



"What and why libraries?" - looking at what libraries might look like and why we still need them now and into the future

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Abstract:

Public libraries are threatened. At least we can feel so when we look at the changing surrounding in which more and more information is available on the net and people can download music, films and even books. In this paper I do not concentrate on the threats, however. With some new library models which I see as progressive I try to find out some more general conclusions for the future of libraries. My conclusions are among other things: look at people's lives not at your services, be customer-oriented instead of being system-oriented, realize that the focus of library service is moving from transactions to relations, emphasize that libraries are social places and living organisms. Realize that we are facing a paradigm shift which confuses both our staff and our users. But if we as librarians are able to rethink, remodel and renew the libraries, so believe it or not I would even say that libraries can head for The Golden Age in their history.

Public libraries are threatened. At least we feel so when we are reading about the reduced budgets and the decreasing use of libraries. We also easily get the same feeling when we hear the question: do we still need libraries when all the information is available on the net and people can download music, films and even books?

And really, we all can name a long list of different phenomena which have changed and will change the environment in which public libraries work: how e-book business is growing, how music is downloaded, how the mobile phone has become "the all around device", how social media influences our behavior, how etc. These and all the other matters do not hit only libraries but the whole society, so we are not the only ones who face the same challenges.

That is the reason I want to start my paper from the capabilities and ambitions and not the threats, deficits or declines in the library field. I describe some successful new models and explain what is so special about them. Through these examples I also try to find out some more general conclusions for the future of libraries. Intentionally I have limited my examples to physical libraries.

My examples of course show my narrow geographical perspective; they all come from Europe. However, I encourage everyone to start thinking which libraries or activities you would collect to this kind of list! I am sure that the global library world is full of good models which we should list somewhere to encourage us to believe in the future of libraries.

Idea Stores in London

My first example is Idea Stores from London, perhaps a well-known case for everyone. The interesting aspect about Idea Stores is that in less than 10 year their strategy has radically transformed the performance of library and information services in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, moving them from being among the worst in London to among the top performing in the country. *“Idea Stores were designed to deliver ‘in a way that captured the best traditions of the library movement and education sector but present them in an exciting way – one that draws in new users and retains existing users.”* (1)

And how did they do it? They made a large consultation exercise and asked what residents wanted from the Idea Stores. They made a significant service remodelling and a capital investment led to the opening of the first Idea Store in 2002 in Bow. Today the ideology of Idea Stores is moving outside Tower Hamlets to other boroughs.

What is so special with Idea Stores? There are several items. They totally renewed the old model of existing libraries in Tower Hamlets. They closed some of the old Carnegie libraries, moved them to the places where people already were, changed the name of libraries as the word “library” was either unknown for the inhabitants, (many of them immigrants from Asia) or had a negative connotation.

The new library was not born while the library as an institution wanted to improve services. It was born from the remodeling that was based on the needs of the inhabitants and the community. *“The provision of high quality, accessible library and information service facilities in the Borough will contribute significantly to the achievement of this vision, notably by supporting improvements in outcomes relating to learning, community cohesion, health, economic and social well-being.”*

These are the three pillars that everything is based on:
Supporting and promoting reading and reader development
Supporting formal and informal learning
Providing access to and support for ICT services

Because the starting point was far from a working ideal, the change was radical and was fairly easy to carry out as no one missed or wanted to return to the earlier model.

The Darling Library in Malmö, Sweden

My second exemplary comes from Malmö, where the city library has created a new strategy for 2009-2012 “The Darling Library – your life, your dreams, your library”. (2) The basis of the strategy is that the city library wants to bring about a paradigm shift and change their own and others’ ingrained conception of the library. In implementing the strategy they started a process which challenges the existing idea of the library and creates an ultramodern center of culture and knowledge which will be “The Talk of the Town both in Malmö and throughout the world!”

The paradox was that the discussion about what was to be the desired vision began earlier, and it almost smashed the whole process before it ever even started. The discussion was passionate both inside and outside the library.

The special aspect with the Darling Library strategy is connected with the sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s idea about “The Great Good Place”: the third place between home and job, a place where people enjoy being. Even if Oldenburg has never connected libraries to his model, the librarians have realized that libraries are far better as third places than restaurants, cafes, barbershops and other places which Oldenburg names. All this is on the condition that libraries move to the direction that they are doing in Malmö.

According to Malmö’s strategy the library has to have a stage where something happens regularly. But that is not enough. In fact all the library premises are a stage full of surprises. The library has to try to stage new spatial contexts, media, workshops, meeting, visitors, staff and other partners. In the library you have to feel that you are at home but at the same time being somewhere else, too. Here you should be able to use all your senses. In my eyes this kind of library also opens the possibility of serendipity for the customer.

More space is created by taking away parts of the collections. Personal relationships are the key to the success. The participation of users must be strengthening as they are experts, co-producers, and participants in the creative process.

This kind of library needs new staffing. In Malmö the recruitment of new teams was open to everyone. It meant that it was not limited to the librarians, but included other groups. Librarians were not hired, however, because they could not see the possibilities of this new thinking.

Library 10 and Meetingpoint@lasipalatsi in Helsinki

The story of Library 10 goes back to 1994 when Helsinki City Library opened one of the first Internet libraries in the world. This library was called the Cable Book Library because it was situated in the old Nokia cable factory. This library it routinely been transforming all the time.

The first phase of the development was to provide internet access for the customers. At that time it was an innovation which really offered something new. The strange thing was – if we look back with the experience we have today – that colleagues from Fin-

land and abroad came to “see” the Internet. The Cable Book Library made the Internet familiar both to the customers and the library staff.

After 10 years, the new century had begun and the basic idea of the Cable Book Library did not support that activity anymore – the internet was a normal part of our daily life and we did not have a need a special internet library. Instead of closing this well-known library we got an innovation: we integrated The Cable Book Library and the biggest music department in the Helsinki City Library system. The combination got new premises in the main post office building where the main postal branch “Helsinki 10” is situated. Thus the new unit got the name Library 10. (3)

Library 10 was opened in 2005 and became at once one of the most popular libraries of the Helsinki City Library. Since its opening the 800 m² premises has been receiving over 0,5 million visitors every year even though the library has had only a limited collection and concentrates mostly on music and IT. It has a central location, long opening hours (7 days a week, 78 hours), music and video editing rooms, a stage for happenings and the staff reflects the make-up of many of the young male customers -a new group which we reached with this renewed unit.

Library 10 has from the beginning been a place where the customers have been active but the trend has been that they have taken over more and more of the events and happenings on the stage. Today about 80 percent of the program, both performances on the stage and exhibitions are organized by the customers.

As innovative as Library 10 has been it is a traditional library, at least if we compare it with Meetingpoint@lasipalatsi which is a unit totally without any books, newspapers or magazines. The idea of Meeting Point is to create a place which is focused on introducing and guiding the use of new information technology. From the beginning we also have had the purpose to collaborate with different kinds of partners, enterprises, organizations and public sector actors in general. The way has not been easy but today, after five years, we have come so long that we have started to implement the idea in other libraries, too.(4)

We are open to supporting ordinary people in using information technology in different forms. Before Finland shifted over to digital TV we loaned digital boxes so that people could get acquainted with them. Now we offer personal help for using a computer. We call it Start-up hour which is a one-time guidance service where computer instructions are tailored to meet your personal needs. And one of the favorites today is to transfer material from old home videos to DVD!

A novelty from 2010 within Meeting Point is Urban Office which provides the use of modern equipment and a pleasant surrounding free of charge for short-term work and business negotiations. Among some of the available items are computers with touch screen, printers, scanners, video negotiation, data projector and screen, web cams for loan, headsets and chargers. Even Skype calls can be made from the office which offers a peaceful surrounding for discussions and work.

Our goal is not only to provide the technical tools but to help and support people by giving personal guidance. Needs change all the time, and it is our challenge to be able to find what issues are topical.

These are my three main examples but I could have taken the image change of the Dutch public libraries. It is really amazing how many libraries in the Netherlands have changed their look and image in the retail spirit.

Another extra could have been The Cultural Centre of Stockholm, a living house where even the libraries change all the time. There is also one of my favorites for families, Kidzone, but now they also have opened Tiotretton Library which they say to be the world's first library for 10 to 13-year-olds. There you find computers, a recording studio, sewing machines, a kitchen and people who have time to talk, chill and cook.

All these examples show drastic changes either in the form of re-thinking and re-starting the former activity or starting something totally new. The change has not taken place gradually but as a leap. It also has demanded strong vision about the new and determined ability to put the vision into practice. But the result has been successful and seems little by little to be exemplary for others.

I dare to make some other personal conclusions based on these examples which I present in the following.

How do we survive and why we are needed more than ever before

1. Be open-minded. Do not block your mind by thinking: does this belong to the tasks of the library. Start thinking the other way round and ask if this is something the society and citizens, the people need today. Can the library somehow support and help to solve the problem by offering a new service. What is the usefulness of the library to the society and the people. In short: look at people's lives, not at your services!
2. Do not think that the libraries provide services **to** people because it has the sense that we, librarians know what people need and the point of view can easily be institutional not customer-oriented. I am afraid that we have the tendency to think more about what makes our own work easier and improves our library as an institution, than what makes the life of the customer easier and the service better for them. While planning services **for** people already sounds better, today we should more and more often plan and carry out services **with** users. And then finally, a part of activities, events and services can be done **by** users.
3. Realize that the focus of library service is moving from transactions to relations. This means that sooner or later the circulation, logistics and moving of books and other material back and forth will decrease and the focus will change over to the relations between people and to communication. This will have a big impact on premises, jobs and hiring of staff. When you make changes, decommission the old at the same time you develop the new.
4. Do not emphasize that libraries are smart places, emphasize that they are social places. Through all the technology and information that libraries have, they are indeed smart or intelligent places, but libraries change character through people. Google is not a place and does not understand the social either. Facebook is social but is it smart like the library? Libraries, the intelligent buildings become intellectual through their users and at the same time they are social.

5. Libraries are perhaps no longer growing institutions or organisms as Ranganathan told in one of his five laws, but they certainly are living institutions and organisms. What we should learn is to visualize the living library while it is important to get rid of the old stagnant image which emphasizes the passive role of libraries as places where nothing happens. David McCandless's book *Information is Beautiful* shows how effective information can be illustrated with new and old methods.

With the help of RFID and net searches we should be able to show what kind of information interests the people who use the library, of course without connecting it to individuals. Think about the living, a constantly changing map which would show how people's interests shift from one topic to another. What a difference compared with the picture where the classified books stand on the bookshelves like in a still life painting. I see libraries like fractals in which the basic model can be like the same library ideology but where the picture and colors constantly change, just as the users make the library living. These kinds of illustrations would clearly show the effects of the libraries.

6. We are facing a paradigm shift in libraries which confuses both our staff and our users. We have in both groups conservatives and reformers who can have very different opinions how libraries should be developed. To survive we have to create new services for the young generations but at the same time we have to respect and serve those who are used to the traditional library. In big library buildings these two aspects can be taken into consideration side by side but in smaller units the only successful solution can sometimes be to establish special libraries for different purposes and customer groups.

In conclusion: my personal view about the future of libraries is very hopeful. In my mind the future of libraries will be successful on the condition that they rethink, remodel and renew their work in practice. Believe it or not, but I would even say that in this case libraries can head for the Golden Age in their history.

- (1) <http://www.ideastore.co.uk/public/documents/PDF/IdeaStoreStrategyAppx1CA B290709.pdf>
- (2) http://www.satellitemalmo.org/pics/1/1/Strategi_The_darling_library.pdf
- (3) <http://www.lib.hel.fi/en-GB/kirjasto10/>
- (4) <http://www.lib.hel.fi/en-GB/kohtaamisaikaa/>
- (5) McCandless David, *Information is Beautiful*, 2009