2012 Kay Poustie OAM Scholarship Report

What makes a successful public library?

An investigation into the qualities and features that make libraries great

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Introduction

The aim of the research trip was to clarify a direction for public libraries based on the experience of libraries overseas. As an outcome, the goal was to produce a list of priorities for libraries that would provide them with practical guidance and realistically achievable goals.

Issues that were examined included:

- The incongruity between statements that the book's days are numbered and the reality that circulation of physical books remains a library's core business.

- The conflict between reports of the decline of the public library and the continued investment by councils in building huge new statement library buildings.

- The actual priority of technology for libraries, particularly for small or regional libraries. Are they doomed to decline if they cannot cost-justify expenditure on technological innovation?

The goal was not to crystal-ball gaze, but rather to see what international libraries were doing and learn from their real experiences. The results may confirm the view of library professionals about the priorities of their library services, or they may provide libraries with ideas and inspiration about what to focus on in the future. In particular, this research will affirm goals and directions for public libraries amongst so much conjecture about their future, and bring an awareness of library trends and activities in Europe and the United Kingdom (U.K.).

One issue that was to be examined was the differing criteria for a successful library service that the community, library staff and the library funding authority had. The motivation behind this was to see if there was a relationship between the scale of funding cuts applied to a library service, and the perspective of the council on whether the library service was successful. Unfortunately, due to the limited time available, it was not practical to include this within the scope of the research. However, libraries

were visited that had experienced severe funding cuts, which provided an opportunity to see how they have coped with this challenge.

I travelled to The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and the U.K., and visited ten libraries. They were Amsterdam Public Library (OBA), the DOK Library Concept Centre in Delft (DOK), Copenhagen Main Library, Copenhagen University and Royal Library, Malmö Library, The London Borough of Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores, The British Library, Cardiff Central Library, Manchester Central Library and Liverpool Central Library.

At each library, one or more staff members were interviewed about their jobs and their library service. Questions were used to guide the discussion, but staff also had the opportunity to talk about what they thought was important and any particular projects they were working on. The time spent at each library varied, depending on staff availability and other commitments. The information gathered was general, in that the aim was to form a picture of all aspects of the library service in an effort to pin-point specific features that had worked well.

The findings are summarised under the themes of opening hours, library buildings, events programmes, customer engagement, the priority of technology and challenges in the U.K.

Broad & Consistent Opening Hours

Most libraries had seven day a week opening and many of them emphasised broad opening hours as important. Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores stressed that opening hours should be memorable, consistent and in line with people's expectations. Libraries that are unable to extend their opening hours are trying other ways of making the library buildings available to the public. For example, Copenhagen Main Library, a library of 6000m^2, opens from 8am to 10am on weekday mornings with a clerk on reception and some student help. From 10am they open with full services and staff. Some of the Copenhagen branch libraries have trialled opening in the evenings with no staff; patrons use their health care card to gain access to the building. Similarly, DOK are re-organising their staffing resources so that they can open more hours without additional staff. It is clear that importance is placed on making the library space

available to the public as much as possible and that extended opening hours are seen as a way of extending accessibility. What is notable is that this is seen as important despite many resources being available remotely online twenty-four seven. This indicates the increasing emphasis on the public library as a place to spend time in.

Library Buildings: Well-located, Recognisable, Attractive, Prominent

How important is the library building? When more and more resources are available online, from home, surely there are fewer reasons to visit the library? Is a library building even needed anymore? This issue required clarification, and through the research it became evident that the building is vitally important. Not only does it provide a focus for the library service and a contact point for the public, it gives the library visibility and heightens its presence in the community. After all, out of sight is out of mind and library buildings which are prominent, well-located, recognisable and attractive, promote greater use of library services, visits and memberships.

Putting the library in the right location is an important criterion of success. A move of only a few hundred metres can make a huge difference to the number of visitors. The Idea Stores particularly emphasised the importance of location by stating that they would prefer to wait years for the right plot of land to become available than put an Idea Store in the wrong place. The location of Idea Store Whitechapel was carefully planned; it is situated on Whitechapel Road, is visible from the Whitechapel underground station, and adjoins the supermarket Sainsbury's. The location of the Idea Stores is based on Tower Hamlets' market research consultation of 1999, which revealed that people wanted to incorporate visits to the library with the rest of their daily activities, mainly shopping.

Some of the libraries visited occupy new, specifically designed buildings. The research examined how much of their success could be attributed to the building and what the impact of a landmark building is to a library service. OBA, Malmö Library and the Copenhagen University and Royal Library have all opened new library buildings since 1999, and have benefited greatly from the subsequent increase in profile. OBA's ten story high building was opened in 2007. It houses two restaurants and a café, and has views over Amsterdam (Figure 1). The opening of the new building has boosted members, visits, and the profile of the library service as a whole,

and has helped gain the funds and interest to renovate other public libraries in Amsterdam. Malmö Library's building was inaugurated in 1999 and has three parts, the castle, the cylinder and the calendar of light (Figure 2). Malmö Library's strategy document *The Darling Library* states that "... there is no space more beautiful in Malmö than the city library." Despite remaining in the same location, they now receive three times as many visits as when they were in the old building. The Black Diamond, one of the buildings belonging to the Copenhagen University and Royal Library, has become a landmark in Copenhagen (Figure 3). It has a high profile, is used for cultural events and conferences, as well as having a shop, restaurant and café on the ground floor.

These libraries credit their beautiful new buildings as instrumental to the success of their library services. Not all libraries occupy new or specially designed buildings; however, all the libraries visited have paid close attention to the appearance of their building or have incorporated a programme of renovation and physical renewal into their planning. Common to all these libraries is the recognition that the library should be an attractive space where patrons wish to spend their leisure time. Copenhagen Main Library's focus over the past two years has been to develop the appearance of their ex-department store building. The improvements include the wooden framed cubes visible from the atrium, which have become popular places to sit (Figure 4). The focus of their re-fit has been to enhance their event and exhibition space.

Manchester Libraries have run a programme of renewal of all library buildings since 2008, which culminates in their re-developed Central Library which is due to open early next year. Similarly, Liverpool Libraries have been following a programme of rejuvenating their community libraries over the past fifteen years. They focused on quality fit-out and providing good physical infrastructure, and found that visits to libraries rose whenever they were re-furbished.

Although the quality of the physical library space is a crucial element in the success of a library service, both DOK and Idea Stores pointed out that a new building is not enough to sustain long-term increases in usage. If usage was declining previous to your new building or renovation, then this decline will resume once the novelty of the changes wears off. Indeed, this is what has happened to DOK, a library often referred

to as the most modern in the world. When asked whether they considered themselves successful, they said no, and were the only library to respond in the negative to this question. This is because, after experiencing a rise in visits and memberships for the two to three year period after opening in 2007, membership began to decline again. DOK are combatting this with a focus on enriching the in-library experience and providing quality content to sustain visitor and membership rates.

The research detected a trend for patrons to be involved in personalising library spaces, particularly in children's areas. Libraries provide places for patrons to play music, to draw and to write in order to encourage them to personalise the library. This turns the library space into an interactive one and gives the community a sense of ownership. At Malmö Library they created a library space for nine to twelve year olds called Balagan, which was designed in dialogue with children from the community (Figures 5 and 6). The library engaged architecture students to do the design work for the area, which was cost effective and provided the students with an opportunity to realise their designs. Balagan has been very popular and the library is now looking at putting musical instruments into the area. A similar process and concept will be used next to design a space for teenagers.

Many libraries stressed the importance of providing a library building as a free, open, public space where no-one demands anything of you. A library is a place to meet, a place for young people to go and a place to go if you can't spend money. The non-commercial status of libraries is crucial in a world where most public space has a commercial motive; a library provides a place where you don't have to purchase anything to be entitled to be there. At Malmö Library staff reported how patrons have said how valuable it was to come to a place to hear Swedish being spoken. Indirectly, the library is aiding migrants in adjusting to a new culture and language. Simply by existing and being open, the library building is fulfilling the need for an open and free community space.

Sustainable and Dynamic Events Programmes
Libraries are devoting more time and attention to events. They want people to spend their leisure time at the library and hope to inspire and engage patrons with a variety of workshops, clubs, exhibits and performances. Copenhagen Main Library's events

programme is a growing area, with thirteen staff members whose main work is events related. There are at least three events per week, most of them provided free of charge. They feel they have an obligation to provide quality events but try not to compete with other cultural venues in the city. They run a large reading and writing club programme, with clubs for both adults and children, in Danish and English. This year they have begun guided reading clubs and are working with the psychiatric department of a local hospital to widen the scope of the programme.

Outreach events form a large part of both Liverpool and Manchester Libraries' event programmes. Liverpool Library works with many other organisations to deliver programmes like health and education initiatives. Manchester Library has had great success holding outreach days to drive memberships. They set up mini-libraries in places like parks, art galleries, shopping centres and the canteens of office blocks. During one of these outreach days they joined 1000 new members. Manchester Libraries have also worked in partnership with sporting clubs to offer incentives for programmes like their reading challenge. They found that adults needed incentives for children's programmes as well because the child's participation depended on their parent or guardian. Targeting incentives to adults as well as to children has given them a great response to their programmes.

Art is having an increasing role in the libraries I visited. Not only were they thinking about their library buildings as pieces of art or spaces for art, they are hosting art exhibitions, providing hanging space and producing art centred events. DOK even has an art library and loans out pieces of art. The art library holds events, focussing on children's events, and encourages families to create art together.

Copenhagen University's Social Sciences Faculty Library is using art to publicise and interpret faculty members' research. By interpreting research through the form of art exhibitions, the library has facilitated the presentation of faculty members' work. For example, the Danish cartoon crisis was the subject of research by a professor at the Department of Political Science, investigating how images become focal points for foreign policy crises. The research was presented with an exhibition of cartoons associated with the crisis, an exhibition catalogue containing information about the project, and extra events, including lectures and debates. Another exhibition,

presenting research by the Department of Asian Studies, included lectures, speed dating with researchers who had fifteen minutes to talk about their field, Asian food and music. The researchers participating in these exhibitions received a high profile for their research, as the events were written up in Danish newspapers, and the library attracted publicity and strengthened its relationship with faculty staff.

Customer Engagement

Libraries knew how they wanted to engage with their patrons and what they wanted the experience of visiting the library to be like. These libraries focussed on relaxing the space, making the library personal and interactive, emphasising communication with their patrons, removing irritations and concentrating on the quality of the experience of visiting the library.

At the Idea Stores, customers are central to everything they do. The findings of the market research conducted in 1999 underpin the Idea Store concept of a customer-centred approach. For example, they have a no negative signs policy, have made an effort to relax the space and staff wear uniforms. At DOK, they have found that if people experience three or more irritations they will not re-visit the library. They have no rules printed on the door, and patrons can eat and drink anywhere.

The Copenhagen University Social Sciences Faculty Library looks at their services for students holistically, considering the entire library environment. This encompasses the physical library building (heating, seating, cafés) as well as communication with patrons and provision of services. Efforts are made to personalise interactions with patrons through ideas like the guest book, speech bubble posters where the library's answers to questions are displayed, and shelf talkers with photos of specialist staff on them. The fixed bicycle tyre pump outside the building is a symbol of their approach to patrons and how they want the library to fit in to the lives of students.

The Priority of Technology

How essential is technology to the success of libraries and should it be a priority for libraries to pursue? Although technology was used for some interesting projects, such as Copenhagen Main Library's inventory management project, where the location of

books on the shelf is tracked, none of the qualities identified require technology as an essential component. Additionally, in answer to the question 'If a small library could only focus on one thing what would you recommend based on your experience?', no library directly referred to technology. Their answers varied, but were concentrated around supporting literacy and reading skills, providing a local focus and on improving the physical space of the library. Therefore, for smaller libraries it is better value for their time and money to invest in customer engagement, the appearance of their library building, extending opening hours and in their events programme.

Are the physical book's days numbered? Day to day activities in a public library do not seem to suggest the advent of the library with no books heralded by some. There was little evidence that libraries were planning to decrease their book stock to minimal amounts or nothing. For example, at DOK, books make up 90% of their total collection. Similarly, at Idea Store Whitechapel, their collection is focussed heavily on books with only a small media collection of audiobooks, CDs and DVDs. Perhaps improvements to e-book models will alter the situation in the future. However, at the moment, there is no movement towards decreasing provision of real books.

Challenges in the U.K.

Many libraries had experienced or were expecting funding cuts. The Liverpool Library Service had 30% of their budget cut; they closed three small libraries, lost 86 jobs and cut opening hours. Manchester Library has experienced similar cuts, with only about forty staff available to man the new Central Library when it opens. They have cut opening hours by 25%, their mobile library service and their annual book award. Idea Stores have avoided cost-cutting, but on the whole funding cuts face many libraries, even the large successful ones. This indicates that success is not a prerequisite to avoiding budget cuts and libraries must undertake progressive planning to ensure their ongoing services are met.

So, how are these libraries coping with the reality of severe budget cuts? Staffing is often the first thing to be reduced, and libraries must meet the challenge of maintaining opening hours and services with less staff. Services are concentrated at fewer locations, with the closure of branches and mobile libraries. Interestingly, there is not a move toward a reduction of stock or to digital resources as a response; book

budgets are usually the last thing to be cut. Staff duties are generalised and shared, and there are no specific marketing or events staff. Libraries are co-located or built with corporate sponsorship or in partnership. For example, Manchester Council recently built a library with a Tesco, making contribution to the library a condition of Tesco's planning approval. Manchester is looking at setting up a charitable trust to fund the events programme at the new Central Library, as there is not likely to be any money available. In these ways, libraries are striving to continue to provide a quality service despite their financial challenges.

Conclusions

So, what are the qualities that are essential in making a public library successful? The common qualities in the libraries visited are:

- A focus on the library building and recognition of the importance of an attractive building that people want to spend time in.
- A focus on a full events programme.
- A holistic approach to people's needs within the library space (e.g. free toilets, quality food and drink options).
- A wish for customers to see the space as relaxed and personal and an effort to humanise staff.
- A desire to evoke their visitor's imagination and creativity and to create a place of inspiration.
- A desire for greater accessibility through opening hours.
- The increasing use of art.
- A willingness to work in partnership, most often with events, but also for funding initiatives and the building of new libraries.
- The follow-through of these qualities with thorough planning and action.

The first five of these qualities contribute to the enhancement of the library visit, providing opportunities to encourage customers to stay longer and spend their leisure time in the library space. This strong movement towards making the library a centre for events and a place to meet has contributed to the success of these libraries.

In accordance with the aim to provide libraries with goals that were possible, practical and realistically achievable a list of ten actions has been compiled:

- Provide wi-fi.
- Integrate art into your building and events.
- Define your customer approach and know what experience you want your patrons to have when they visit.
- The location of the library is important. Know your preference for the location of your building and document it if possible.
- Have broad opening hours and plans to further widen them. Seven day a week opening at your central branch, and overall making opening hours consistent.
- A sustainable and dynamic events programme.
- Plan, have goals and have the ability to articulate your approach.
- Make the library space attractive and of high quality and plan for periodic renewal of the environment.
- Provide good quality food and drink options.
- Make better use of the knowledge your staff already have. Inspiration can be found from OBA's programmes like their book blog and weekly radio spot.

What makes a public library successful? This research has provided an outline of features common to ten successful international library systems. Many of them face similar challenges as any other library system, but by looking at them as a group, we can learn from their collective experience in what has been successful. The points outlined in this report outline a direction for Western Australian public libraries, providing them with ideas which will enable them to develop goals and priorities for their library services.

Appendix: Photographs from the Scholarship Trip

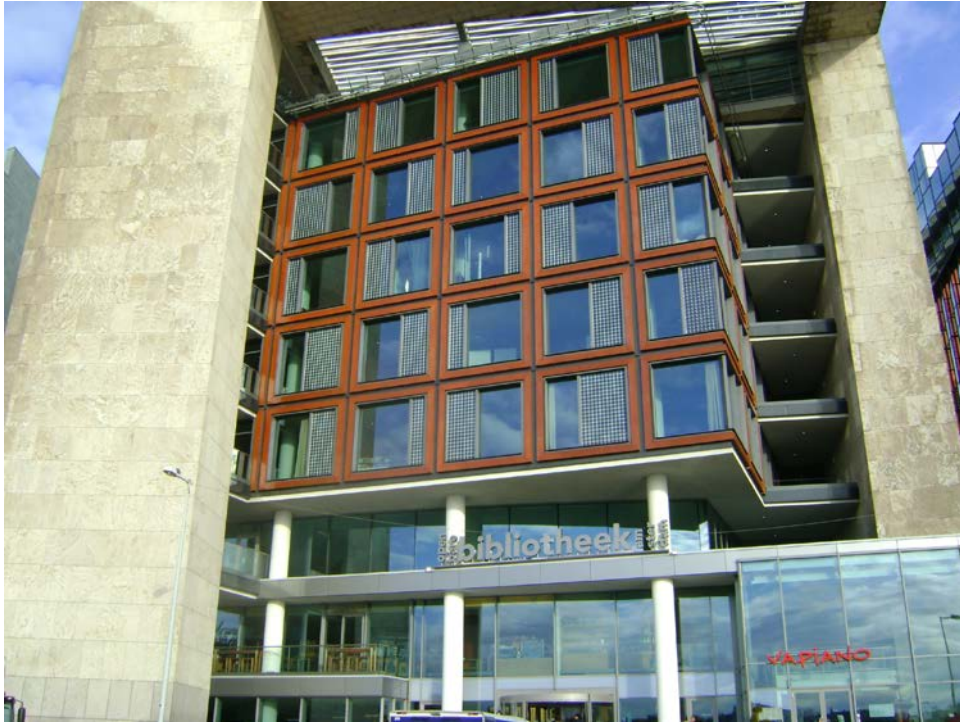All photos © Kirstie Nicholson

Figure 1: Exterior of OBA

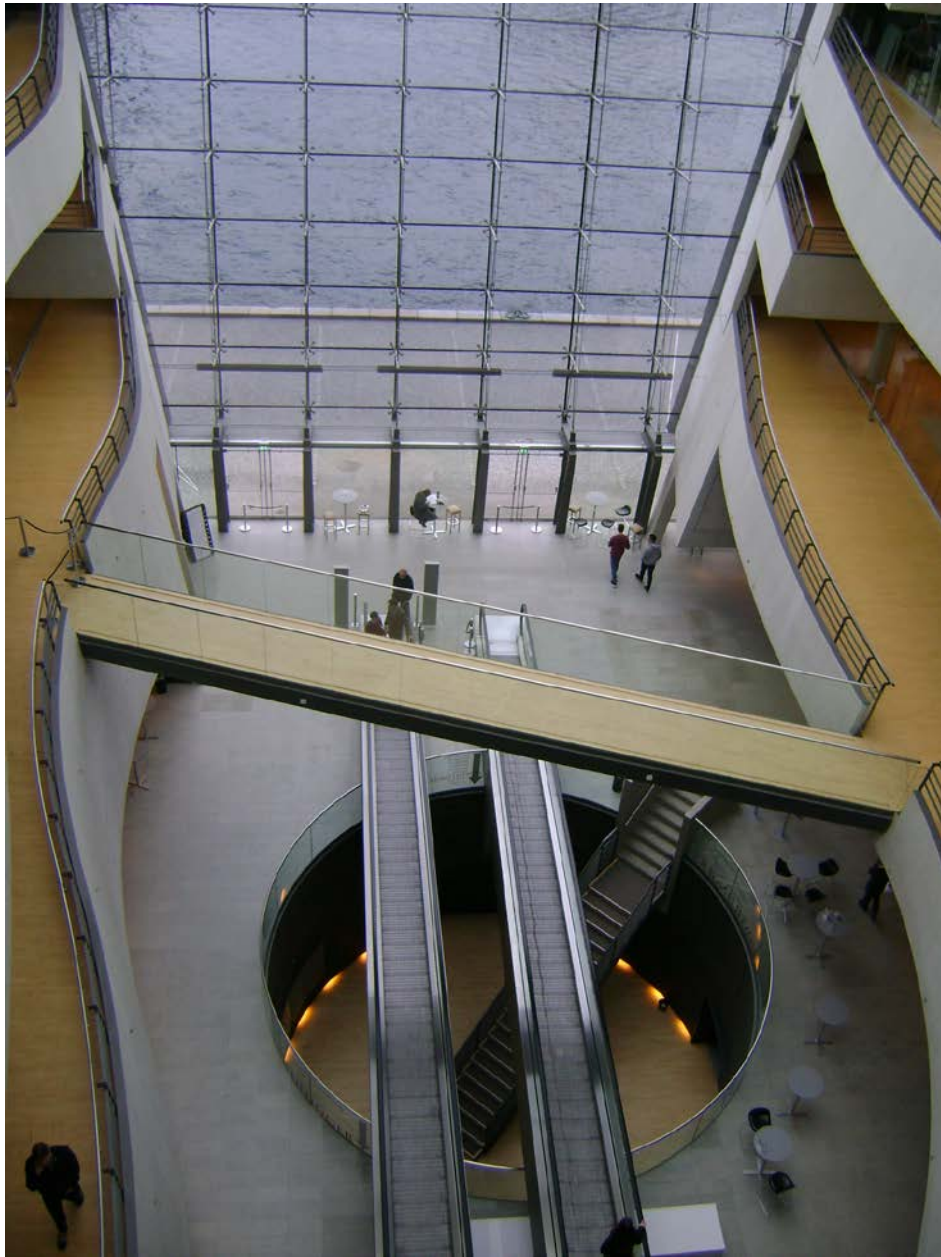Figure 2: Exterior of the Calendar of Light, Malmö Library

Figure 3: View of the atrium in the Royal Library's Black Diamond, Copenhagen

Figure 4: Atrium, Copenhagen Main Library

Figure 5: Balagan, Malmö Library

Figure 6: Balagan, Malmö Library

Figure 7: Inside the Calendar of Light, Malmö Library

Figure 8: Children's Library, OBA

Figure 9: Children's Library, OBA

Figure 10: Children's Library, Idea Store Whitechapel

Figure 11: Front Desk, DOK Library Concept Centre