselves in earlier phases; and these continuities and discontinuities are summarised in the paper's conclusion. Our geographical focus is primarily Britain, although mention is also made of developments in, and influences from, abroad, including the United States.

Our primary sources for this paper have been varied: the *Library Association Record*, first published in 1899; archival material, including photographs, located in the collections of municipal local studies libraries; books and chapters in books contemporaneous with the events and periods we have studied; and, in relation to recent developments, evidence from our own visits to children's libraries and from websites documenting or promoting individual children's libraries.¹

Before 1914: School and Shelter

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that library provision for children on anything approaching the scale or in the form we see today began. A number of factors coalesced to bring this about. After nearly half a century, the development of the public library in Britain finally began to accelerate swiftly, facilitating and legitimising the emergence of specialised services, including services for the young. The growth of specialisms was supported by the development of professional librarianship following the establishment of the Library Association in 1877. A number of librarians became keenly interested in the library needs of children and began to write extensively in the library press about the issue.² This is not to say, however, that there existed any specialist training for children-focus librarians, nor that specialist posts were created and advertised. Only three dedicated posts before the First World War have been identified: at Nottingham (1897), Cardiff (1907) and Leicester (1910).³ This contrasted markedly with children's provision in the United States which British librarians studied and admired.⁴

¹ Including, for example, the 'Designing Libraries' website: <http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk/>

² W.C.B. Sayers, *The children's library: a practical manual for public, school and home libraries* (London: Routledge, 1911), pp. 204-213 contains an extensive ten-page bibliography on children's libraries

³ A. Ellis, *Library services for young people in England and Wales 1830-1970* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1971), pp. 34-35.

⁴ For example, see S. Fairchild, 'What American libraries are doing for children and young people', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 5 (1903), pp. 549-551, and L.S. Jast, 'Some impressions of American libraries', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 7 (1905), p. 67. Brief histories of children's libraries in America are given by M. Sassé, 'The children's librarian in America', *Library Journal* (15 January 1973), pp. 213-216; and E.L.

Increased demand for children's facilities came from the growth of children's literacy following the arrival of state education in 1870. On the 'supply side', children's publishing improved markedly. A rapid increase in the number and quality of books and magazines aimed at children occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. Librarians hoped that 'good' reading would turn children away from 'the perniciousness of the penny horrible',⁵ and the 'garbage' written for them in half-penny 'funnies' and 'comics' which had, as one library commentator believed, 'the most lamentable influence on their future character'.⁶

An early practical reason for the introduction of the children's library was to create more space, as well as quiet, for adult readers by removing the adolescent boys who populated libraries in relatively large numbers. Segregating the juvenile from the adult was the desirable, though not the practical and economic, option for many librarians, and certainly for adult readers seeking order and quiet. A separate building for children was first supplied in 1882, in Nottingham. In Wigan in 1895, a building was opened to house a separate boy's library as well as a committee room.⁷

In the decades immediately approaching the First World War, children's sections in adult accommodation – a convenient device for serving children – gradually became less popular and unnecessary as dedicated children's rooms became more common. Separate accommodation often meant separate entrances for adults and children. At Hove Public Library, opened in 1908, the library was located in the basement, accessed by a separate entrance to the side of the building. The same arrangement was implemented at Bury, though the room there was at street level.⁸ After 1918 separate entrances for children and adults girls were generally not seen in designs for new libraries, the plan for the extension to Scarborough Public Library (1936) being an exception.⁹

The children's library was often divided into separate accommodation for boys and girls. At Kingston District Library, Glasgow, the first Carnegie library to be opened in the City, boys and girls were kept apart by a glass screen, the superintendents desk straddling the rooms segregated compartments, thereby allowing direct supervision over both areas. **(Figure 1)** In unisex rooms, it was advised that boys' and girls' periodicals be grouped on separate tables.¹⁰ In late-nineteenth century Manchester a string of boys' rooms – ten by 1899 – were opened. The name was an anomaly as 'girls were admitted equally with boys'.¹¹ The rooms had a good amount of space devoted to them in the branches in which they were located, in places over half the amount of space enjoyed by adult readers.¹²

Even allowing for the dangers of retrospective history, compared with today's children's libraries, the look of the majority of spaces allocated to children before the First World War was stern, barren, uninspiring, mean and dull. The initial inclination of librarians was to

Power, *Work with children in public libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1943) (Effie Power was a pioneer of children's libraries in the America in the early-twentieth century).

⁵ *Islington Gazette* (23 January 1908).

⁶ B. Carter, 'School libraries', *Library World*, Vol. 8 (1905), 29.

⁷ *Programme of the presentation to the Borough of the Boy's Reading room, April 17th 1895* (Wigan, 1895).

⁸ A. Sparke, 'Bury juvenile library', *Library World*, Vol. 5 (1903), p. 233.

⁹ W.H. Smettem, 'Extensions to the Scarborough Public Library', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (February 1937), 58.

¹⁰ Sayers, *The children's library*, op. cit., p. 82.

¹¹ L.S. Jast, *The child as reader* (London: Libraco, 1927), p. 26.

¹² W.R. Credland, *The Manchester public free libraries* (Manchester: Manchester Public Free Libraries, 1899), p. 283.

conceptualise the physical arrangements in, and decoration of, children's spaces along the same lines as the treatment of adult spaces. For many, the children's library served as a mere *shelter*, a place of refuge from inhospitable streets and crowded, squalid homes. The early children's room also had the feel of the *schoolroom*. Rectangular tables organised in neat rows were designed, as in the schoolroom, to instil discipline and good behaviour. (Although it is important to emphasise that the early children's library was not always a place of discipline. Any strategy or mechanism of control can attract resistance. The children's library has been no exception in this regard. For those who viewed the children's room as a symbol of authority, it was a place in which to make trouble).¹³ Tables or desks allowed the reader to face only one way, in the tradition of the school and the church: tables allowing readers to sit on one side only was ideal, said the librarian J.D. Stewart: 'this arrangement promotes good order', he argued, whereas round tables gave rooms 'a confused appearance'.¹⁴ The importance of colour and an attractive décor were barely considered; in 1885, three years after it opened, the children's library in Nottingham was merely whitewashed.¹⁵

Despite the tendency towards decorative austerity, by the early-twentieth century librarians and library designers had begun to think in a much more focused way about the physical arrangements for children and young people in their dedicated accommodation. A pioneer in the field was Cardiff's librarian, John Ballinger, who preached that 'children must be provided for by a separate and special effort'. The children's room, he said, should take 'exactly the same position of importance and size as the adult's room ... The children must not be pushed away'.¹⁶ Ballinger's children's rooms in Cardiff were described as 'lofty, well-lighted and ventilated ... [and] decorated with pictures'.¹⁷ Enlightened librarians like Ballinger came to realise that children did not need 'libraries' so much as 'reading halls': rooms with a relaxed, non-school atmosphere where the young could undertake non-book activities, be directed in their reading and look at the illustrated papers. Ballinger conceptualised the 'reading hall' – as opposed to the 'library' or the associated term 'reading room' – as a softer description of the ideal space for children (but he objected to the idea of Peterborough's librarian, W.J. Willcock, of calling them simply 'recreation rooms').¹⁸ 'Halls' were to be places to which children could bring their own books, where they could engage in non-book activities and feel happy about staying for long periods: they should not simply be places for lending books for home reading.

In British library circles the idea took root that services to children should take a cue from the nurturing, sympathetic environments created in American children's libraries. Croydon Public Library's Stanley Jast was highly enthusiastic about the children's libraries he saw on a visit to the United States in 1903:

¹³ As symbols of authority, libraries certainly experienced their fair share of disaffection on the part of children and young people. When a reading room was opened at a Board School in Leyton in 1898, the Chairman of the Library Committee trusted that 'those who used the room would help the Assistant to keep order, and that they would be troubled by no unruly boys': *Leyton Public Library Quarterly Library Magazine*, Vol. 1 (1898).

¹⁴ J.D. Stewart et al., *Open access libraries: their planning, equipment and organisation* (London: Grafton, 1915), p. 88.

¹⁵ Nottingham Public Libraries Sub-Committee Minutes (27 May 1885).

¹⁶ J. Ballinger, 'Children's reading halls', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 5 (1903), p. 553.

¹⁷ W.C.B. Sayers, *A manual of children's libraries* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), p. 104.

¹⁸ Ballinger, 'Children's reading halls', op. cit., pp. 552-558. See, also, W.J. Willcock, 'Are children's libraries really necessary?', [Letter to] *Library Association Record*, Vol. 7 (1907), pp. 184-185, and the response by J. Ballinger, in the same volume, pp. 354-355.

The children's rooms which you get in all the new buildings are exceedingly fine, beautiful apartments, the woodwork often beautifully carved, and so on. At the recently opened Pacific Branch at Brooklyn there is a magnificent fireplace and an ingle nook in which the children can sit close to the fire on winter evenings and read their books ... There are good pictures on the walls, and the higher shelves are covered with wooden flaps, [in turn] covered with green baize, on which pictures are fastened. The whole appearance of the room is bright and gay, the appeal being constantly to the eye as well as the mind of the child.¹⁹

Berwick Sayers, a leading advocate of children's libraries, was impressed by the nature-oriented pursuits provided in some American libraries: on 'flower days' children might be invited to bring blooming wild flowers to the library, which were used to decorate the room and provided the raw material for study with the aid of books on botany.²⁰ The old theory, said Sayers, was that 'given space, a stool to sit upon and something to read, the child was satisfied', but what he wanted was rooms 'which will give to the child generally most of the characteristics of a private study.'²¹ Because 'the child comes naturally in search of beautiful and pleasant things' in the realms of knowledge, Sayers calculated, the surroundings also needed to be pleasant and beautiful.²²

The children's room Sayers created at Wallasey Public Library before the First World War was, he recalled, 'a homely room with a large bay window giving onto the lawn, around the interior of which I ran a continuous window seat'.²³ 'The ideal children's department', said Sayers,

is a well lighted, lofty apartment, well-furnished and decorated, and properly staffed – an attractive or even beautiful apartment, equal in status to any other department of the municipal library. While its immediate object is utilitarian, it should have in addition an aesthetic ideal; and the rather prevalent conceptions that a room in the basement in charge of a janitor or boy assistant will suffice, or that children are admitted only on sufferance to a library that is really for adults, should perish.²⁴

Sayers' complete formula for a popular and busy children's library comprised an attractive reading room with books on open access, located around the walls, the space flexible enough to be transformed into a lecture room with 'performance' platform at one end. Separate rooms for a reference collection and storytelling completed the accommodation.

However, the liberal and progressive ideas of librarians like Ballinger and Sayers were the exception rather than the rule and were not widely translated into the physical environment of the children's library. In the pre-1914 period the largely design-free shelter mentality dominated. This was linked to prevailing anxiety concerning the degeneration of the British race. It was believed that libraries could help elevate the young by rescuing them from the morally and physically damaging recreational life of the street, made all the more sinister by

¹⁹ L.S. Jast, 'Some impressions of American libraries', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 7 (1905), pp. 63-64.

²⁰ Sayers, *The children's library*, op. cit., p. 88.

²¹ Sayers, *A manual of children's libraries*, op. cit., p. 112.

²² Sayers, *The children's library*, op. cit., p. 90.

²³ W.C.B. Sayers, 'Children's libraries as I saw them', *Library World*, Vol. 60 (1958), p. 23.

²⁴ Sayers, *The children's library*, op. cit., p. 79.

an awareness of the puzzling persistence of poverty.²⁵ Fear of the consequences of the street and the promises that libraries gave to ameliorate these were fuelled, of course, by anxieties, compounded by stiffening foreign competition, concerning the bodily and mental decline of the population: a degeneration of the race, comprising a deterioration in national intelligence and in the physical condition of the masses. The ‘future of the race ... depends upon the enrichment of the imaginative life of the race’, wrote Stanley Jast.²⁶ One of the purposes early children’s libraries was clearly that of ‘child rescue’ – the protection of children from social and biological degradation.

In one sense, therefore, children’s libraries became part of the pre-First World War ‘national efficiency’ movement. This explains why many of the early spaces – if they went beyond the need merely to offer shelter – adopted the form of the schoolroom. Fears of economic decline relative to advancing nations like Germany and the United States coalesced with nagging doubts about the moral fabric of mass society. This resulted in louder calls for improved education, including technical instruction and library provision. It is no coincidence that the design of, and spatial arrangements in, some early children’s rooms mirrored that of the traditional school and schoolroom, including the segregation of boys and girls, reflective of the distinctive roles allotted to the sexes in the quest for industrial and imperial survival: women as homemakers, providing a nurturing environment for the nation’s future male workers and soldiers.²⁷

The 1920s and 1930s: Middle-Class Domesticity and Constructive Play

What one might describe as the ‘coming of age’ of the children’s library between the wars coincided with the growth of initiatives and ideas, which had begun to emerge in the late-Victorian and Edwardian years, concerning childhood and child welfare. These ideas heralded what Hendrick believes can reasonably be termed ‘modern childhood’, in that during this period childhood was ‘legally, legislatively, socially, medically, psychologically, educationally and politically institutionalised’.²⁸ There arose ‘a belief, incomprehensible to earlier generations, that children are citizens who have social rights independent of their parents, rights which the state has a duty to protect’.²⁹ The lot of children had been improved by a number of legislative initiatives, including the raising of the compulsory school-leaving age to 14 in 1918 and of the age of sexual consent to 16 in 1885, and the introduction of school meals and school medical inspection in 1906 and 1907, respectively. The Children’s Act (1908) established juvenile courts and a system of registration of foster parents.

²⁵ On the persistence of poverty, see G.S. Jones, *Outcast London: a study in the relationship between classes in Victorian society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

²⁶ Jast, *The child as reader*, op. cit., p. 40.

²⁷ A. Davin, ‘Imperialism and motherhood’, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1978), pp. 9-66.

²⁸ H. Hendrick, *Children, childhood and English society 1880-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 15. The study of the history of childhood was effectively inaugurated by Philippe Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Cape, 1962). His statement that the concept of childhood did not exist until the seventeenth century eventually attracted strong criticism, but it at least served to place the issue of the social significance of children on the historical map – to rescue children from history in the same way that women’s history has written women back into the historical record.

²⁹ I. Pinchbeck and M. Hewitt, *Children in English society. Volume II: From the eighteenth century to the Children’s Act 1948* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 637.

Consequently, it could be said that by the inter-war period children had become, in one sense, ‘children of the state’.³⁰

As British imperial and industrial pre-eminence became threatened by high infant mortality and low levels of working-class health,³¹ there was growing discussion about the physical and mental condition of the nation and the political and social consequences of poverty. The establishment of a child study movement in the United States (a Child Study Association was founded in 1894, growing out of the psychological teachings of the American G. Stanley Hall) impacted considerably on the thinking and policies of child welfare specialists in Britain. The Child Guidance movement of the 1920s and 1930s attempted to treat and cure, through psychiatric clinics, nervous, maladjusted and delinquent children. These and other developments in child psychology and psychiatry reflected a new understanding of childhood, a realisation that childhood mattered.³² The twentieth century had become the ‘century of the child’.³³

In the field of education a number of progressive ideas took root. In the United States, G. Stanley Hall had differentiated between the ‘scholastic’ and the ‘pedocentric’ school. In the former the needs of the institution came first; in the latter, the needs of the child were prioritised and the stages of child development determined the content and format of teaching.³⁴ Hall taught that the guardians of the young should defend ‘the happiness of the rights of children’ and should understand that ‘there is nothing else so worthy of love, reverence, and service as the body and soul of the growing child’.³⁵ Progressive education theory placed the child at the centre of the education process. It was advocated that schools should provide an environment in which individuals could be shareholders in determining and achieving common learning goals. All pupils would undertake experiential education – learning by doing – which tapped into a child’s natural curiosity and energy. Education was to be a process in which the child learned how to solve problems and did not simply learn by rote. Education through play and self-expression, through dance for example, was encouraged.³⁶ The Montessori method, developed by Maria Montessori in the opening decade of the twentieth century emphasised spontaneous activity, freedom of choice of activities and self-development through movement. This pedagogy was deeply dependent on a sensitively ‘prepared environment’: surroundings needed to be attractive and well-decorated, with furniture and fittings appropriate to the ages and needs of children.³⁷ Such thinking was in the tradition of the Froebelian method developed in the nineteenth century, for which Berwick Sayers showed great sympathy.

³⁰ ‘Children of the state’ is the title to Chapter XXI, pp. 638-656, of Pinchbeck and Hewitt, *Ibid.*

³¹ A. Davin, *Growing up poor: home, school and street in London 1870-1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), p. 153.

³² H. Hendrick, ‘Constructions and reconstructions of British childhood: an interpretive survey, 1800 to the present’, in A. James and A. Prout (eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood* (London: Routledge Falmer, 1997), pp. 47-49, 51-53.

³³ J. Clarke, ‘Histories of childhood’, in D. Wyse, *Childhood studies: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 10-11.

³⁴ As explained by A. Van Slyck, *Free to all: Carnegie libraries and American Culture 1890-1920* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), pp. 179-180.

³⁵ G.S. Hall, ‘The ideal school as based on child study’, *Forum* [New York], Vol. 32 (September 1901), p. 39.

³⁶ J.F. Soltis, ‘Dewey, pragmatism and education’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Education*, 2nd edition, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Elsevier, 1994), pp. 1520-1524.

³⁷ C. Gustafsson, ‘Montessori and education’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Education*, 2nd edition, Vol. 7 (Oxford: Elsevier, 1994), pp. 3912-3914.

The expanding interest in child psychology and welfare appeared to infiltrate the thinking of some librarians. The notion that by the early-twentieth century children had begun to ‘matter’, is illustrated in the growing number of writings on children’s libraries. An early major contribution was Sayers’ *The Children’s Library* (1911).³⁸ Sayers observed that: ‘More recently it has been found that the demands of the young readers require a more special treatment’.³⁹ He advised specialised training, for it was ‘essential that the librarian should be so far acquainted with psychology as to appreciate the mental processes of the child’; and the best training preliminary to the technical (librarianship) training, he believed, was the Froebelian method.⁴⁰ This method, observed a contemporary of Sayers, William Benson Thorne, in 1918, ‘insisted on the need for drawing out the individual characteristics of each child, and relied on demonstration with practical objects and story telling’.⁴¹ Those working with children, said Sayers, should become acquainted with their mental processes via the Froebelian method because of its power of understanding the imperfectly articulated conceptions of children’.⁴² Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), founder of the ‘kindergarten’, believed children best developed through creative self-activity. Derived from his idealist belief, similar to that held by Stanley Jast, that the universe was an organism to which all other lesser organisms belonged, Froebel taught that the child was innately good and to realise its potential its development had to be natural not prescriptive or interfering. The Froebel method emphasised free play, singing, group work, nature study, dance, outdoor activities and storytelling (the latter was not a feature of elementary schooling at the time).⁴³

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which new ideas on education and child psychology influenced librarians and library designers and planners of the day. What is evident, however, is the similarities that existed between the discourses of educationalists and child psychologists and those concerned with providing children’s libraries, including their architectural treatment. After the war Sayers inaugurated a children’s department at Croydon, which he described lovingly in his *Manual of Children’s Libraries* (1932). The room’s colour scheme was worked out by the Borough Engineer’s Department. The walls were decorated in glossy ‘Spanish red’, with upper layers of green and cream: an effect ‘as utterly unofficial’ as could be achieved.⁴⁴ Small bookcases and framed green baize screens were placed against the walls, and a large number of pictures were displayed. All doors and windows were curtained. A daïs (raised platform) at one end of the room, on which were placed tables and chairs, provided space for quiet reading, authorship and homework, and, of course, ‘performance’ activities; behind this daïs was a lantern screen which was covered with a velvet curtain when not in use (the daïs became a common sight in later children’s rooms). Reference books were placed proximate to the daïs. The centre of the room was filled with tables with an ample six-foot gangway between them. Tables could be folded away to allow the room to become a

³⁸ Sayers, *The children’s library*, op. cit.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 73-74.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 196, 198.

⁴¹ W.B. Thorne, ‘Memorandum on Children’s librarians’, Library Association Library Development Committee (8 March 1918), Library Association Archives.

⁴² Sayers, *The children’s library*, op. cit., pp. 198.

⁴³ J. Johansson, ‘Froebel and education’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Education*, 2nd edition, Vol. 4 (Oxford: Elsevier, 1994), pp. 2385-2388.

⁴⁴ Librarians and designers, as at Croydon, began think hard about the colour format of the children’s accommodation. Sayers, *A manual of children’s libraries*, op. cit., p. 115, noted that in America one librarian suggested ‘a cream-coloured wall, furniture finished in pearly grey and a large bowl of orange or deep blue placed conspicuously somewhere in the room to lend a bright note of colour’.

lecture or ‘performance’ space.⁴⁵ This was a place where children could not just come to read and be safe but to express themselves and engage in *constructive play*.

In 1932 Sayers’ *Manual* carried an idealised version of the children’s room (originally published in 1924 in Gwendolen Rees’ *Libraries for Children*).⁴⁶ **(Figure 2)** It was a place in which children were in harmony with their surroundings. The décor was bright and lively and, above all, homely. The windows were curtained and the walls potted with pictures. A cosy fireplace and adjacent inglenook seating conveyed an impression of safety. Furniture was of a suitable size and appropriate to needs: tables for communal study and use of encyclopedic tomes and bureaux for private study, perhaps homework. The relaxation experienced by the child was replicated in an easy relationship with the librarian over an unimposing desk. It might be suggested that this idealised place was conceptualised to a large degree as a feminised space, in keeping with the contemporary discourse among librarians that women were best suited to work with children. It was not possible to replicate such an idealised image universally, or even perhaps widely, but some libraries did approach the ideal, the children’s room at Croydon Central Library in the 1930s being a close example. In Manchester Jast’s young people’s reading rooms set a new standard by categorically rejecting the schoolroom ambience and making use of flowers, pictures and low bookcases to soften the look.⁴⁷ Such environments had become not just surrogate homes for children – mere safe havens and shelters – but ‘comfortable’ homes away from home, evocative of *middle-class domesticity*.

The practice of grafting the adult pattern of physical arrangements in the reading-room onto children’s reading-rooms came under pressure from a new child-centred – or ‘pedocentric’, to use G. Stanley Hall’s term – approach. The over-riding consideration was to provide a home-like setting. Circular tables, which had begun to appear in children’s rooms just before the First World War and now became much more common, mimicked the convivial family meal-time circle. Evocative of safety and warmth, the fireplace became the focal point of the children’s room. Space was de-cluttered, encouraging greater freedom of movement and expression in a place where, henceforth, as Van Slyck notes in respect of American libraries, children would be allowed, within reason, to ‘tumble about’⁴⁸ (although in 1945 it was gleefully noted that children in the public library at Maghall ‘now *use* [original emphasis] the library instead of just grabbing a book, sliding around on the linoleum and being put outside’).⁴⁹ Berwick Sayers believed that ‘it is well to have small separate writing-desks, or tables with divisions so arranged as to give each child as much privacy as possible. The chairs or seats should not be school forms, but should be comfortable, with backs to them’.⁵⁰ Due to the fatigue as well as the noisy shuffling involved, children should not be forced to stand at reading slopes in the image of their adult counterparts.⁵¹ However, at one of Nottingham’s branches, as late as 1927, reading stands were provided so that children might ‘emulate their elders in the adjacent newsroom’.⁵²

⁴⁵ Sayers, *A manual of children’s libraries*, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

⁴⁶ G. Rees, *Libraries for Children* (London: Grafton, 1924).

⁴⁷ T. Kelly, *Books for the people: an illustrated history of the British public library* (London: Deutsch, 1977), 150. The rooms are described in Jast, *The child as reader*, op. cit., pp. 25-40.

⁴⁸ Van Slyck, *Free to all*, op. cit., p. 186.

⁴⁹ ‘Children’s book week held at Maghall’, *Library Association Record*, Vol. 47 (1945), p. 45.

⁵⁰ Sayers, *The children’s library*, op. cit., p. 100

⁵¹ Sayers, *The children’s library*, op. cit., p. 111.

⁵² Briscoe, *Library planning* (London: Grafton, 1927), p. 135.

Nonetheless, by this time Nottingham's Walter Briscoe was able to argue with increasing support that 'future planning must be to cater for the requirements of the children first, and let adults take second place'.⁵³ The juvenile room at the Withington Public Library, Manchester, opened in 1927, was proudly described by the authorities as 'one of the most attractive departments of the library', and had a floor space equal to that of the main reading room.⁵⁴ Opened in the same year, the pleasant children's room at Nottingham's Southern Branch Library contained

no desk-like reading tables, reminiscent of the schoolroom, but round tables with comfortable chairs suggestive of a children's club. Around the room are reading slopes, of a sit-to height, on which are more children's magazines and literature; and occasional settees, constructed for two, relieve the orthodoxy.⁵⁵

At the Cross Gates (Percival Leigh) Public Library, Leeds in 1939 an interesting feature provided in the centre of the children's room was an electric fire surrounded by circular settees, a space principally designed for story-telling but also available for individual readers to use (reading circles and corners constructed by various kinds of furniture were a fairly common sight in inter-war children's room and were in many respects antecedents of the 'comfort zones' which were to appear later in the century and which are discussed below).⁵⁶ A further attractive feature of the room was a colourful mural depicting scenes from children's classics and inhabitants of various countries grouped around a map of the world. Pictures were said to inspire children, to give them an appreciation of art and provide an air of domesticity in the room. They could also convey messages, depending on the allegory of their content, of such things as courage, patriotism and the importance of reading and learning.⁵⁷ The children's department in the new Hillsborough Public Library, Sheffield (1929) was adorned by a large mural frieze painted by students from the local School of Art. In 1936 in the children's room at Scarborough Public Library four murals showing scenes from children's literature were painted by Scarborough-born artist Kenneth Rowntree.

The trend, therefore, was towards openness, comfort, intimacy and an elevation of the children's tastes. At Sheepscar Branch Library, Leeds the junior room, as well as the adult lending library, were designed with 'exceedingly attractive' low windows which were said to provide a 'publicity value' and serve 'to break up the monotonous run of shelving which mars the aesthetic appeal of so many library interiors'.⁵⁸ Planners began to question the 'obsession with the fetish of supervision' in children's rooms.⁵⁹ The changing approach to children's library design reflected a growing trust in the child reader.

1945-1980: Open Plan and Modern Office

After the Second World War children libraries continued to be developed as a major aspect of public library provision, which itself benefited considerably from the growth of a welfare state and, once the austerity years of the post-war years had passed, of public expenditure

⁵³ Ibid., p. 138.

⁵⁴ City of Manchester Public Libraries, *A note on the new building of the Withington Public Library* (1927).

⁵⁵ Briscoe, *Library planning*, op. cit., p. 135.

⁵⁶ Leeds Libraries and Arts Committee, *Official opening of the Percival Leigh [Cross Gates] Public Library* (1939); 'A new library at Cross Gates, Leeds', *National Builder*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (January 1940), 155; and J.T. Gillet, 'Percival Leigh Branch Library, Cross Gates, Leeds', *Library Association Record* (February 1940), 41.

⁵⁷ Briscoe, *Library planning*, op. cit., p. 136.

⁵⁸ J.T. Gillet, 'Sheepscar Branch Library, Leeds', *Library Association Record* (August 1938), p. 413.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

also. In 1947 the Association of Children's Librarians, formed a decade earlier, officially joined the Library Association (working alongside a Youth Libraries Section) and by 1959 boasted a thousand members.⁶⁰ In the mid-1950s a shortage of trained children's librarians was identified and some training put in place to remedy the problem.⁶¹

It is true that in the immediate post-war period a whiff of Victorianism could still be found in the views of the children's library held by some: in 1951 the librarian Charles Elliot wrote of the 'ephemeral atrocities that shame the shelves of many juvenile libraries'.⁶² Librarians often viewed the children's library as a cultural battlefield where the tide of corrosive popular culture – whether in the form of opiate literature, comic books, television or library-based puppet shows – could be turned back.⁶³ Librarian identified a link between the horror comic and juvenile delinquency.⁶⁴ 'Let the libraries introduce the children to the book before they become addicts of the comic strip', wrote one librarian in 1952.⁶⁵ However, from the 1960s onwards a more liberal and constructive tone to children's library work, building on the advances of the 1920s and 1930s, became apparent: in 1963, for example, the President of the Scottish School Libraries Association argued that comics had 'done far more good than harm'.⁶⁶ With the assistance of a new Library Association syllabus and the introduction of two-year training courses in library schools, both encouraging specialisation in professional preparation, a thoroughly 'professional approach', as Ellis put it, emerged.⁶⁷ Young children, those under 7 or 8, were more actively encouraged. The growing interest in services to children was seen elsewhere too, as reflected in the establishment in 1955 of the IFLA Committee on Library Work with Children and Young People.

Until the late 1950s the economic climate did not allow the resumption of public library construction, but thereafter, until the mid-1970s, investment in the physical infrastructure of the public library mushroomed. The growing openness towards the child reader that was evident before 1939 continued after the war and found expression in a move towards open planning in architecture, including design for the home, a sphere from which the children's library had drawn a good deal of its design inspiration between the wars. The shift towards open plan marked a significant break in the design history of the children's library, and so some discussion of its origins and early development is appropriate at this juncture.

Open plan design (sometimes called 'free plan' or 'fluid plan') was a new vision of architectural space born at the beginning of the twentieth century, though with roots also in the late-nineteenth-century vogue for Japanese design connected with the Arts-and-Crafts Movement. It was made possible by new construction techniques (especially reinforced concrete) that eliminated the need for interior load-bearing walls. Beyond technology, the

⁶⁰ Ellis, *Library services for young people*, op. cit., p. 98

⁶¹ J. Butler, 'Survey of public library services for children', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 57 (1955), p. 450-451. In 1955 a six-week full-time course on library work for young people was provided by the North-Western Polytechnic in London, as advertised in the *Library Association Record*, Vol. 57 (1955), p. 322.

⁶² C.A. Elliott, *Library publicity and service* (London: Grafton, 1951), p. 63.

⁶³ J.D. Reynolds, *Library buildings, 1965* (London: Library Association, 1966), p. 7 carries a photograph of children reading poetry in the public library in Kirkby, Liverpool. In a patronising fashion the photograph's caption tells us that 'the community is rough and tough, but children read poetry in Kirkby', implying that children's consumption of 'traditional' literature, even in a 'rough and tough area', was what librarians mostly wished to see.

⁶⁴ F. Wertham, 'Seduction of the innocent', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 57 (1955), p. 170.

⁶⁵ S. Uniechowska, 'Libraries and the pre-school child', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 54 (1952), p. 365.

⁶⁶ 'Gobbledegook – or "pleasant conceit"', *Liaison: The News-Sheet of the Library Association* (August 1963), p. 53.

⁶⁷ Ellis, *Library services for young people*, pp. 119-167.

open plan was furthered, as Adi Shamir Zion has argued, by parallel developments in science and culture – from Freud’s ‘fluid scape’ of the unconscious mind and Einstein’s new way of looking at the time-space relationship, to the free and natural choreography of the American dancer Isadora Duncan and the free expression of Picasso’s cubist shapes. Architects began to break free from traditional and spatial constraints. This was most visibly seen in the realm of house design. The open plan was a critical ingredient in Frank Lloyd Wright’s prairie houses (e.g. the Robie House, 1910). The elimination of self-contained rooms was also a feature of Le Corbusier’s (e.g. Villa Savoye, 1929), a house hollowed out in every direction, representing what he and contemporaries such as Mies van der Rohe (e.g. Tugendhat House, Brno, 1928-30) termed ‘le plan libre’. Free-flowing floor plans were later combined with large expanses of glass wall that at once replaced windows and blurred the distinction between inside and outside.⁶⁸ Large expanses of glass could also mitigate the smallness of a house, serving to deliver compactness with the illusion of spaciousness.⁶⁹ After the Second World War, open plan also became a feature of the large office block. Post-war modernism saw the emergence of the ‘open office’ with floor space broken up by fabric-covered screens, desks, filing cabinets, plants and other ‘barrier’ devices. Layout was defined by traffic flow rather than rigidly defined work hierarchies.⁷⁰

In the school context, open plan was pioneered by Francis O’Neill, head teacher of Prestolee School, Lancashire, between 1918 and 1953. Francis believed children learnt by doing (his school became known as the ‘learn by doing school’) and did so at their own individual pace (self-generated learning). The critical design innovation he implemented was the conversion of the assembly hall into an open plan classroom. The room was accessible to pupils of all ages. Screens and other furniture provided necessary and flexible zoning and long tables were grouped together to provide large flat areas for activities in small groups. This arrangement flew in the face of half a century of school design, articulated most loudly by E.R. Robson and his work for the London School Board, which organised age-related classrooms around an assembly hall, a system which had first been developed in Prussia and which contradicted starkly the older method of simultaneous teaching of all ages in one large space.⁷¹ In some respects, therefore, the O’Neill formula was a throwback to the first half of the nineteenth century and earlier; as was the trend in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in primary education, towards open-plan schools which were characterised by a large floor-plate to enhance flexibility; open classrooms; movable furnishings used as class partitions; and spatial continuity between classroom and circulation space.⁷²

Open-plan learning was further encouraged, in Britain and elsewhere, by the example of the infant-toddler centres and pre-schools of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, inspired by the childcare specialist Loris Malaguzzi. The Reggio Emilia programme of early childhood education, started in 1945, went on to gain an international reputation. The Reggio Emilia approach recognises the environment as the ‘third teacher’ - parents and carers being the first two. Great attention is given to the look and feel of the early-years setting. Space is organised for small and large group projects and small intimate spaces for one, two or three children. Displays are at both adult and children’s eye level and the furniture is designed to

⁶⁸ A.S. Zion, *Open house: unbound space and the modern dwelling* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2002).

⁶⁹ S. Isenstadt, *The modern American house: spaciousness and middle-class identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 175.

⁷⁰ A. Massey, *Interior design in the twentieth century*, 2nd edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 146.

⁷¹ M. Dudek, *Schools and kindergartens: a design manual* (Basel and Boston: Birkhäuser, 2008), pp. 10-15.

⁷² A. Van Slyck, ‘School’, in *Encyclopedia of 20th-century architecture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1181.

be multifunctional. Reggio settings make marked use of natural and artificial light, with floor to ceiling windows and pale walls that off set the colourful artwork done by the children. An important design feature of the Reggio Emilia institutions was internal central square, or piazza. This was a public meeting place for the school conceptualised in the tradition of the outdoor town piazza.⁷³

Given the strong twentieth-century evolutionary history of the open plan in architecture – whether in the home or the office – it is not surprising to see the adoption of open plan design in the library setting coinciding with the rampant design modernism of the 1950s and 1960s. The take-up of open plan was especially enthusiastic in Scandinavia where it was believed, as the Danish librarian Sven Plovgaard explained on a visit to Britain in 1960, that sharply defined departments gave an impression of an institution-like library (though in very large libraries some departmentalisation was inevitable); whereas open interiors made for an informal, flexible and efficient plan, any separate spacing needed being manufactured by careful arrangement of furniture and various moveable barriers.⁷⁴ When a new central library for Birmingham was being planned in the 1960s, the open-plan system was advocated because it was thought that it would ‘give the building a longer useful life by making it possible to adapt and re-distribute space to meet changes in requirements and activities as the years go by.’⁷⁵

The strengthening of the open-plan philosophy after the Second World War in the context of the home was driven by an enthusiasm for technological advances as well as a poetic desire on the part of society to break loose from an oppressive era of depression and war. It also symbolised a concern for the welfare of children and a desire to give them greater freedom.⁷⁶ Arguably, this impulse leached over into the planning of children’s libraries. Open plan buildings allowed children’s library services to become more integrated into the general work and image of the library; and in the 1960s and 1970s it became extremely common. In 1960, in the renovated Ormeau Road Branch Library in Belfast, one-third of the space was given over to the children’s accommodation but there was no physical partition between the area used by children and that used by adults (though the children’s section was demarcated by a lower ceiling).⁷⁷ By 1965, small libraries at Nine Elms (South-West London), Mountsorrel (Leicestershire) and Selsey (West Sussex) had been designed to provide a free flow of space between children’s and adults’ sections, although there were certainly continuing examples of entirely separate accommodation also (as at the Brookhill Road Library, East Barnet where enclosed junior reference and lending rooms were placed on the first floor, separate from the adult reference section, also of the first floor, and the adult lending section downstairs; and at Hornsey Central Library, which not only had a separate room for juniors but also a separate entrance, representing a throwback to the Victorian era).⁷⁸ ‘Skilful designing’, gave children at Eastbourne’s new central library ‘a distinct library of their own but [one] which is not

⁷³ Dudek, *Schools and kindergartens*, op. cit., pp. 10-15.

⁷⁴ S. Plovgaard, ‘Building layout in Denmark’, in K.M. Newbury (ed.), *Design in the library* (Penge, London: The Library Association London and Home Counties Branch, 1960), pp. 20-21.

⁷⁵ ‘£2¼ million open-plan project for Birmingham’s new central’, *Liaison: News-Sheet of the Library Association* (February 1963), p. 10.

⁷⁶ C.A. Pearson (ed.), *Modern American houses: fifty years of design in the ‘Architectural Record’*, 2nd edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams and the Architectural Record, 2005), p. 15.

⁷⁷ I.A. Crawley, Belfast: Ormeau Road Branch, *Library Association Record*, Vol. 62 (1960), p. 346.

⁷⁸ See plans or photographs of these libraries in the *Library Association Record*, Vol. 66 (1964), pp. 541, 567, 568, 572; and Reynolds, *Library buildings, 1965*, op. cit., p. 45

actually separated from the main library'; the transition was said to have been 'effected naturally and with the minimum of break'.⁷⁹

The lowering of barriers between adult and child accommodation was not appropriate everywhere. In Pimlico, in London's Westminster district, a stand-alone children's library was opened in 1960 (due to the heavy road traffic and the large number of non-residential areas in Westminster the best place for an adult service was not always the best place for a children's service).⁸⁰ The library occupied two shop units at the base of a seven-storey block of flats on the edge of the Churchill Gardens Housing Estate. The library's internal design was uncompromisingly modern. A ceiling of deal 'tongue and grooved' boards treated with a plastic matt sealer was complemented by flooring in polished maple and plastered walls painted blue and light grey. All unpainted wooden fixtures and fittings were in West African hardwood. To avoid clutter, no free-standing bookcases were supplied, the two display cases that occupied floor space being fitted with wheels to facilitate movement. The staff counter was of 'a novel light design in metal and glass'. The L-shaped room was lit on its two inner sides by natural light from a glass-screened courtyard which served as an outdoor reading room in the summer months. Photographs of the room reveal a highly contemporary interior design, with a modernist simplicity typical of the time. From the photographic evidence alone, however, one cannot tell that the room was the site of a children's library service. Its appearance is more like that of the modern office. Indeed, a great many children's libraries of the 1960s appear to take their cue from the office environment, providing an abundance workmanlike tables alongside more comfortable furniture.⁸¹

The instigator of the Pimlico Children's Library was Lionel McColvin, Librarian of Westminster and the leading professional librarian of his day. His thoughts on children's libraries were extensively publicised in his book *Libraries for Children* (1961), the front cover of which carried a photograph of the Pimlico library. (**Figure 3**) Drawing on the practices of his Victorian professional forebears, he advised that the children's room should be made to look as much like the adult library as possible, only 'cosier and more opulent';⁸² or as he put it on another occasion, the children's department should be a 'shade smarter than the others'.⁸³ He urged that children's libraries should avoid the schoolroom look and protested that too many still looked out-dated, 'bare and heavy, with clumsy old-fashioned furniture and the type of decoration which might be appropriate to a public lavatory or a railway station' and perhaps scarred by 'over-powering murals' and 'silly mock ingle-nooks'.⁸⁴ In design terms as in many other aspects of library policy and provision, McColvin was an authentic moderniser. Following a visit to Finland in 1957 he exclaimed that: 'They are ahead of us'; Britain needed to start re-building and improving its libraries, 'or we will soon be living in the past', he warned.⁸⁵

For McColvin, as for many of his contemporaries, children's libraries needed to embrace the modernist revolution in design, even if that meant a synchronisation with adult accommodation and the adoption of a ubiquitous, minimalist style. The library literature of

⁷⁹ 'Eastbourne's new Central Library', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 66 (1964), p. 520.

⁸⁰ The description that flows is in L.R. McColvin, 'Pimlico Children's Library', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 62 (1960), pp. 367-368.

⁸¹ The term 'workmanlike tables' was used in connection with the children's reference collection at Hornsey Public Library in the mid-1960s: see, Reynolds, *Library buildings, 1965*, op. cit., p. 44.

⁸² L.R. McColvin, *Libraries for children* (London: Phoenix House, 1961), p. 120.

⁸³ L.R. McColvin, *British libraries* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. for the British Council, 1946), p. 23.

⁸⁴ McColvin, *Libraries for children*, op. cit., p. 121.

⁸⁵ L.R. McColvin, 'A visit to Finland', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 59 (1957), p. 296.

the 1960s is replete with images of children's libraries subjected to the modernist design ethos of the day. In 1964 at Brentford and Chiswick Central library, the children's room was dramatically transformed from a dull, cluttered pre-war space into a brightly lit, spacious facility sporting sleek Scandinavian furniture.⁸⁶ At times, the most striking feature of the modernist children's library appeared to be its sparseness, as evident in the young reader's corner in Feltham Public Library.⁸⁷

After 1980: Domestic 'Comfort Zone' and Pop Culture Playground

Against a backdrop of economic turbulence and an associated growth of political radicalism, in the 1970s and 1980s a new mode of public library service emerged and spread in Britain: community librarianship.⁸⁸ Its aim, not shared by the entire library community it has to be said, was to prioritise the 'disadvantaged' partly by de-institutionalising the public library and moving services outside the walls of the library and into the community. By re-locating deep into the community, it was argued, librarians could open up libraries and make them 'community catalysts'.⁸⁹ This new focus entailed the targeting of specific client groups, a strategy that proved beneficial to users and potential users of the children's library. The title of Janet Hill's 1973 book on children's library services, *Children are People: the Librarian in the Community*,⁹⁰ reflected a new determination to improve services by rationally identifying the reading, cultural and information needs of the young and recognising that these needs were substantially different from those of adult users.

One of the legacies of this new way of looking at children's provision was the appearance in places of strategies and separate spaces for teenagers,⁹¹ a trend underpinned by the inexorable rise of 'youth culture', which was sustained not only by the widening gap between the end of childhood and the beginning of adult hood, but also by a distinctive pattern of peer-group leisure consumption and a concern with style.⁹² The first dedicated teenage library had appeared in Walthamstow in the 1930s. However, little progress was made in this area until the 1980s, the problem of providing materials for teenagers often being negotiated by providing two collections for the group, one in the adult library, one in the children's library.⁹³ In the 1980s a clutch of teenage libraries appeared around Glasgow, for example: the Castlemilk Teenager Library, the Johnstone Information and Leisure Library and the Yoker Teenage Library.⁹⁴ In 1985 the Xchange teenage room was opened in Bradford Central Library in response to a growing ethnic population and rising teenage unemployment. The majority of users were in the age range 13-17, but 11% of users were in their 20s. The design

⁸⁶ P. Millard, *Modern library equipment* (London: Crosby Lockwood, 1966), pp. 41-42.

⁸⁷ Photograph in Reynolds, *Library buildings, 1965*, op. cit., p. 47.

⁸⁸ A. Black and D. Muddiman, *Understanding community librarianship: the public library in postmodern Britain* (Aldershot: Avebury Press, 1997); W. Martin, *Library services to the disadvantaged* (London: Bingley, 1975).

⁸⁹ A.M. Adams, 'How to "open" a library', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 75 (1973), pp. 152-153.

⁹⁰ J. Hill, *Children are people: the librarian in the community* (London: Hamilton, 1973).

⁹¹ L. Love, 'Teenagers and library use in Waltham Forest', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 89 (1987), pp. 81-82.

⁹² 'Youth culture', in S. Bruce and S. Yearley (eds.), *The Sage dictionary of sociology* (London: Sage, 2006).

⁹³ D. Denham, 'Public library services for children', in A. Black and P. Hoare (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland. Volume 3: 1850-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 108-109.

⁹⁴ A. Miller, 'Notes from abroad: a study tour of German libraries', *Library Association Record*, Vol. 91 (1989), p. 224.

of the library was said to be ‘upmarket and trendy, using bright and sophisticated furnishings ... aiming to create an atmosphere somewhere between a bookshop and a coffee shop’.⁹⁵

If teenage library provision was a prime concern in the 1980s, the 1990s and beyond were marked by a shift in children’s library services towards the very young, something that has impacted considerably on recent children’s library design. Over the past decade or so, the UK has developed policies for early childhood care and education. Early childhood is now high on the political agenda. Children’s services are receiving a high profile today as policymakers are concerned about social malaise, effective education and the level of reading skills for the information age. In the UK there has been a major expansion in pre-school education over the last 30 or so years. The proportion of three and four year olds enrolled in all schools in the UK in rose from 21 % in 1970-71 to 65% in 2003-04.⁹⁶ During the last decade the UK’s Labour government has viewed the way out of poverty to be through education and a high level of literacy and have committed considerable funding to targeting ‘effective’ early childhood education and care.

In the past, public library services mainly focussed on children who already knew how to read. Public libraries in the UK are now actively encouraging parents and carers of babies and very young children to join in language and literacy activities; while IFLA, in its *Guidelines for Library Services to Babies and Toddlers* (2007), has focuses on meeting the needs of families with children under three, which means, amongst other things, providing ‘an accessible, inviting, attractive, safe, non-challenging and non-threatening place to visit ... [where there are] no barriers to access, like steps without elevators, or heavy doors, or areas which might be unsafe for crawling and toddling youngsters’.⁹⁷

In 2002 a working group from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) provided an overview of library services to children and young people in a report titled *Start with the Child*. Arguing that libraries can change children’s lives, the report also praised the emergence of partnership initiatives, such as those where library authorities have worked closely with the Sure Start schemes inaugurated in 1997, the aim of which are to deliver the best start in life for every child by bringing together early-years education, childcare, health and family support. Many library authorities in Sure Start areas have succeeded in gaining funding for early-years workers, additional mobile services and for supporting Bookstart, the national programme that encourages parents and carers, partly through the distribution of free packs of books, to enjoy books and reading with their children from a very early age.

Thinking carefully about designing for early-years services generally is certainly not new,⁹⁸ but in recent years considerable energy has been expended in the area, including the library field. In Wakefield, Sure Start has funded the Sunshine Library, the first designated early-years library in the country.⁹⁹ The innovative Sunshine Library, located in a community centre on the Lupset Housing Estate, opened in 2001. Designed with the help of parents and

⁹⁵ J. Nicholson and H. Pain-Lewis, ‘The teenage library in Bradford: an evaluation of exchange’, *Journal of Librarianship*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1998), p. 206.

⁹⁶ Office of National Statistics, *Social Trends*, No. 38 (2008).

⁹⁷ IFLA, *Guidelines for library services to babies and toddlers* (2007), p. 7.

⁹⁸ Matrix and the Greater London Council Women’s Committee, *Buildings for childcare: making better buildings for the under-5s* (London, 1986).

⁹⁹ Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), *Start with the child. Report on the CILIP Working Group on Library Provision for Children and Young People* (London, 2002), p. 39.

by removing traditional barriers it became a key social space in the local area. The Sunshine Library was purpose-built to support early language development and book enjoyment among families living in a deprived community. Communities give purpose to libraries and local families were actively involved throughout the planning and development of the Sunshine Library and were consulted during the drafting of the plans. They helped to select book stock, furniture and equipment. They were involved in choosing the farmyard theme for the library interior and the 'Sunshine' name for the library.¹⁰⁰

Running alongside the concern to improve the life chances of the very young, there has also emerged a focus on the family and the need to develop policies to strengthen family life. In recent years, the image of a 'broken Britain' has gained currency. To a large degree it has done so by virtue of escalating concern – commencing as a 'fin de siècle' anxiety – about care in the family, domestic violence, lone parenting, the selfish individualism of absent fathers and the future of marriage as an institution.¹⁰¹ In response to the perception of the multiple toxic consequences of family breakdown, in 1997 the Labour Government established a 'Ministerial Group on the Family' and announced its intention to develop strategies that would increase support for family life.¹⁰² The *Every Child Matters* (2003) consultation Green Paper was part of the Government's response to the inquiry into the horrific murder, by her guardians, of Victoria Climbié and outlined plans to improve the services supporting children from all backgrounds, looking at how such a framework will be able to help those most at risk. The research programme 'The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education' (EPPE) demonstrated the importance of parents in children's early educational achievements, showing that what parents and carers do makes a real difference.¹⁰³

Recently, the library community in the UK has forcefully argued that encouraging young children and their families to access a library can provide a great foundation not only for developing early literacy but also for supporting the family as an ingredient of social stability. The importance of the family was also recognised by IFLA in its *Guidelines for Children's Library Services* published in 2003.¹⁰⁴ It is now seen as important to make information available to parents to encourage them to bring their child to the library (something which contrasts vividly with children's library use in earlier generations when, as the photographic evidence confirms, children, albeit juniors rather than infants, went to the library alone). The library is promoted as a community hub – welcoming all. Library managers are working to ensure that traditional barriers to access and use are broken down and removed. If parents and carers are relaxed and made to feel welcome this will enhance the experience for all and should lead to repeat visits to the library.

In the 1990s, the community librarianship approach described above gave way to the less contentious discourse of 'social inclusion': policies – including those in the areas of child welfare, the family, education and public libraries – that would address the social exclusion

¹⁰⁰ C. Rankin et al., *The role of the early years librarian in developing an information community: a case study of effective partnerships and early years literacy within a Sure Start project in Wakefield*. Paper presented in the conference proceedings of the Canadian Association of Information Sciences 35th Annual Conference, Montreal (2007).

¹⁰¹ J. Lewis, 'Family change and lone parents as a social problem', in M. May, R. Page and E. Brunson (eds.), *Understanding social problems: issues in social policy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 37-54.

¹⁰² Ministerial Group on the Family, *Supporting families* (November 1998).

¹⁰³ K. Sylva et al., *The effective provision of pre-school education [EPPE] Project: final Report*. London: DFES/Institute of Education, University of London, 2004.

¹⁰⁴ IFLA Children and Young Adults Section, *Guidelines for Children's Library Services* (2003).

that accompanied and reinforced poverty. In addressing social and economic deprivation, policy makers became interested in the concept of ‘social capital’, this being the construction of what one might call a ‘social infrastructure’, the building of active connections between people based on mutual understanding and trust as well as shared values and behaviours. Arising out of the social capital discourse came the suggestion that greater attention should be paid to ‘physical capital’, the very structure and nature of the places and spaces we are creating. A recent study by the market research organisation MORI has demonstrated the impact of the built environment on our quality of life, where homes, schools, doctor’s surgeries, streets and parks combine to form the ‘physical capital’ of a location.¹⁰⁵ The premise is that concerns about improving quality of life should focus more attention on the design quality of the urban fabric.¹⁰⁶

In keeping with these ideas, it has been recognised that libraries can help to build social capital by providing physical capital in the form of a safe place for people to meet, socialise and relax. One of the major developments in domestic interior design in recent years has been the idea of the *comfort zone*, reflecting our propensity for ‘cocooning’ (stay-at-home lifestyle) as a reaction to what some see as a time of social anxiety and public behaviour and morals. As part of this trend, ‘lounging’ in the home has become a style of entertainment.¹⁰⁷ The sanctuary function of the home has grown significantly, as reflected in the boast of IKEA, the giant Scandinavian retailer of high-styled, mid-priced furniture, that it isn’t simply a business but also ‘a way of life’.¹⁰⁸ Design for the home as comfort zone and sanctuary has leeches over into the design of some public spaces, such as bookstores and coffee houses. The domestic influences on public-space design has also been evident in libraries, which have sometimes been called ‘living rooms in the city’.¹⁰⁹ The children’s library has clearly absorbed these domestic design tendencies, reflecting the concern for the family, and especially young children, noted above.

However, to view of the contemporary children’s library as a ‘public sphere’ space representing a valuable stock of social capital – as ‘haven’ from a materialistic, individualistic and morally diseased society – runs counter to the way its image has been shaped by the growth of commercialised popular culture and family-focused leisure. While it is true that children’s libraries have reflected design trends in the domestic interior, they have also chimed with patterns of family consumption in popular culture, from McDonald’s to Disney. Just as in the sphere of the McDonald’s hamburger chain, food is seen as entertainment and the restaurant as play area, so also in the environment of the children’s library the semiotics of its design components has to a large degree been that of *playground* – the reading and educational equivalent of fast-food restaurant.¹¹⁰ A classic recent example of the children’s library as playground is that provided in the Aarhus Public Library, Denmark.¹¹¹ In aping the McDonald’s look, the children’s library is buying into the former’s status as a signifier of modernity, social relevance and contemporary appeal.

¹⁰⁵ Ipsos MORI, *Physical capital: liveability in 2005* (2005).

¹⁰⁶ C. Rankin and A. Brock, *Delivering the best start: a guide to early years libraries* (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), p. 58.

¹⁰⁷ S.J. Slotkis, *Foundations of interior design* (London: Lawrence King), p. 408.

¹⁰⁸ B. Torekull, *Leading by design: the IKEA story* (New York: Harper Business, 1999).

¹⁰⁹ K. Worpole, *21st century libraries: changing forms, changing futures* (CABE [Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment], April 2004), p. 12.

¹¹⁰ J.L. Kincheloe, *The sign of the burger: McDonald’s and the culture of power* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 89.

¹¹¹ http://www.e-architect.co.uk/aarhus/jpgs/aarhus_library_shl050309_4.jpg

Continuing this line of thought, and noting that the term ‘McDonaldisation’ is primarily evocative of rationalization, efficiency, Fordism and scientific management,¹¹² yet in a world rich in post-modern forms, the concept of ‘Disneyisation’ may be more appropriate for our analysis. Disney theme park culture is heterogeneous, but its central signifier is arguably the cartoon, one of the most popular and technologically interesting media advances of the twentieth century. It is not only the vivid colours and cartoon-like exaggerated details of the Disney theme parks and resorts (as seen in ‘Mickey’s Toontown or Orlando’s ‘All-Star and Pop-Century Hotels)¹¹³ that may have in places found their way into the design of the children’s library, emphasising again its function as ‘playground’; it is also the concept that is situated at the core of the Disney experience: ‘theming’. Theming – in this context the use of a design ‘narrative’ that is consciously imposed on a particular space or physical environment – is now used as a part of a strategy of differentiation by service providers as diverse as restaurants, shopping malls, zoos and museums. It may be spreading, as Bryman has noted, ‘not just because service providers and others perceive it to be a weapon for getting money out of our pockets’, but also because ‘it has a kind of multiplier or snowball effect in our consciousness: we increasingly expect the accoutrements of theming’.¹¹⁴ Maximea¹¹⁵ has argued that the design of themed museum exhibition spaces has been influenced over the last few decades by the development of commercial themed experiences. In particular, in many museums there has been an adaptation of techniques borrowed from Disney theme parks. These developments have increased public familiarity with and expectations of large scale exhibition spaces that have the capability to present technically challenging exhibitry. In addition, new children’s museums are opening everyday, again with an emphasis as much on play as on learning. There is a growing trend for museums of all types to include a children’s discovery room or a children’s gallery, a key ingredient here, and increasingly in museums generally, being the active or interactive element.

An early example of theming in libraries was that included in the Waterthorpe Community Library, Sheffield in the late-1980s. Here, in the children’s section, a story booth with sound system was constructed in the form of a medieval castle, outside the entrance to which a large plastic dragon, on which children could sit and climb, was positioned.¹¹⁶ Recent themed designs include those at public libraries in Oswestry (castle), Sutton (jungle) and Folkstone (starry sky). The Sunshine Library in Wakefield, described above, has a farmyard look. **(Figure 4)** It was designed by a company called ‘Animania!’, which designs environment for children not only in libraries but in hospitals, museums and schools also.¹¹⁷

A further prime example of the themed space in connection with the children’s library is in the exciting, interactive, re-modelled space named ‘The Trove’ in White Plains Public Library, New York, opened in 2005 (the building itself is a late-modernist structure dating from 1974). The aim of the makeover was to re-create the library for a new generation that is used to being entertained, engaged and active. The planners and designers looked at museums, playgrounds and bookstores for ideas. Planning the project took several years. The library staff decided what they wanted for the children and worked with a team of other professionals: architects, theatrical designers and fabricators and lighting specialists. The

¹¹² A. Bryman, *The Disneyization of society* (Sage Publishers, 2004), p. 13.

¹¹³ B. Dunlop, *Building a dream: the art of Disney architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1996), pp. 180-189.

¹¹⁴ Bryman, *The Disneyization of society*, p. 53.

¹¹⁵ H. Maximea, ‘Exhibition galleries’, in B. Lord and G.D. Lord (eds.), *The manual of museum exhibitions* (Altamira Press, 2002), pp. 143-195.

¹¹⁶ A. Woodfoffe, Waterthorpe: Sheffield’s new flagship community library, LAR 91.8, 1989, p. 463.

¹¹⁷ <http://www.animania.org.uk/Animania%20Libraries.html>

Trove provides different environments and experiences for children from birth through to the age of about 11. The name was suggested by a branding firm based on the idea that a ‘trove’ is a collection of valuable items discovered or found. The Trove is a multisensory, multimedia space which is entered through a jagged brick opening in the wall on the library’s second floor – a motif for the traditional library blown apart! The Compass is the focal point of The Trove and serves a number of purposes – information, reference, assistance with circulation and printing. Each of the environments in The Trove is very different. The areas closest to the opening are for older children while areas for younger children are deeper inside the complex where it is more contained and intimate.

Themed, fantasy design typifies the tendency towards post-modern hyper-reality, countering the rationalism and realism of the modern. This is not to say, however, that there has been a complete break with the modernism that delivered the open-plan, office-like children’s library of earlier decades. Modernism lives on in interior design in terms of the high-tech or industrial feel, incorporating such elements as modern technology, factory-style flooring and steel scaffolding, staircases, pillars and roof girders – the type of look one can perhaps find references to in the Idea Stores of East London, libraries re-branded as such by the Borough of Tower Hamlets.¹¹⁸ while modernist minimalism is now re-packaged as Chinese ‘Feng Shui’ – the organisation of interior spaces around Zen principles.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

The public children’s library in Britain is little over a century old. During that time its design is something in which librarians have taken a keen and persistent interest. The history of children’s library design is marked by a four identifiable phases. As a new cultural phenomenon with no architectural precedent to follow, children’s libraries before the First World War not surprisingly drew on the design format of the schoolroom, with its ordered rows of forward-facing desks, tables and chairs and its disciplined, sterile ambience. This ‘school-shelter’ format corresponded to early motives behind children’s library provision centred on the need to safeguard the moral fibre of the nation’s young, to rescue children from the degradation of the streets and to build a healthy population that could help strengthen Britain economically and imperially.

The design of the children’s library after 1918 mirrors an increasingly liberal approach to children’s library provision, contrasting with the stereotype of control and repression attached to pre-modern provision. As attitudes to childhood changed and as children began to receive greater attention from child welfare experts and greater protection from the state (something which had begun to happen before the war), the formal, sombre ambience of the children’s room began to give way to a brighter, domestic setting: the middle-class home. The inter-war period saw heightened levels of comfort in the children’s library (although by no means everywhere, it should be emphasised). There was also an increase in the variety of decorative and spatial devices – from curtained windows and bright paintings, to inglenooks, work tables and raised performance platforms – which emphasised the role of the children’s library as a place of relaxed free expression and constructive play.

¹¹⁸ <http://www.ideastore.co.uk/>

¹¹⁹ A. Massey, *Interior design in the twentieth century*, 2nd edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 168.

Once economic recovery allowed the resumption of library construction, the post-Second World War decades witnessed a proliferation of open-plan modernist designs, the roots of which can be traced back to earlier in the twentieth century, to the evolution and influence of Scandinavian design and to developments in the design of the American house. In accordance with the universal spirit of modernism, adult and children's library's became more alike in their design: office-like – even space-age – efficiency replaced cosy domesticity.

Over the past generation, as increasing anxiety has been focused on the trajectory of the family in the fractured post-modern age. As increasing importance has consequently laid on nurturing and on early-years education, children's library design has in many ways reflected the cocooned 'comfort zone' of the domestic haven, itself the focus of a considerable commercialisation under the marketing influence of retail giants like IKEA and a vibrant culture of home improvement. In addition, as society experienced a marked strengthening of consumer and popular culture, the children's library took on the image of the playground, designs becoming more playful, vivid and hi-tech, the use of colour and the choice of furniture and fittings aping the McDonaldisation and Disneyisation of family-based mass leisure and entertainment.

Finally, taking an overview of the series of themes and periods we have identified, certain continuities and discontinuities present themselves. The early shelter function of the children's library can be seen today in its role as a cocooned 'comfort zone'. The original schoolroom image, though still visible in the 1920s and 1930s, and even detectable in the era of the children's library as 'modern office' in the 1960s, has now diminished. The open plan of post-war modernism was, naturally, in keeping with contemporary developments in office design, although it also reflected the emergence of the open-plan house, re-enacting the link of the children's library with the domestic sphere. Design for constructive play in the inter-war period has undergone a metamorphosis and has re-emerged in the early-twentieth century in the form of the children's library as playground. Heavy references to the domestic environment in the 1920s and 1930s has recently re-appeared under the guise of the high-styled IKEA-like environments for young library users; while, in keeping with the trend towards cocooning, the open-plan, free-flow interface with adult sections seems to have lost some of its appeal. But what remains constant is the important place of the children's library and its design in public library provision, in Britain and elsewhere.

Figure 1. Juvenile Reading Rooms, Kingston District Library, Glasgow (opened 1904). Source: *Descriptive Handbook of the Glasgow Corporation Public Libraries* (1907).



Figure 2. The ideal children's library. Source: Gwendolyn Rees, *Libraries for Children* (1924), reprinted in W.B.C. Sayers, *A Manual of Children's Libraries* (1924).



Figure 3. Source: Lionel McColvin, *Libraries for Children* (1961).

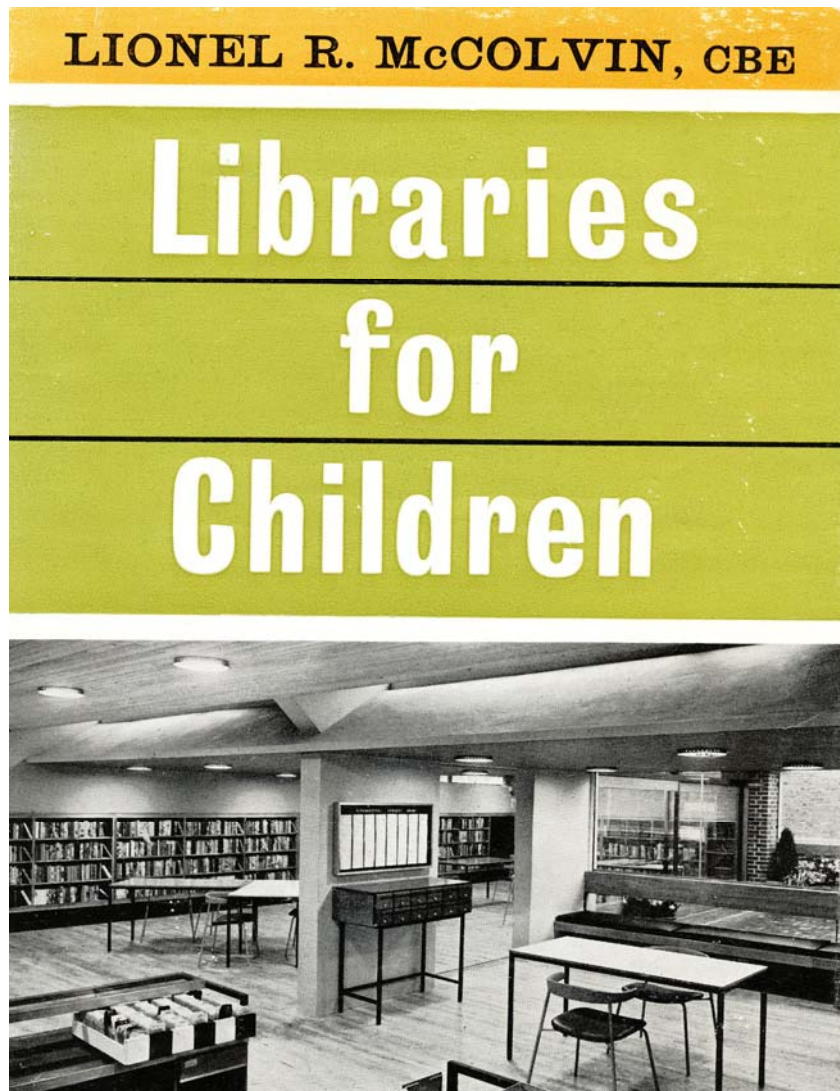


Figure 4. The Sunshine Library, Wakefield. Source: Carolynn Rankin

