

Chapter 80

Public Libraries and the Right to the [Smart] City

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ABSTRACT

The future of public libraries has been threatened by funding cuts and new digital technologies which have led many people to question their traditional role and purpose. However, freedom of information, ready access to knowledge and information literacy in all its digital and analog guises are more important than ever. Thus, public libraries remain significant spaces and places where people can socially interact and learn. In many countries public libraries are reinventing themselves and part of this process has been the redesign of library services and the design and construction of new library building and facilities that articulate the values, purpose and role of what has been termed ‘the next library’. Following discussion of new library developments in London, Birmingham and Worcester in the UK, Aarhus in Denmark and Helsinki in Finland, the article concludes that public libraries are now both social and media spaces as well as being important physical places that can help city dwellers decide what type of urban world they want to see.

INTRODUCTION

In June 1998 the United Nations issued the Aarhus Convention, which states in its First Article, that in order to protect “the right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being” all signatories should “guarantee the rights of access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters” (UNECE, 1998: Article One). Ratified by the European Union and a number of other countries it clearly links learning, information, access and democracy to sustainability and social justice. Although public libraries were not identified by name in the Convention document they are digital spaces and physical places which articulate these values and activities. Public libraries “clearly have a major role to play in increasing public awareness of environmental sustainability” (DCMS, 2009: 48). New media technologies, smart buildings and smart infrastructure are reshaping everyday lived experience, social cognition,

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literacy, politics and [translocal] citizenship. Citizens, library users, virtually all of us, are digital media users and producers. The UK media regulator Ofcom noted in its report, *Adults media use and attitudes report* (Ofcom, 2012), that 79% of adults now have access to the Internet and although a digital divide remains with only around 60% of people from the lower socio-economic groups (D and E) having digital literacy skills. However, the immense popularity of many introductory computer courses run by public libraries suggest that as technologies swiftly improve and evolve there will be a continuing need to maintain ways of this divide from widening again. The Ofcom study also noted that 92% of adults are mobile phone users and 44% have smart phones (30% from socio-economic groups D and E) and that literacy is therefore no longer confined to traditional reading and writing. For Elmborg (2010: 73) literacy should be viewed as a wide repertoire of performances appropriate to particular social situations:

Information literacy forms a new narrative for library practice, and this narrative of information literacy in libraries builds on a larger literacy narrative (...). Viewed this way, literacy is something mobile and flexible, not just a set of skills with written text. Literacy is the ability to read the codes of our cultures and subcultures. Literacy is also the ability to produce codes that are valued in these cultures (...). Literacy is fundamentally connected to community, and community members are the judges of literacy competency. According to this view, we are all literate, but we are not all literate in the same communities.

In Delft, in the Netherlands, the “library concept centre”, known as DOK has been designed to inspire people. Its Director, Eppo van Nispen tot Sevenaer, who worked in broadcasting pioneering interactive formats before joining the library, and Erik Boekesteijn, who works in the Science and Innovation Department at DOK, sees the facility as a multi media space competing very much competing with other media related attractions. For Boekesteijn libraries do not need complete collections, they need people, their stories, their desires and their imagination. Dok offers an experience. Interactive multi user touch screens enable visitors to browse through the cultural heritage of the city of Vermeer, a video wall - the DOK Agora allow users to see their own stories being related, Nintendo Wii and games for PC and Mac sometimes inspire discussions between library staff and parents concerning the pedagogic value of ‘serious games’, listening booths and a ‘media bar’, based on the Apple Stories ‘genius bar’, where visitors can seek advice on how to use their digital technology, are elements of a rich cultural media ecology (Boekesteijn, 2010). This paper will explore the changing nature of public libraries in this digital world where concerns around environmental sustainability are also becoming increasingly urgent. It is based on continuing research work within the UK particularly with the Library of Birmingham Project, the Royal Society of Arts and The Hive in Worcester (Blewitt & Gambles, 2010; Blewitt, 2012). The research has included numerous observational visits to libraries, interviews with library professionals, architects and library users, as well as reviews of media reports on library developments and public policy documents. The methodology combines elements of ethnographic and action research.

THE NEW PUBLIC LIBRARY: A SPACE OF TRANSFORMATION

The new media ecology enfolds the city’s spatial environment creating hybrid and augmented spaces, new and emerging forms of social behaviour, frequently facilitating commercial interests that fragment and enclose digital public space (Blewitt, 2013). This new media ecology is multi dimensional with concerns over justice, sustainability and learning transcending physical localities, temporal boundaries

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