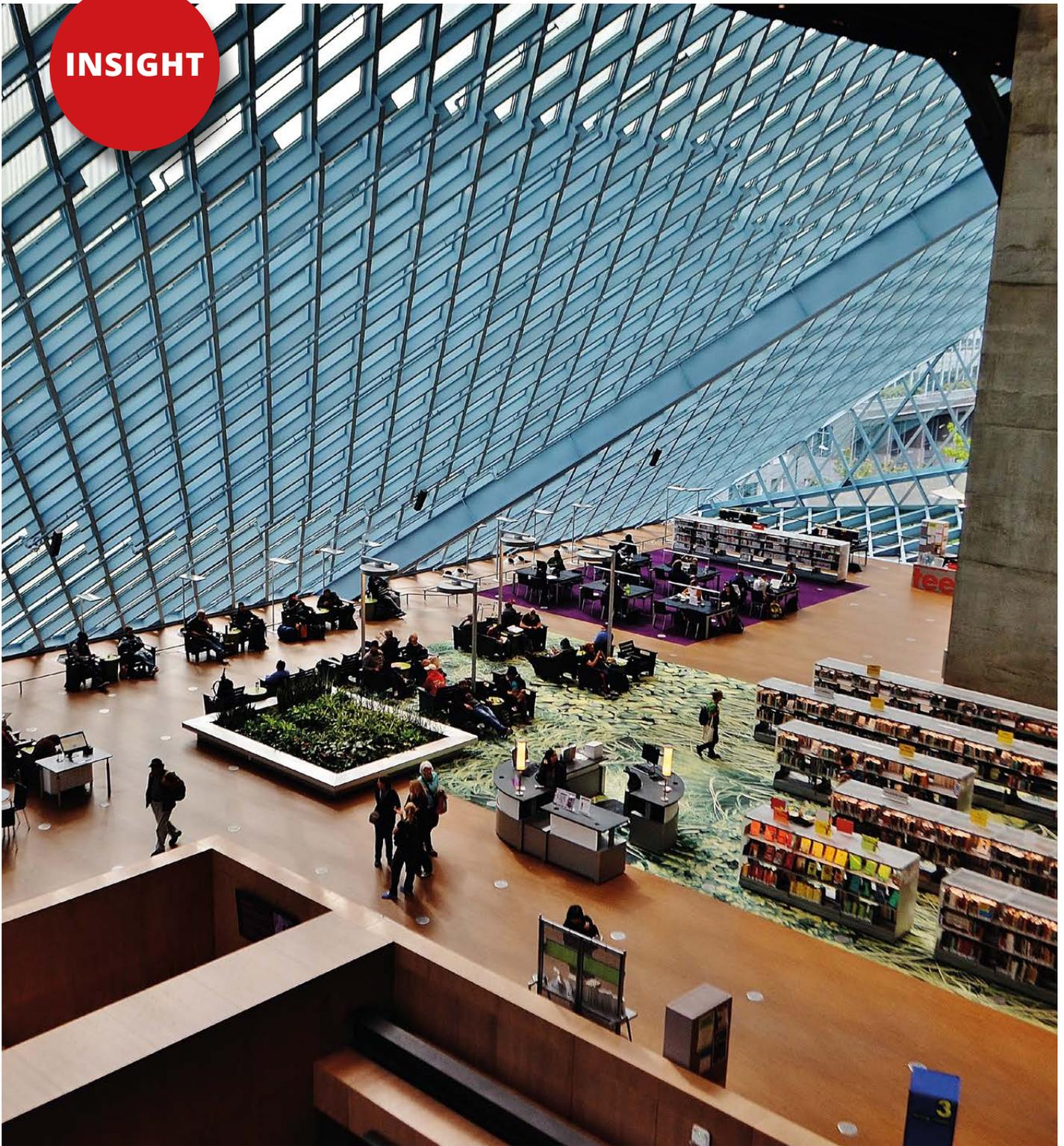


INSIGHT



Seattle Public Library.

Designing Libraries

# The disrupted library

“ **Social cohesion and social distancing are self-isolating by definition. The digital library service and the growth of supportive social networks may be a solution.** ”

*No one expected this, and no one planned for it. Anti-social distancing and the return to that mid-twentieth century era where library books were viewed as potential sources of contagious disease. But here we are. Is this the unmaking of library spaces, or their remaking?*

**W**e talk a lot in the profession about the ‘digital future’. Well, the future hit us head-on when most other library service continuity options were denied us. And it has provided libraries with the opportunity both to consolidate their online and digital offers and to make more library users aware of what they have been missing. The digital library space is beginning to design itself as libraries continue to develop innovative solutions for the delivery of services outside the library building.

It has been good to see the increased take-up of e-books everywhere, storytimes going virtual, new reading groups thriving, and libraries providing more opportunities for learning and skills using their digital resources or subscriptions, such as those offered by Calgary Public Library (<https://bit.ly/388jHhS>). Libraries have even made their own contributions to supporting health workers in this period, with The Word in South Shields, for example, utilising its FabLab 3D printing capability to produce protective visors.

### **Demand will not diminish**

Most of these innovations will remain in place when libraries fully reopen. Bibliotheca, who are promoting their self-check and mobile check-out solutions through this period, write: “New digital borrowers were born during this pandemic. Libraries have been forced to promote their digital collections more than ever. They

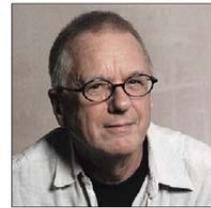
shouldn’t expect digital demand to diminish when libraries open back up. As the economy enters a recession, more people will turn to library services at the same time library budgets will be challenged... Looking forward, people will expect their digital and physical lives to blend more seamlessly than ever before.” (<https://bit.ly/2CREllm>)

There is a lot of help and advice around on the safe reopening of public libraries (<https://bit.ly/3eK3QIG>) and library design companies thedesignconcept and FG Library & Learning offer generic and bespoke services as well as individual products for safe working. But, however we manage the reopening of physical spaces there will be no “normal” service to be resumed. The new out-of-the-building and out-of-the-box digital library is not going back in the box. It is a permanent disrupter to the normal that will have to be taken into account in the redefining of the library service.

### **A social space**

But the safe reopening of library spaces is itself also a disruption of the normal, or rather an interruption to the trajectory of libraries that have been moving away from their traditional roles to become service hubs, social and cultural centres. Social cohesion and social distancing are self-isolating by definition. The digital library service and the growth of supportive social networks may be a solution. But at some point we will want to return to our natural habitats as social beings who need each other and will need the expanded physical library more than ever.

I wrote in my previous column



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that the big revolution taking place in libraries is in the social sphere – libraries as place, as the ‘third place’ where people gather, meet their friends, exchange ideas, socialise in ever more flexible spaces where they feel they belong. A place where people can participate in a variety of activities or design their own, giving them a greater sense of belonging and ownership than mere fleeting visits to ‘borrow’ something. We should all work to ensure that this vision does not become fleeting but, in combination with our digital future, will become the ‘new normal’ for libraries. **IP**