The Fall and Rise og the Physical Library

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to shed light on the present situation for the physical library. It is our argument that the uncertainty for the future of the public library as a place which characterized the 1990's today is replaced by a new belief in the importance of the physical library. This belief is not only strong among librarians but also among scholars, politicians and city-planners. The paper introduces this renewed interest in the physical library, emphasizes new trends in library-development and finally pinpoints an essential challenge when new libraries are being planned or built.

KEYWORDS: The physical library, new libraries, urban development, library trends.

Introduction

The rapid development and distribution of the Internet since the middle of the 1990's did create great and understandable uncertainty concerning the future of the physical library among scholars, politicians and not least professionals in the library field. Would the new possibility for Internet-access mean that the users now only would use the library from a distance and not attend the physical library anymore? And would "the librarian" be replaced by "the cybrarian" – the internet-librarian who completely independent of time, and without needing the physical library as a base, could service the users? In other words: would the physical library, as we have known it for centuries, dissolve into cyberspace? As we now know – and in spite of all prophesies of doom – this did not happen.

If we take a look at the development of today we are able to note that the possibilities of the physical library have indeed been replenished by many Internet-founded offers. At the same time we have also witnessed a renaissance for the physical library as a centre for culture and knowledge in the local community. People have not stopped using the physical library. But they may use it in new ways. Furthermore, both major and minor cities are building new – and often very spectacular – libraries these years. The famous so-called "experience library" in Cerritos near Los Angeles and the new public libraries in Seattle and Amsterdam are only few examples of new and headline grabbing libraries in US and Europe. And the three Nordic capitals – Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen are likewise only few examples of cities which have new main-libraries on the drawing board. Thus the physical library is by no means dead. Actually the development suggests that the physical library is more alive than ever.

In this paper we will deal with three main themes. *Firstly*, we will stress some of the background for the renewed interest in the physical library. We will pinpoint the role of the library as an icon and a landmark for cities and regions. Moreover, we will look at the physical library as place-maker that contributes to local strategies for growth and synergy between local businesses, local institutions for culture and knowledge and local population.

Secondly, we will outline three tendencies characterizing new libraries. We will look at the library as "a space for experience" in which the library is staged to create different experiences. Furthermore, we will look at the library as "a space for learning" in which pervasive information technology is part of the library. Finally, we will draw attention to the library as a so-called "third place" – a place between homes and work in which people can meet crosswise of generations, cultures and ethnical background.

Thirdly, we will call attention to a very important challenge or dilemma which must be taken into consideration when new libraries are planned or built: how does one create a unique icon which at the same time is a democratic and all-embracing house providing room for all parts of the population?

The renewed interest in the physical library
The physical library is without doubt undergoing a radical change in relation to content, function and appearance these years. Once upon a time public libraries were quiet places with shelves and collections of books supporting the enlightenment of citizens. During the last few decades new functions and not least new media have been added to public libraries. The development of the latest years shows that the more traditional media of the library are going to share the attention of the user with new attractive media-platforms. Furthermore, the library will, to an increasing degree, be a meeting-place in the local community supporting many different needs of the user in late-modern society. Thus, the public library of today is not only shelves and media in a rational universe; it is also a flexible space for contemplation, experience, inspiration, communication and innovation.

Both among scholars and professionals in the library field, we have been witnessing a renewed interest in the physical library during the last decade. In 2003 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published a coffee-table book which presented 100 new library buildings of the world and the philosophy behind them (Wu). And in 2006 the well-reputed journal Library Quarterly, as a consequence of an overwhelming interest for contributing to a special issue about the library as a place, took initiative to publish a book about the topic (Bushman and Leckie). This interest is quite surprising as far as the physical library on the whole seemed without future just a few years ago.

The situation then was first and foremost a result of the introduction the Internet and the development of the virtual library which followed in the wake of the distribution of the Internet from the middle of the 1990's. Would the physical library disappear in cyperspace and would "the cybrarian" replace "the librarian" such as predicted in the paper "Vom bibliothekar zum cybrarian – die zukunft des berufs in der virtuellen bibliothek" (From librarian to cybrarian – the future of the profession in the virtual library) presented at the 61st IFLA conference (Lux 1995). An example of the same uncertainty from Denmark is a governmental report on libraries in the information-age from 1997, which likewise predicted that the development in the following 10 years would be a move towards the user's access from a distance as a replacement of the physical access (Kulturministeriet 1997). Indeed a very logical message when the technological development seems to undermine the traditional use of the library. But as we all know it can be

very difficult to foretell the future. Actually, although libraries now have more virtual offers to the public, this does not mean that the users have stopped using the physical library. Recent investigations in Denmark show that the number of visits to libraries has risen in the first half of this decade (Biblioteksstyrelsen 2005). The experience so far is that the physical library and the development of new media platforms and technology by no means are clashing contrasts. What happens is that the role of the physical library change during these years. Thus, Danish investigations show that most of the users to day leave the library without having lent anything (KL 2004).

The library as an icon
In 2008 the Danish Library Association (Danmarks Biblioteksforening) published the book "Biblioteksrummet" (The Library Space) in which new tendencies in both national and international library-building and arrangement are dealt with (Niegaard et al. 2008). Among the code words for new libraries is flexibility in space and arrangements, development from collection towards interactive communication of knowledge and culture and a development from being a centre for lending to becoming a living room of the local community. In other words, we see a transformation from a more or less passive collection of books and other media to an active space for experience and inspiration and a local meeting point or so called "third place".

If we furthermore take a brief look upon the libraries build in the last decade in both US and Europe it is noteworthy for a great part of them that they are meant to be not only functional as libraries but also to be distinctive icons or landmarks designed as the pride of the cities in which they are placed. Many of them are designed by world-famous architects and have become the object for great interest from architects and designers all over the world. Examples are the public library in Delft in the Netherlands by the Dutch architects Aat Vos and Lisbeth van der Pol, the library in Seattle by another Dutch architect: Rem Koolhaas or the main library in Salt Lake City by the Israeli-American architect Moshe Safdie, which in 2006 was appointed library of the year by the American library Association (ALA). These libraries are all examples of how local authorities use the planning of new libraries as opportunities to create a spectacular and head-line grabbing icon for their cities. Thus, among local politicians and authorities awareness about possibilities in connection with a new library clearly exists. They seem to believe that the public library as an icon-building can provide the city with an architectonical marked character and a value of attraction that reach far beyond its immediate significance for the local users.

Growth and synergy
Internationally, we witness an increasing focus on urban development, on local strategies for growth and on how a

city or a region can create its image, establish a position, and place itself on the map (see Bianchini and Landry 1995). At the same time, we look more and more at urban development as a continuously process in which openness, creativity and local anchoring are key concepts (Landry 2000 and Mercer 2005). Experience shows that the public library can be an essential factor in this process, and that the library as such holds a potential for the city. For instance the famous American economist and urban developer Richard Florida has created a so-called "index of creativity". In brief, this is a way of measuring a city's part of, what Florida describes as "the three T's": Talent, Tolerance and Technology. According to Florida, the existence of these ingredients is essential to urban development and growth (Florida 2002). It is worth mentioning that those cities which rank among the highest at the index of creativity are in most cases cities which have built new libraries. The reason might very well be that the public library is a neutral and democratic place open for everybody, and that the public library can raise the general level of knowledge due to its technology, materials and communication. Furthermore, the library can contribute to the local identity due to its manifold of cultural activities.

It goes without saying that spokesmen for the public library takes every opportunity to advocate for the library under these very favourable conditions. In autumn 2008 an international conference titled "The Smart City and its Libraries" was held in Copenhagen to discuss how to incorporate and support the synergy between the library and the city. An obstacle for the conference was the report: "Making Cities Stronger: Public library contributions to local economic development" published in 2007 by The Urban Libraries Council – an association of public libraries in metropolitan areas in USA. In short this study finds that the library is a very important part of the communities learning infrastructure which supports local economic development. Among other things, the library supports early literacy, workforce readiness and small businesses, and not least: the library facilities have a positive impact on downtowns, commercial areas and neighbourhoods (The Urban Library Council 2007). Naturally The Urban Libraries Council is an association with a very exact agenda but the message certainly seems to have been delivered: a new library can contribute to the development of a region or a city.

New library trends
Altogether, the physical library has a fair wind these years but at the same time the positive development depends upon whether or not the professionals in the field have the ability to renew and rethink the library. In this section we will draw attention to tendencies characterizing new libraries. The emphasis will be on tendencies which in our opinion are significant for the development and which at the very same time add something qualitative new to the physical library.

A space for experience – staging the library
Today the public library finds itself in an intensified competitive situation, fighting for the attention of both users and politicians. The distance between the library's offers and e.g. the new bookshop with a smart café, comfortable armchairs and the opportunity to read the latest books and periodicals on the spot, has narrowed. The late-modern consumer usually has both the economical and the cultural capital to choose or reject. And if the bookseller is offering you an altogether better experience, why not choose this? Just as the possibility of finding information, knowledge and entertainment on the Internet has challenged the library. If the library is to assert itself in the profusion of more or less spectacular offers, it is necessary to think in innovative terms.

Over the past few years "experience" as a concept has become a mantra. This is associated particularly with the two American economists Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore and their book *The Experience Economy* (1999). According to Pine and Gilmore any business wanting to survive on a market where the competition for the attention of the customers is stiff, and the possibilities for consumption endless, can no longer succeed by just offering goods and services. Instead the individual firm must be actively engineering new experiences, and each product must be able to tell a story which will leave distinct emotional tracks. This experience-economical line of thought has with lightening speed spread from business life to the everyday life of cultural institutions.

In USA the new library in Cerritos (built 2002) has taken up the glove and created a library where experiences plays a very important part of the arrangement and the communication in the library. Another American example is the renovation in 2004 of the children's library in White Plains north of New York City. In this library experiences also play a key-role in both arrangement and mediation. It is in this context striking that both libraries report on a significant raise in the numbers of visits to the libraries after the new focus on experiences (Jochumsen and Hvenegard Rasmussen 2008).

A space for learning – pervasive information technology in the library
Back in the 1990's the physical library and new information technologies were seen as competitors, and several spectators have declared a quick death for the physical library. But today new information technology is seen as an opportunity to enrich the library. The technology does not only have to be interpreted as a foe, it is also a means to create a more interesting physical library. This tendency can be entitled pervasive information technology in the library and is today an important trend in library-development. In Denmark Aarhus Public Libraries is a pioneer. One illustrative example of their work is the project "Transformation Lab". In the assessment report for the project they described the background as follows:

The digital revolution has provided completely new possibilities for communication of the library's resources, but at the same time poses a serious question to the physical library: When everything is on the net – why should the users go to the library? ... The library as a passive framework for physical material collections is being phased out, while a new intelligent room is emerging – a cross field between the digital and the physical where the library space can become an interactive interface for user access to both digital and physical resources (Thorup 2007: 10 – our translation).

The transformation room in Aarhus was placed at the main entrance so that it would be the first impression users had when entering the library. In a period over two and a half years the 500 m2 room was transformed five times, each time experimenting with an experience-based communication of e.g. literature, news and music. The literature room consisted e.g. of a mix of literary events and attempts to include technology in the communication of literature. An example of the use of technology in communication was an interactive floor which users could communicate with via e-mail or text-message. During the experimental period the floor was used partly to give information and partly to mediate the various quizzes with literary content. Tips on literature to users via their cell phones were developed. You registered for this service on the library's homepage, where you also stated your literary preferences. After that it was registered each time the cell phone and its owner visited the library, and immediately afterward a text-message was sent with a tip on literature. The development of pervasive information technology in the library can be seen as a tangible attempt to change the perception of the library's brand so that users also in the future still can see the purpose of visiting the physical library.

A space for meeting – the library as a third place
As mentioned above we also see a development for the library from being a centre for lending to becoming a living room of the local community. In connection to this, the concept of "third places" is often heard. A third place can be defined as a place in which people can meet crosswise of generations, cultures and ethnical background. The concept is usually traced back to the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg and his book "The Great Good Place" (1999) in which he study the different public places where people can gather and put aside the concerns of home and work. Oldenburg sees these places as the heart of a community's social vitality and the grassroots of democracy.

Norwegian library-researcher Ragnar Audunson also discusses the concept of "the third place" in relation to the public library (2005). Audunson shows how cultural and social changes caused by the growth of multicultural society and the growth of the so-called information or knowledge society makes it necessary to redefine the traditional role of the public library. Audunsons point is that democracy in a multicultural context is dependent on what he refers to at "low-intensive" meeting places where we can see one another across the high-intensive arenas on which we engage, and that this makes the role of the public library as a physical meeting place important.

The library as "a third place" has become a central issue in both the debate and the actual design of new libraries. At the before mentioned conference held in Copenhagen, the role as a "third place" was discussed under headlines as "Open for everyone – not a club", Uniting the neighbourhood" and "A neutral ground where people may come and go as they want" among many others. At the same time it is noteworthy that many recently build libraries provide space for "third place-activities" in different varieties that are meant to stimulate the meeting crosswise of generations and cultures. An example would be the new library in Seattle from 2004 which has a lot of free space together with many different and independent environments. Another example is the new main library in Salt Lake City in which religious and nonreligious festivals for ethnical minorities are being held, and hereby connect different cultures.

There is reason to believe that not only the local community but also the library itself benefit from such priorities. Thus, visibility is of the greatest importance for the legitimacy of the physical library both towards the population and the politicians. The legitimacy of the public library in the future is highly dependent on the mutual relationship between the library and the surrounding local community; therefore it is an essential topic how the bonds between the public library and the local community can be strengthened. In this context the library as a "third place" is certainly one possibility which the professional in the field seems to have taken to their heart.

An important challenge
In conclusion we will pinpoint an overall challenge which ought to confront both politicians and library-professionals when new libraries are planned or built.

As we have seen both newly build libraries and libraries still on the drawing board are meant to be distinctive icons or landmarks. A role which is, as we have seen, to a considerable extent supported by the field itself. This seems eminently reasonable, particular when considering a new library as part of a desired urban development. But at the same there is reason to believe that the library contribute to this development first and foremost due to its role as a democratic place open for everybody and due to its ability to create local identity. Thus, it is crucial that

the library still preserves and strengthens the role as all-embracing cultural institution and that the library in spite of different social preconditions and different needs stills provide a common framework. Therefore, it is of great importance that the emphasis on the library as a headline-grabbing and unique icon does not at the same time, more or less unintended, undermine the library as a democratic and open house providing room for all parts of the population. In other words: if the role of a third place is important for the library, both architecture and arrangement have to appeal crosswise of different generations and different cultures.

The challenge of today is to create a living, dynamic physical library based on pervasive information technology without at the same time dismantling barter away the authenticity, non-commercialism and inclusivity which so far has been the hallmark of the library.

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