

# Libraries in the 21st Century... the next 20 years?



**SOUTHMERE VILLAGE  
CIVIC & LIBRARY BUILDING**





## Looking back to 2000...

Looking back to the year 2000, the talk was of future-proofing libraries for the 21st Century, and there was a sense of excitement about what that meant, although it was far from being defined.

Tony Blair's introduction of the 'People's Network' was, and possibly still is, the most revolutionary advance in public libraries since the concept was born way back in the mid-19th Century. It gave libraries a real relevance at a time when access to technology and the internet represented a genuine divide in society.



**“Just as in the past books were a chance for ordinary people to better themselves, in the future online education will be a route to better prospects. But just as books are available from public libraries, the benefits of the superhighway must be there for everyone. This is a real chance for equality of opportunity...”**

Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (1996)



# Initiatives for change

The ground-breaking Idea Store concept - still referenced today as a transformational model bringing together libraries, information, adult learning and retail - was in development by Tower Hamlets council and Bisset Adams but the pilot site in Bow was still two years away from opening.

The government initiative 'Framework for the Future' was finally published in 2003.



This was to recognise libraries' role as threefold:

- Providing community space and helping to tackle social exclusion;
- Promoting reading and informal learning in all its forms;
- Offering access to technology and the internet, including crucially e-government.

It also referenced one of the challenges facing the library service - a lack of consistency

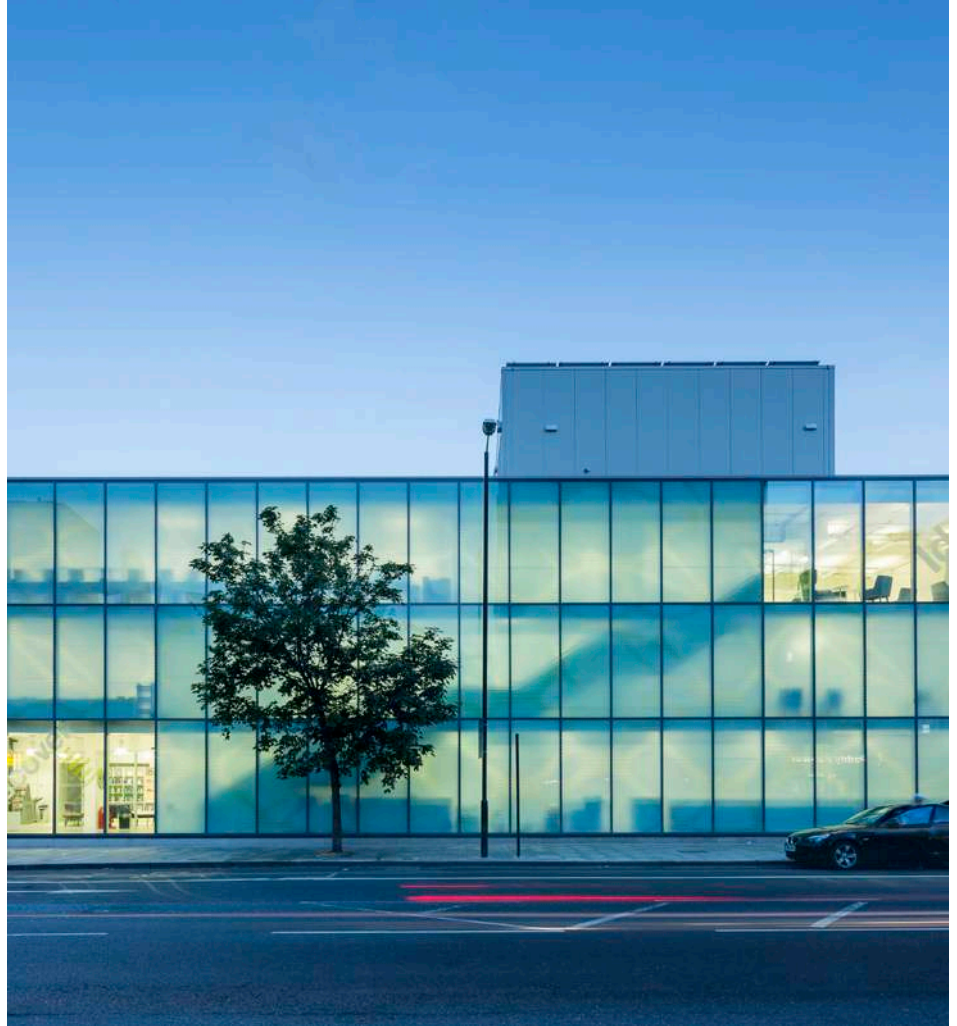
in the quality of the service offered nationally. One of the key strengths of the library service is its local character, its autonomy and understanding of its own community's needs, therefore any centralised initiatives for transformation are hard to implement, and any powerful brand messages to engage with new audiences tends to be local rather than national.



# Now in 2021..

Now in 2021, we can see the transformation has been extraordinary. Over the past two decades librarians have embraced their customer-facing function with enthusiasm, reinventing their role from the stern, finger-on-lips stereotype to a position encompassing aspects of a teacher, research assistant, social worker, events manager, community coordinator and - in many cases - a friend.

Libraries are often bright, exciting places, with cafes, exhibitions, informal lounge and social space, inspiring reading and creativity, accommodating research and study of all types; offering welcoming spaces for events and activities which genuinely feel owned by the community.



However, even today, this isn't always the case. Local Authority budgets have been decimated by a decade of 'austerity', with libraries bearing the brunt along with other services.

## Community culture post-pandemic

Just as we began to ask 'what next' for the upcoming two decades, from leftfield came a global pandemic. It's made us reassess how we live our lives together, what social space means, and how public spaces and services may need to change in the future.

Public libraries are first and foremost public spaces – one of the few left where communities can get together without pressure to buy anything, or indeed do anything other than browse or relax.

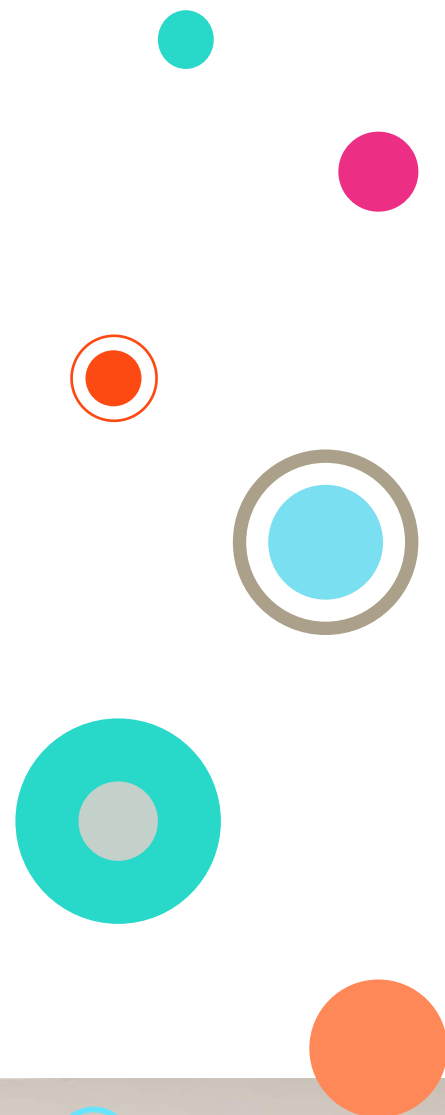
During public consultation on the new Southmere Library in Thamesmead (designed by Bisset Adams) our team of architects met with readers of all ages, interests and needs with a keen interest in the library – from young people eager to be involved in the design - to a retired women's reading group who met monthly, enjoying the social aspects as much as the book discussion.

All these activities ceased during the extraordinary year that 2020 proved to be. Libraries now have to rethink how to maintain their role as a focus point for the community.

# Following in the footsteps of retail

Over the past two decades, library services had undergone a metamorphosis, engaging with new readers and communities, and often following the lead of retail. A sense of ownership and belonging was encouraged amongst individuals and communities who may previously have felt excluded and would not have used the library.

The Idea Stores paved the way to use the library 'brand' as a means to engage with users: crafting a comprehensive brand strategy which communicated the library offer, staff role(s) and behaviour; the 'message' of library and learning as a means of empowerment, and a consistent customer experience in the design of the space.





# Delivering a digital experience

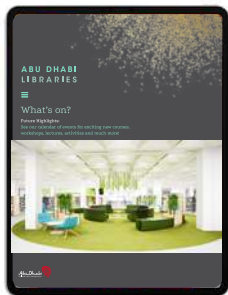
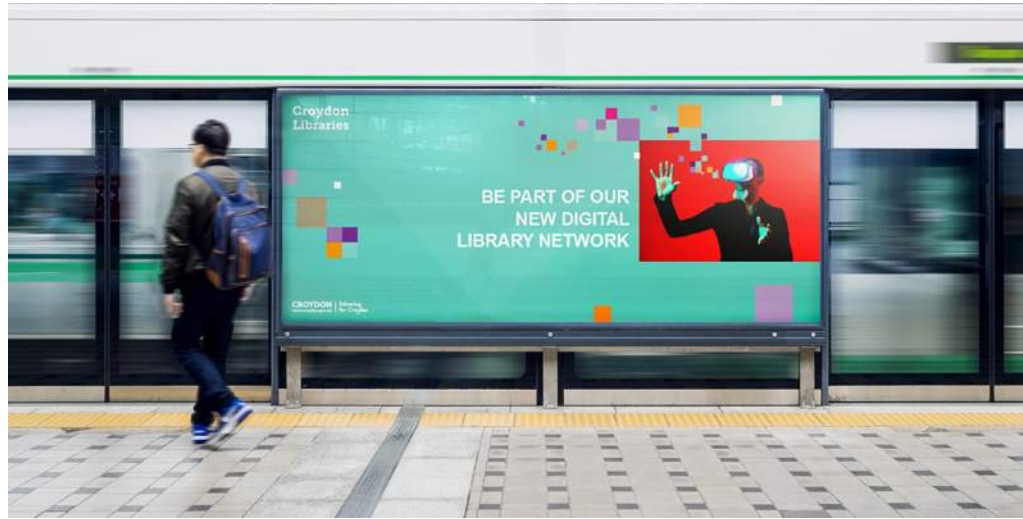
Yet again, libraries must follow the lead of retail: building their brand in a virtual space, engaging through social media and other online channels with an ever-widening community, encouraging take-up of all the services the library has to offer - from leisure reading to study and research.

Throughout the pandemic, many libraries have shown huge initiative in continuing to lend materials, from safe drop off points to quarantining returned books for a safe period of time.

As an example, Warwickshire Libraries have offered 'keep in touch' calls for the vulnerable, Reading Friends via the telephone, online newspapers, ebooks and an online programme of events and activities including storytime, virtual clubs and reading groups via Facebook.

**During the 2020 pandemic, over 1200 new members joined the library service.**





# Building the library brand: a marriage of digital and physical

The paradox of retail is that a greater digital presence requires something different on the high street to attract footfall and build brand loyalty. Pre-Covid, weariness with an online existence put the focus on offering experiences, particularly to millennials. Retailers such as Rapha, retailing cycle wear, created a hub and café in Central London for like minded cycling enthusiasts. A buzzing space with movies, exhibits and coffee, it offers a sense of membership and belonging which goes far beyond retailing sportswear. Similarly, retailer Lululemon (selling high-end yoga-wear), offers a café, yoga classes and social events to cement brand loyalty.

Clearly, the success of an experiential approach to retail will now be challenged by the social distancing 'habit', but in the long run - initiatives that create customer loyalty by offering real experiences - will be the future for both retailers and libraries. As pandemic restrictions ease, libraries will regain their position as a community public space. Inevitably, there will be some more permanent alterations, with a heightened awareness of the threat of infection.

A key lesson from retail is to build on the strengthened offer online combined with an engaging brand experience. Online retail received a huge boost during lockdown and many high street shops have struggled to adapt. Coming out of lockdown, and continuing a trend already in process, retailers will be providing more seamless virtual transactions, matched with

a genuine customer experience in the physical store. Brand activation will be key.

Libraries too, need to ensure that customers feel connected through the online experience, but still visit the library for social, learning and creative experiences, from classroom groups to informal social meetings.

**The key is to create a strong brand message to reach out to people – both online and with in the physical library – making members feel that they're part of a high quality club, which helps them experience the best their local community has to offer.**







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