



Libraries have been destinations for millennia. Their traditional book-based functions are now being challenged by new technologies, and their user groups expanded by policy and demographic shifts, with the result that a new breed of libraries is emerging in the UK. **Anna Brown** puts three model projects in context.

# The new libraries

Inclusive destinations for communities

## Whither libraries?

### Definition and direction

Libraries have risen to the top of the Government's social and political agenda. Its stated aims for the public library service include the following:

- to take practical steps to ensure that the service can meet the demands of future generations;
- to create a community asset in which local people can take pride – and which helps them to identify with their community;
- to provide benefits to the people who live, work or study in an area.

How are these aims to be met? A library as a physical and virtual destination should aim to provide:

- education and enlightenment for children and lifelong learners;
- a landmark in its community;
- a familiar, relaxing place which is safe, warm and well-lit, and accessible to all;
- a stimulating environment, enlivened with events and activities;
- access to knowledge and culture at a global level;
- access to knowledge and information at a local level (including local history);
- support to local businesses through the provision of business information.

Resource, the newly established Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, has issued a vision statement which asserts that 'Museums, archives and libraries belong at the very heart of people's lives, contributing to their enjoyment and inspiration, cultural values, learning potential, economic prosperity and social equity'. There are obvious policy links with economic regeneration, local cultural, heritage and arts provision, community advice and health information services. In addition, the links with other locally provided services such as education are clear.

The new libraries conform to a tripartite model of destination development: embodying the social inclusion policy aims of stakeholders, creating destinations for communities and visitors, and acting as gateways to the provision of a range of local cultural, learning and information services.

How can a library best serve the set of aims mapped above? The answer must be through strategically focusing on the development of a local cultural destination which appeals to the particular needs of its market, and which provides an integrated mix of facilities, services and programming to the community.

## Tackling social exclusion

On the occasion of the publication of a report by Policy Action Team 15 in July, *Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion*, Dr Mo Mowlam spoke to the Library Association:

Libraries have traditionally been at the centre of life in communities all over the UK; places where people of all ages can get information to enrich and extend their education. Increasingly, this will involve the information and communications technologies of the new century which are transforming society.

The PAT 15 report hinges on the need for the public library to become far more proactive and interventionist, with a commitment to equality, education and social justice at its core. The report asserts the need for radical change, including 'developing a community-based approach'.

Libraries have traditionally been at the centre of life in communities all over the UK

This will sound familiar to destination makers, accustomed to the challenge of developing and then marketing their products and services to suit the needs of the constituencies at the heart of their markets. Ultimately, the challenge for the new libraries is one of defining and describing a market and then establishing how best to reach out to it.

As a central part of the 'infrastructure of inclusion', libraries have a critical role to play in creating the communities they serve. As gathering places and gateways, libraries can provide access to information and learning at all levels. Strategic thinking has led to a redefinition of what users can expect to find in and around a library: a range of facilities and services, different types of information, physical and virtual links to other local authority services.

The dynamics of destination-making apply no less to libraries and community learning destinations than to national museums or visitor attractions. The most exciting new projects in this field — the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets, the Peckham Library, the Millennium Library in Norwich — are conceived as visitor-facing facilities with strong brands and an iconic physical presence. Other library projects have focused on becoming electronic destinations on-line, or hubs for a mobile network of services addressing geographically isolated communities. The key, both on-site and on-line, is integration of services and facilities, with a view to creating a seamless experience for users.

## Integrating library services

In Tower Hamlets, a £20 million project is underway which will eventually build seven 'Idea Stores', the first of which will open in Bow in 2001. The plan is to create a series of bright new buildings offering a combination of library services, lifelong learning facilities and cultural attractions.

Working with the Adult Education Service, the Library and Information Service and Tower Hamlets College, the Council developed the Idea Stores concept after a period of intensive research and detailed surveys of local people. Currently, over 70% of people in Tower Hamlets don't use libraries at all: one of the key aims of the Idea Stores programme is to double the number of library users in the borough.

Over 70% of those surveyed expressed a desire to combine a trip to the library with shopping, banking or other commercial high-street activities. The result was a critical plank of the Idea Stores concept: they will be located in shopping centres well served by public transport, and will bear a strong, high street-style brand.

The Idea Stores will have longer opening hours than the current library service, will provide fully accessible services for people with disabilities, and will offer a crèche service 'to make life simpler'. All Idea Stores will include:

- traditional library services including books, CD-ROMs, computer games, videos, story tapes and children's libraries;
- learning facilities such as classrooms, workshops, homework clubs and other study spaces;
- latest in IT from public computer suites to business IT and support services;
- information on various subjects like healthy living, careers advice and tourist information, plus an improved reference and information service and local history and archives collection;
- entertainment including music shows, art exhibitions, a café and other community activities.

Further market research into the learning needs of the borough, supported by SRB funding, is being conducted by the Adult Education Service and Tower Hamlets College.

The Idea Stores are tackling social exclusion head-on by creating destinations which fit into the cultural map of a deprived borough. It is clearly a deliberate choice to do away with the word 'library' altogether, to focus instead on creating inviting, accessible and strongly branded facilities which offer products and services to meet the learning, information and cultural needs of local people. Doing away with social and physical barriers to entry and use — by, for example, providing a crèche — is central to the concept.



One of the planned Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets

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Peckham Library Picture courtesy of Wire Design

## Creating landmarks

In Peckham, in South London, a striking architectural statement has visually defined the 'new library' for many observers. Reinterpreting the great tradition of monumental landmark library buildings, Peckham library is fun, whimsical, even silly, but nonetheless dominates the neighbourhood. Commissioned by the Borough of Southwark, the £6.5 million building was designed by Alsop & Störmer. Following up their triumphant North Greenwich station, the building made a critically successful architectural splash when it opened in March this year.



The new British Library, situated behind St Pancras station, is one of the new breed of libraries emerging  
Picture courtesy of Irene Rhoden

Writing in the *Guardian* (4 March 2000), Jonathan Glancey articulated the destination effect Peckham Library produced:

The Peckham Library is a show-off building, as it was intended to be. Its purpose, in a smaller way, and at a 20th of the cost, is to do for this poor area of inner London what, say, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum has done for Bilbao: draw attention, attract visitors and investment, cheer people up and let them know that, far from being forgotten, they have one of the most exciting new public buildings in Europe.

The lending library sits above a lobby, community advice centre, IT and multimedia centre. In the library proper, there are spaces enclosed in 'pods' for meetings, plays and readings, for children, and for African-Caribbean Literature and Music. The building is light and open, and affords views of the London Eye and Tate Modern to its users.

Located nearby is a healthy living centre, with gym, pool and open café. Southwark has established a true community destination for Peckham, now dominated by the library, locating 'something for everyone' in a vibrant central gathering place.

Carefully floodlit at night, the library is an iconic building inside and out, day and night. A sign of opportunity and possibility for its local community, and of accomplishment and forward thinking for those looking in from outside South London, this is a true landmark.

## Acting as gateways

When it opens next year, the Millennium Library in Norwich will, like Peckham Library and the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets, make a statement in terms of architecture, branding and destination creation. The library is part of a £60 million Landmark Millennium project, originating from the need to replace Norwich Central Library after a devastating fire.

The building, located in the historic centre of Norwich, will house, along with the library, a heritage visitor attraction, a Tourist Information Centre, a state-of-the-art conference facility, offices for participating organisations and a range of catering offers. At the heart of the destination is a covered public open space, The Forum, an inviting, attractive and safe environment for people to meet and spend time, day and night, winter and summer. This will be a destination for residents and visitors alike, with a lively, year-round cultural programme.

The team behind this Millennium project team has defined, outside the physical space allocated to the library, an expansive and strategically visionary 'Information and Learning Business' which will be based in the Millennium building but operate throughout Norfolk. Supporting the growth of information and learning opportunities, the core of the business is to perform an enabling and facilitating function, providing leadership, coordination and information-sharing across Norfolk.

The Millennium Library will play host to the hub and flagship of the Norwich Information and Learning Network (NILN), a web of Information and Learning Centres throughout Norfolk, which are often co-located with branch libraries.

Through NILN and other programmes, the Millennium project's Information and Learning Business will collaborate with other parties (including further and higher education partners) to ensure delivery of information and learning content throughout Norfolk. The strategic mission of the business unit is 'to support the development of, participation in, and provision of information and learning opportunities via technology for the social and economic benefit of all the people of Norfolk.'

Through the Information and Learning Business, through the NILN hub, through the Millennium Library, and through the Forum itself, the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Project will function as a true 'gateway' for both residents and visitors seeking learning, information, cultural experience or interpretation of the heritage of the county. By uniting these functions in one building, under one brand, and through one web portal, the project team is on the way to establishing a 'destination for information and learning' on many levels and for many audiences.

## Funding and managing a new library

Initiating a model project such as those described above is a tall order, not least in relation to the need for both capital and revenue funding. There are several international, national and regional initiatives that can help to fund a new library project, in addition to SRB, RDA and Lottery funding bodies:

- Lifelong Learning Partnerships;
- University for Industry;
- The People's Network (funded through NOF's CALL programme);
- EU digital heritage and digital libraries initiatives.

The private and higher education sectors may yield key partners for a new library, and may provide funding support. Potential 'commercial' income streams within and without the building should also be considered, both in operational and policy terms. Possibilities include:

- internet café;
- computing facilities more generally providing internet access, e-mail facilities, word processing and printing services;
- corporate hire/event venue;
- bookshop;
- other retail;
- other catering;
- digital heritage/library projects;
- WWW portal.

A new library demands an integrated executive team able to make decisions affecting all elements of the project. All key stakeholders need to be represented, and to 'buy in' to the corporate structure. Operationally, it is essential that the project elements are fully integrated. The development of library projects such as those at Peckham, Tower Hamlets and Norfolk and Norwich demonstrates the range of possibility opening up for libraries in the next twenty years. They will face tests at every hurdle, in terms of financial performance, management standards, visitor satisfaction and public profile. The very fact that they have made it this far, and with such positive press to date – aided in part by the knock-on effects of the opening of the new British Library – shows that the time is right for a long-term reassessment of the library.

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