

## Future City, Future Library:

### Experiences and lessons Learned from the Library of Birmingham

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For eighteen short months after its opening in September 2013, the Library of Birmingham was a success story without parallel in the world of public libraries. It attracted millions of visitors for multiple new purposes, won countless awards, transformed the model for the design and delivery of public library services, and changed the image of a whole city. I directed the project which conceived and created the Library of Birmingham. This is our story. Thank you for inviting me to share it with you.



The design brief for the architects included three guiding principles: (a) to be welcoming and accessible to all parts of the community, (b) to be part of the public domain and integrate into the city centre location, and (c) to invite visitors to step into a journey of learning and exploration.

The programme for service transformation worked seamlessly with the design development, and is discussed later in this presentation.

What is a librarian, what is a book, what is a library? My themes are those of learning and resource discovery in a fast-changing world. It is our professional responsibility to continually change and reinvent ourselves and our role. Libraries are in need for change in the 21st Century as traditional materials and ways are a dead end street. Most importantly, the library is part of the urban landscape, part of the community, no matter how large or small it may be. This is why the Library of Birmingham pays so much attention to the concept of

public realm, both the spaces inside the library, its relationship to the civic spaces outside, and the bridging spaces which are part of the library but outside – the terraces, the amphitheatre, even the brown roof.

I am often asked: which libraries gave you greatest inspiration for the Library of Birmingham. We visited many, all of which supplied ideas either for the design of library spaces, or for the design of future library services. Seattle, Vancouver in North America, Singapore, Amsterdam, Helsinki, many libraries in Holland, Denmark and Sweden. Colleagues in Barcelona and Aarhus had inspiring ideas. But I want to discuss two libraries which you will never see but which should inspire us all.

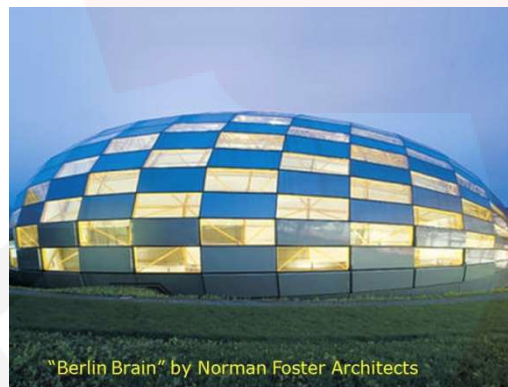
Alberto Manguel, in his wonderful extended essay “The Library at Night”, puts it poetically: -

*“During the day, the library is a realm of order. Down and across the lettered passages I move with visible purpose, summoning books to my attention according to their allotted rank and file. The structure of the place is visible: a maze of straight lines, not to become lost in but for finding, a logical sequence, an obedient geography and a memorable hierarchy. But at night the atmosphere changes. The order decreed by library catalogues is merely conventional, it holds no prestige in the shadows. One book calls to another unexpectedly, creating alliances across different cultures and centuries. If the library in the morning suggests an echo of the severe and reasonably wishful order of the world, the library at night seems to rejoice in the world’s essential joyful muddle.”*

I wanted to build the Library at Night, where discovery and serendipity, surprise and exploration are most important.

The Library of The Forest is no ordinary library. It is not arranged according to topic and subject, nor is it navigated by means of the Dewey Decimal System. It has so far been a quarter of a century in the making, and at last count it consisted of no more than 1100 books. Each book records a journey made by walking, and each contains the natural objects and substances gathered along that particular path – seaweed, snakeskin, mica flakes, crystals of quartz, pine chippings, pillows of moss, worked flints, pollen, acorn cups, leaves...the library exists as a multi-dimensional atlas, a journey of discovery.

One significant visit was to Berlin, to Norman Foster's Library at the Free University. The building has been affectionately nicknamed the "Berlin Brain" for both its cranial shape and its central role in academic life at the university. It is a beautiful design, one of many beautiful libraries around the world, and functionally effective too. It recalls immediately the shape of the human brain. From our many journeys I learned much about design-led architecture and about library functionality, what works and what doesn't, but nowhere made me think quite as much.



I thought first of the great Ranganathan's fifth Law: The library is a growing organism.

By this law Ranganathan means that a library should be a continually changing institution, never static in its outlook. Books, methods, and the physical library should be updated over time.

This law as conceived focused more on the need for internal change than on changes in the environment itself. Dr. Ranganathan argued that library organizations must accommodate growth in staff, the physical collection, and patron use. This involved allowing for growth in the physical building, reading areas, shelving, and in space for the catalogue. This is growth that for many of us today seems unnecessary, unachievable and simply undesirable.

But, Ranganathan also sought to institute massive changes to the library system and he wrote about such things as open access and education for all which essentially had the potential to empower the masses and encourage civil discourse (and potentially disobedience). Although there's no evidence that Ranganathan did this for political reasons, his changes to the library concept had the effect of educating more people, making

information available to all, and even aiding women and minorities in the information-seeking process.

So, the library is not just as an instrument of improvement and empowerment for the individual and society, and potentially a subversive instrument at that, but also an organism that must change and develop itself – like a brain!

But I am getting ahead of myself. I firmly believe that the first lesson of all library design and transformative programming is to know your community. So I should take time to tell you about Birmingham: the second largest city in England, home to around 1m, large for Europe, the regional capital of an urban area of around 5.2m – the same size as a small European country like Denmark or Norway. It is located in the centre of England, lacking any access to the coast and without natural resources, either rivers or mineral assets under the ground. Although it has become the hub of the country's transport network in the successive ages of canals, railways and roads, it thrives mostly because of the creativity and ingenuity of its people. People make cities.

Birmingham is the future face of all European cities. The population profile is crucial for determining our library: we are the youngest major city in Europe, with the highest percentage of children and young people under the age of 25, and Europe's second most diverse city – only Amsterdam has a higher percentage of minority populations.

These features are a great opportunity for a modern city. But also a great challenge. With youthfulness and diversity come the challenges of unemployment, low skills levels, poor literacy standards, and unhealthy lifestyles, and an unflattering image of the city to the outside world.

And this, I believe, gives the answer to the question: What direction should libraries take? I argue here for a deeper understanding of what cities and their citizens need as the way to drive change: people need guidance and inspiration in learning rather than objective information, the city needs their citizens to become more literate, better skilled, and to adopt healthier lifestyles, be more oriented towards social cohesion. We call this social capital. Nobody is better placed than libraries to realise social capital.

Recognition of the significance of the Library in the cycle of urban renewal starts with site identification. Although from many perspectives ours was not an ideal site – with access challenges, rather too small – it had some overwhelming advantages relevant to the centrality of the library experience in the social regeneration of the city. It fronts the city’s main public square, abuts the main pedestrian route through the city, and is adjacent to other cultural facilities – theatre, museum and concert and exhibition hall. These factors overrode any objections to the choice of site, and indeed it was a site that had been used as a car park for over 70 years, not ideal use for prime city centre land.

Let me talk about the design of library spaces. The first message is that you will not get everything right, there are always compromises which must be made. But we should aim high, and adopt clear principles of way finding, adjacent services, and the optimal location for each aspect of service. The first lesson is that everything wants to be on the ground floor. Not possible. So the flow of people through the building, and the need to find ways to spread users across the whole building, was important. We studied not just libraries but hotels, airports, museums, to learn from the circulation of people.

In 2008, a Danish researcher investigated what he called the difference between “Information Recovery” and “Information Discovery”. Put simply, information recovery addresses information where the searcher had prior knowledge of its existence, information discovery tackles information of which the searcher was previously unaware.

How, he asked, can the design of library spaces best support information discovery? Libraries have developed a wide range of tools to support information recovery, for example, library catalogues, classification systems, shelves. In this study, the focus was on what dimensions in the physical library may correspondingly support information discovery, and afford opportunities for serendipity when users find materials and information for which they had not planned.

So the library interface can be designed to invite users with different *interest spaces* to interact with the diversity of human, physical and digital information resources available in the library. This influenced our thinking a great deal.

Two quotes: on the screen are the words of the American author Mark Twain. These guide my life, and guided our ambitions and approach to risk in designing and operating the Library. And the words of Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Malala Yousafzai, on the occasion of the opening of the Library of Birmingham: - *“a city without a library, she said, is like a graveyard. And let us not forget that even one book, one pen, one child and one teacher can change the world. Pens and books are the weapons that defeat terrorism.”*

As Socrates said: we need to stop fighting the past and focus on the future.

Daniel Burnham, American architect and planner, author of 1909 Plan of Chicago, encouraged us all: “Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realised. Make big plans. Aim high in hope and work.”

The message is very clear. Libraries are powerful places, do not limit your ambitions. We should all be aiming to create the best library in the world.

First and foremost, we are reinventing public space. Give people free wifi, comfortable spaces and the opportunity to buy decent coffee, and they will come! Of course more is required, but it's a start. Let me use this slide as a convenient entry point to a discussion about the public library as a source of commercial income. There are well-established sources of commercial income, such as retail and catering, but unless these facilities are at a very large scale net profit will always be relatively low. Meeting room income, with added value from a range of catering options, is more scalable, as the asset can be made to work very hard for most hours of the day. Most lucrative are one-off events, gala dinners, wedding receptions, corporate events, but a word of caution: you must invest in professional management, those who are paying a premium price expect a quality event with no mistakes. Once this investment is made, the quality and originality of the offer, in a public library, will bring commercial rewards. Even so, do not overestimate the level of income or the benefit to the financial bottom line of the library: as long as core library business – entering the library space for reasons of study – is free of charge, then libraries will never operate profitably, and nor should they: they are for the public good.

So what can we make of these images in relation to the **library as a place**? Classical references abound: -

*“Libraries: The medicine chest of the soul”, read the inscription over the door of the Library at Thebes, and Cicero, the great Roman orator, famously wrote: - “If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need.”*

These suggest a place of safety, of healing, of recovery, of rest. I prefer more modern and more challenging images of the library.

The Denver Post, of all things, wrote in 2003: -*“Libraries are not safe places, and the reason for that is there are ideas to be found.”*

Willy Russell, great British playwright and lyricist, once wrote *“I pray that no child of mine would ever descend into such a place as a library. They are indeed most dangerous places and unfortunate is she or he who is lured into such a hellhole of enjoyment, stimulus, facts, passion and fun.”*

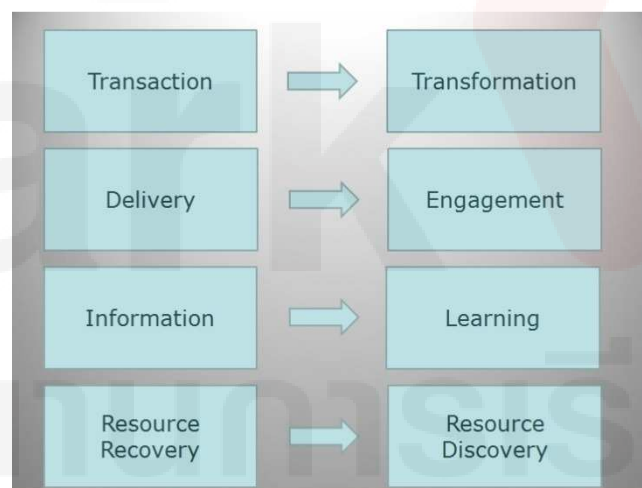
A Library for the twenty-first century is still...a Library. But it is more. We did not try to find new names, but to redefine the concept “library”. Let me expose some of the thinking to you. Technologies now allow us access to unprecedentedly large amounts of information ranging in quality from excellent to the highly dubious. But the democratisation of information, available through the Web and whether organised by the Dewey classification system or virtually by modern search engines, also contains the seeds of its own destruction: information overload. In theory we get more serendipity and lateral searching, in practice the user perspective is severely narrowed.

Information overload refers to the difficulty a person can have understanding an issue and making decisions, caused by the presence of too much information. <sup>1</sup>The term was popularized by Alvin Toffler in his book Future Shock. Psychologists have long recognized that humans have a limited capacity to store, assimilate and process current information in the memory. When people go beyond these limits "overload" results. It is under these conditions that people will become confused and are likely to make poorer decisions.

And so the library of the future has a role to play: to free people from the constraints of democratised information, and to enable people to convert information, through a process of learning and exploration, into knowledge — of self, of others, of the world.

The proposition we put forward is that a library of the future can provide a social space in which *knowledge*, not information is democratised. It can be an enabling infrastructure for social interaction, knowledge acquisition, co-creation, creativity and personal and community development. Diversity of people, perspective and information should be encouraged, so that new knowledge, new networks of people and knowledge, new understanding and innovation is more likely to occur.

We anticipated great change in the way in which citizens use the Library, and indeed only 15% of visitors in the Birmingham Library come for book related "transactions"; yet we could see that almost 85% of the library's organisational resource was directed towards these "transactions". This led us to create a simple but visionary path for change: from transactions to transformations; from information to learning; from service delivery to engagement, and from resource recovery to resource recovery. The ambition of the library was to improve the life of its visitors, to change their destiny, to inspire them for the future. This requires the library to invite its visitors to make the journey from information to learning in order to achieve personal knowledge as an outcome.



I will turn now to the planning process for the Library. At its heart was the notion of community engagement. If the multiple stakeholders for the library development were not engaged with the radical ideas underpinning both the physical design and the service design, the Library would fail. This stakeholder analysis was a vital tool for us at the planning stage in tracking how well we were doing in engaging the hearts and minds of the city. The Library



was not to be our library, but rather the Library of the people – a People’s Palace, our architect calls it.

Great care is needed not to raise expectations during design phases of a major building project. We adopted the term “engagement” in preference to “consultation”, and never solicited opinions about the design as it developed. Much more important was to engage with citizens regarding their expectations of a public library in the twenty-first century, and to operate within our set goals for engagement: to raise awareness of the new library, to engage the public in thinking about how they might use the new library, to inform the redesign of services, and to ensure the evolving building and services design was in tune with what is important to customers/ potential customers

We found high levels of interest in the operational functions of a large building and the priorities a Library should adopt: catering, provision for young people, exhibition spaces, seating design, all benefitted from strong public input and the engagement process was useful in retaining design focus on what really mattered to the public. Interestingly too, we established high degrees of concern for a diverse range of subjects ranging from funding, the green credentials of the building, accessible features for people with disabilities, through to an overall interest to identify the benefits of the public library to the city. This too focussed our attention and kept our feet firmly on the ground.

A great success for the Library was the idea of Community Ambassadors. There were 26 of them, representing all aspects of the city’s diverse population – age, gender and ethnicity, including a homeless man and another with severe disability. Some were professionals, all contributed in different ways to taking the story of what we were trying to accomplish with the Library into their communities – stories told in their words, not mine, and much more powerful. Ian’s story is instructive: from living on the streets he obtained a job on the Library building team, new skills, new friends, and now he has another job, a home, and is a published poet. This is the power of libraries.

We made a visible commitment to economic and social regeneration for the city at the construction stage of the project – five years before the library opened. Apart from the huge investment into the city’s construction sector which the project represented, we secured a

contractual commitment which brought employment opportunities to long-term unemployed local people, young apprentice schemes, and jobs for homeless and former prisoners.

We also engaged the city's many communities with the building programme, inviting thousands of local people to tour the building site, and involving many school children in the construction process. This all helped to secure popular support for the project.

Use of technology and social media was critical to our urgent need to find new ways to communicate with young people – the future of the city, but the section of the population which surveys had shown to be least aware of and engaged with the idea of a new library for the city. The slide here shows its age a little, but reflects the speed with which technology moves: we built the Library in Second Life, used Facebook and other gaming techniques to involve our audiences.



Our goal was to generate civic pride in the Library among all sections of the community, and we succeeded. On this slide the city's business leaders celebrate the opening of the Library at a pre-launch party in the Library's Book Rotunda, and ...

This was opening day, when we were first sure we had a success story on our hands. Queues developed, and for the first week there were never less than 500 people queueing to enter the Library. They were happy to wait, because they knew that the crowds meant success for their library – a cause for pride in their city.



The Library became on the UK's most visited cultural attractions, and the leading attraction outside London. I remain hugely proud of the 90% + ratings for every aspect of the Library which this survey, from October 2014, demonstrates.



I turn now to the role of Library staff, and the relationship between these roles and the transformed service I described earlier, with its focus on engagement and the achievement of outcomes for citizens rather than on transactional service delivery. This has several profound implications. Firstly, that we must be more business-like in our recruitment of specialists, not expecting librarians and archivists to be good at marketing, youth work, conferencing, events management, facilities and so on. Secondly, to make sure we use expert skills where they are needed – too much of the time of professional librarians was, we discovered, taken up in routine enquiry work which did not require qualified staff. So we re-engineered the whole service design to put the right resource in the right place at the right time. Thirdly, that we expected our visitor footfall to at least double – it did. This meant we would be serving twice the volume of people with the same staff numbers, so radical change to self-service and to more efficient use of resources was essential. This slide

is the outcome of a staff workshop, at which they were invited to describe the role of the Librarian of the future.



Here is more detail from the survey I mentioned, setting out the many reasons why people visited the Library. Most significant for me is that only 15% came to borrow an item. I do not foresee an end to children borrowing books from a library, but this data gives me great confidence that as adults gradually cease to use libraries for this purpose, so the public library still holds many attractions which will cause people to visit.

These beliefs led us to specify an environment and an operating model which was event rich, focussed on learning through experiences, and enabled library users to co-create activities and events in spaces which the Library managed in a “light-touch manner”.

Aspects of events programming which you must consider are the extent to which you enter into partnership with other organisations, how much “co-production” of events with community organisations you allow, how brave – risky – will you be, and who is in control. An example here of an event which was out of control, with the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the American politician, and a risk we took with our events brochure, which was produced entirely by a group of young people, not by the library. We gave them authority.

This allowed us to operate with a broad classification of events and activities, which was helpful for efficiency and for long-range strategic planning. Events could be delivered by the library, or in partnership with other organisations – arts and community groups, schools, universities and so on – or just sanctioned by the Library, meaning that we give permission for events but have no delivery role, and at the extreme end events which were not known to the Library beforehand – almost flash mob style of events by community groups.

And this in turn should encourage library managers to ask fundamental questions about the ownership of the library space, its management, culture and ambience, and to ask themselves how much risk they are prepared to take to create a community-led environment – risks of noise, disruption, untidiness, risks of causing dissatisfaction to other users. Ultimately, whose library is it? There is no right answer, but I would encourage you to ask the questions.

Here are just a few examples of risk – handing over an entire exhibition – design, curation and delivery – to young people, allowing rock bands to play in the Library or on its terrace gardens, and encouraging controversial sculpture outside the Library.

Diversity in programming is essential: the gender, ethnic, social and ability mix of the city must be fully recognised in order to achieve not just maximum penetration of the target audience, but also credibility with the people of the city.

And other examples which encourage engagement from all sectors of the community – the gala dinner for business leaders, children’s activities on the terrace, and a photographic exhibition curated by young people all have importance in developing ownership of the Library in the hearts and minds of the people of the city.

Surprise is an essential component of events programming for the Library. Always we encourage the question “why not?” rather than the question “why”? And the answer, firstly because we can, secondly because these activities all foster a sense of community ownership, even in a large multicultural city. So it is right that the Library should help people celebrate important lifestyle events – graduation, weddings and so on, and to develop a reputation where interesting things, people and ideas come into fortunate collision.

We learned many useful lessons from early events programming at the Library, especially when things go wrong. Of first importance is having the right staff, and the right number of staff, to manage each event; understand the building – an entire event can be ruined by poor lighting, inadequate sound systems or incorrect signage and greeting; know your audience, and get the marketing right; and get pricing strategies and ticketing sorted out at an early stage. Most people are less concerned attach a higher priority to value for money than to the actual price.

We had no previous experience of exhibitions programming, and can also share many lessons for this topic too. It was important to appoint an Exhibitions Manager to co-ordinate the many different aspects to mounting an exhibition, and not to underestimate the amount of time and resource needed to define, curate, prepare and build an exhibition which will command both critical acclaim and popular interest.

A significant development has been the emergence of self-starting and self-governing groups who have colonised different areas of the Library at different times or days. The Library has become the community meeting place in the city. Again, this emphasises the extent to which citizens need to feel ownership of a community facility, and not to feel the need to seek permission to operate – within legal limits, of course – within the building.

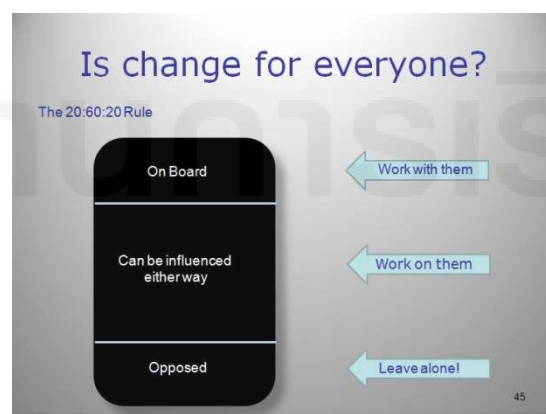
The Library has been positioned as a popular alternative destination for festivals in the city: music, literature, and performance festivals all now schedule events in the Library, adding to the range of diverse attractions which draw different audiences to the Library.

This slide illustrates an important dimension of the transformation journey from service delivery to engagement. Archival resources are used by library staff to promote greater understanding within communities of their individual and shared heritage and identities, using workshops, events, activities and training programmes. This is a very pro-active scheme designed to help local community groups to be self-supporting.



An important aspect of transformed services is the engagement of volunteers with the service. We proceeded slowly, largely due to heavy Trade Union opposition to volunteer workers. An early success story has been with gardening volunteers, who help to maintain the terraces. Over 250 people registered an interest in working at the Library as a volunteer. This will be important for future success.

Our Business and Learning service provides an exemplary case study in the transformation journey. Originally a conventional information service for established businesses, this service was at risk as business migrated its information content to the Internet. By refocussing our work on pre-start up entrepreneurs, people who wanted to run a business but lacked the necessary knowledge and/or skill set to do, and people in need of employment or economic advancement, the service has successfully repositioned itself as part of the knowledge economy of the city, no longer as an information service. Advice sessions, workshops and seminars, peer group networking events, are all delivered and managed by library staff retrained as business and learning advisors.



I have described many radical changes to the conventional view of a public library and archive. It is necessary to ask the question when adopting any form of leadership role: are the staff supportive of the goals of business transformation, do they understand the nature

of the future operational model and how they will fit into it, and what can be done to secure maximum engagement with the change process. Time does not permit me to answer all of these questions, but suffice it to say that we can have reasonable confidence that in any organisation facing major cultural change the workforce will split into approximately three groups, usually though not always in these proportions: 20% will understand and support the need for change, 60% will be agnostic, and 20% will be resistant. Our great mistake, and we are not the first to commit this error, was to spend too much time at the beginning of the process trying to convince the resisters. Wrong. Leave them alone. Commit your energies to working with the uncertain majority, and move them into the supporters' camp. The resisters cannot be convinced, and eventually must be moved out of the organisation.



Success takes many forms. High profile media coverage from the British Royal family...

And again, and from actors, musicians and comedians



This perhaps is a more genuine expression of success, captured in the delight of young children, the future of the city, in exploring their library.

Today the Library of Birmingham is much diminished place, with less activity and less excitement. The sun has set on a great period for a public library. Times are hard, with very



little resource to animate the library. One thing is certain though – as the sun sets, tomorrow it will rise again. I am confident that the great days of the Library of Birmingham will return.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to your conference, and thank you for listening so patiently.



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