

In Copenhagen libraries are everywhere

Mikkel Christoffersen

Copenhagen Libraries, Copenhagen, Denmark
c45c@kff.kk.dk

Finn Petersen

Copenhagen Libraries, Copenhagen, Denmark
finnpe@kff.kk.dk



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Abstract:

Copenhagen Libraries is in the middle of a large redesign of its mission and its services. Rather than being a place that provides access – mostly to physical media – we are transforming part of our core service into deconstructed, modular and open learning facilitation and embedding it in Copenhagen environments as diverse as school and kindergartens, gymnasiums and other secondary education institutions, sports and cultural centres – even showing up at for example people's allotment gardens with inspiration for online research into botany and garden designs – and, yes, the traditional library space as well.

Our goal is to become an integral part of public, urban space as a ubiquitous cultural and learning resource whether you choose to use us where you are, where we are or in virtual space. A primary driver behind our efforts is the concept of “equal opportunity.” As a public library we strive to help our patrons bridge the socioeconomic gaps by providing an opportunity to acquire reading and digital competencies and experiences regardless of background.

We are opening the traditional library space not only through extended self-service hours, but also through open events in immediately accessible spaces. When you walk in the Copenhagen Main Library, you're likely to find a lecture going on in front of you that you can join, or seminars on dealing with fake news, participatory democracy, Big Data, surveillance and other hot-button issues. Throughout the city you will find not only traditional branches, but also libraries developing into cultural centres and library run institutions such as fablabs and literary makerspaces as well as library employees using the city as both background and primary subject matter for thematic tours.

Keywords: Public libraries, Denmark, Outreach, Urban life, Open libraries

1.1 Strategic context

In Denmark, public libraries find their mission statement in the “Act regarding library services” from 2000 where it states:

“§ 1. The objective of the public libraries is to promote information, education and cultural activity by making available books, periodicals, talking books and other suitable material, such as recorded music and electronic information resources.”¹

With the proliferation of commercial services today offering a glut of digital entertainment, information and education, the scarcity is no longer the documents but rather attention and time on part of our users. Making informed choices between sources, knowing what and whom to trust and getting the right title among thousands is the challenge now for our users. Not acquiring the sources or the needed title.

Therefore our “Strategy 2014-19” is very clear on the proposition that for the library, providing access is necessary but no longer sufficient for fulfilling its mission.

At the same time, the young generations have a vastly different pattern of media consumption than older ones. Their use is digital, mobile and fragmented and they turn to peers rather than traditional institutions for guidance and inspiration. If the library cannot hook them, they are gone. If we can hook them, we can help them achieve their life goals, and even though they abandon us at various stages of their lives, they will most likely return once they have children of their own. With the rise of the digital and the social it has paradoxically become a lot more difficult getting in touch with non-users as well. Commercial services allow for high levels of personalization and close consumers off in filter bubbles. Bursting bubbles in the benign sense is crucial but a giant task.

Denmark is suffering from the same trend most developed nations are; children do not read nearly as much as they used to. Not only is that bad in and of itself, because it hurts their long-term chances for education and jobs, reading is a fundamental skill underlying everything from digital skills to social skills. Digital and information competencies are crucial for the future wellbeing of not only the Scandinavian welfare state but also our democracy in the modern flood of fake news and partisan truths.

Children, young adults and non-users are therefore crucial user groups for us. Reading promotions, engagement with maker cultures and participatory democracy are some of the ways we reach out for them as described below. However, non-users may also very well be educated and affluent and we make ourselves visible to them as well.

Our view of the library’s fundamental value proposition is detailed in figure 1 below.

¹ http://slks.dk/fileadmin/publikationer/publikationer_engelske/andre/Act_regarding_library_services.pdf

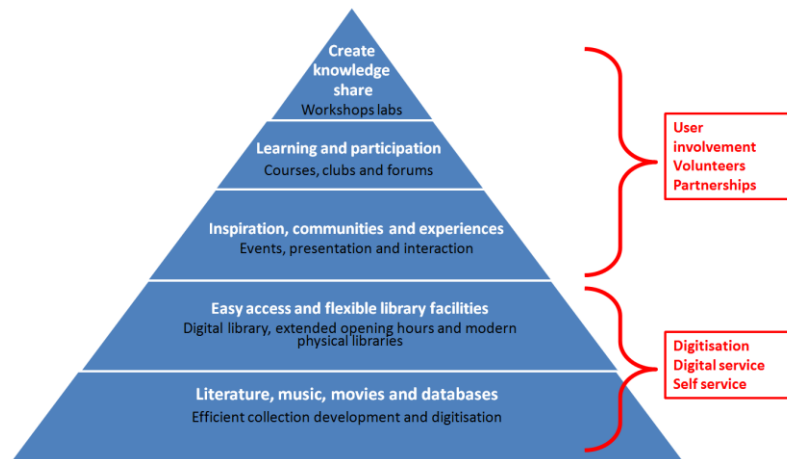


Figure 1. The value pyramid

The point of citizens sharing with each other – becoming smarter together as our new motto says – is exemplified throughout this paper.

We believe that, obviously, people are welcome to pass on everything the library has to offer, but it must be an informed choice. They must know what they are declining. This requires us to get in touch with everybody in principle with the young generations and traditional non-users as the biggest challenges.

Consequently, our strategy for 2014-19 contains the idea of the proactive library. The library has certainly never been confined to the space between its walls, but now more than ever it is vital that the library designs outreach programmes both physically and digitally. The difference between the traditional and the proactive library is outlined below. It is important to note that this is not a question of either/or, but rather non-exclusive perspectives.

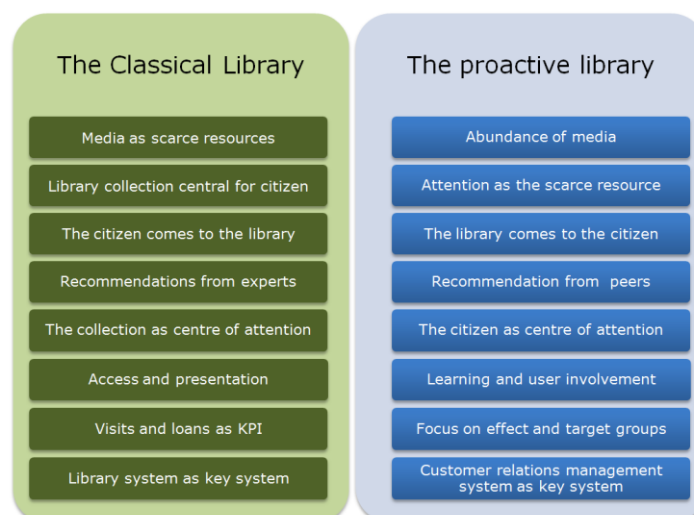


Figure 2. The traditional and the proactive library

The city is growing steadily. 1,000 Danes every month choose Copenhagen as their new home, which results in a strain on resources. With our ambition to reach everyone long enough for them to make an informed decision and to serve those that become regular library

users even better with more offers, our own physical space cannot hold us anyway. We need to bring our services straight to the Copenhageners where they are and to offer up our library space as less a book storage facility and more a logical extension of the cultural life of the city.

1.2 Open libraries and outreach services

Since the public library and citizen service fusion in 2013 the library has been able to cultivate a whole new group of traditional non-users as well as coat-tailing on citizen service outreach efforts. This has led to concepts such as “citizen service to go,” which consists of bicycles that move around the city with all the necessary equipment to perform some of the most popular citizen service tasks such as renewing passports, but the beach library and our self-service library bookcases are part of the same thinking; making the library visible in the cityscape.



Figure 3. Citizen service to go

There are several aspects to making the library more accessible and more visible in the city.

One aspect is the library itself. Open libraries and cultural houses and sports facilities mean that city's cultural assets are much more available to Copenhageners. If you see it, if you pass by, you can probably use it. Also at night and on Sundays. Of course this goes as well for our online presence, but a major part of our digital strategy (not dealt with here) is getting people to use our physical facilities. In practice, if you are registered at the library and have a social security card, you can lock yourself in.

1.3 Open events

Another aspect is what goes on during service hours. It is paramount for our main branch that you can always walk into open events. On any given evening there are author readings and talks, political debate or challenging classes on say German philosophers. Our philosophical Mondays draw upwards of 300 guests. Everything that goes on in the main areas is open to

participation. Come for a book you really need right now, stay for the lecture on Kant's life and works.

EksistensFilosofisk Akademi



præsenterer en åben forelæsningsrække der tematiserer eksistens som et allestedsnærværende problem i den filosofiske tradition. Det foregår hver mandag på Københavns Hovedbibliotek fra kl. 17.00-19.00

05.09	PLATONS EROTIK - Jon Auring Grimm
12.09	KANT - Jacob Lautrup Kristensen
19.09	HEGEL - Rasmus Ugilt
26.09	SCHOPENHAUER - Jon Auring Grimm
03.10	KIERKEGAARD - Stine Zink Kaasgaard
10.10	NIETZSCHE - Jon Auring Grimm
17.10	<i>Efterårsferie</i>
24.10	HEIDEGGER - Søren Gosvig Olesen
31.10	BATAILLE - Jon Auring Grimm
07.11	SARTRE & CAMUS - Jacob Lautrup Kristensen
14.11	ARENDT - Stine Zink Kaasgaard
21.11	DE BEAUVOIR - Tone Frank Dandanell
28.11	DERRIDA - Søren Gosvig Olesen
05.12	BLANCHOT - Tone Frank Dandanell
12.12	NANCY - Rasmus Ugilt

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Figure 4. The Existential Philosophy Academy supported by Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces

1.4 Makerspaces

The same goes for our makerspaces which are popular not only among the new maker people, but also students and hobbyists of various kinds to the rank beginners. Our makerspaces have also given rise to literary makerspaces. Those are initiatives where the promotion and presentation of reading and literature take on a more physical DIY-like appearance such as “build your own poem” with materials crafted in the makerspace. Especially children enjoy the hands-on experience.

Tingbjerg Library in the north of Copenhagen made their makerspace (BST) a collaborative community effort about the rumoured new library there. They explained it like this:²

”With [the Tingbjerg Library makerspace], the people of Tingbjerg and the rest of the people participating, have created a space for making and doing together. The space has explored what making in Tingbjerg might mean and could be by engaging the citizens and the library in workshops and establishing an everyday of BST. The space has been used as a prototype - a 4 months long rehearsal or enactment of future spaces in the library. We have seen how actors from diverse communities inside and outside of Tingbjerg have come together and through the encounter with each other, us, and the space have shaped the identity and made the place, BST. In itself it BST serves as a set of recommendations for the future Tingbjerg library and culture house, but to make it travel to other libraries this knowledge is sought communicated in a toolbox containing objects relating to the space and material available online”



Figure 5. Illustration from the BST homepage

1.5 From kids to young adults to everybody

Targeting the young with open events and reading promotions we have recently looked to robots – for instance with the Language Base Robot. The target group is children in kindergartens who work with H.C. Andersen’s fairytale “The Ugly Duckling” in the days before their visit to the library.

At the library they meet a “NAO” robot encoded to respond to different parts in the adventure. The robot has been fed with input from the educators' activities with the children. The robot can express basic feelings like sorrow, fear and joy, and its eyes can change color when it changes mood. The robot function as the “common third” between the children and

² <https://kadk.dk/project/bibliotekets-skabervaerelse-tingbjerg>

the librarian. Working with robots is new for us, so this is also a test to see how the children and the parents – and the librarians! – react.

Finally, the children have the opportunity to take their parents to the library and greet the robot. NAO has been tested at Islands Brygge Library and Kindergarten and Ørestad Library and Kindergarten.



Figure 6: NAO in action

With "Youth Hearings" the library invites young people to a democratic experiment where participants are involved in informed consultation and dialogue. The format is inspired by the theory of deliberative democracy, involvement and public hearing, where we not only ask "What do we mean?" but also: "What would we think if we had thought?" We give ourselves time to hear each other out and challenge ourselves. The topics are: What does it mean to participate in democracy in Denmark? What does it mean to be politically active? What is the future of Europe and what values are important for Denmark to secure in a European context?



Figure 7. The main library's main hall during an event

The same goes for debate festivals such as “Talk Town” about gender, gender equality and feminism. During the three-day intensive festival, all topics related to the issue are in play including the UN’s sustainability goal no. 5 about gender and equality.³

Our annual literature festival “Copenhagen Reads” takes place in all libraries and culture houses with a multitude of events - many of them organized by volunteers and interested citizens.



Figure 8. Literature on display for "Talk Town"

These are initiatives that make the library a more active, usable place in the city making it blend into the broad cultural vibe of the city, but the library goes outside as well in both its more traditional form and in a lot more alternative, interactive form.

1.6 Library service outside the library

The aforementioned beach library and self-service bookcase are installations that are precursors to actual pop-up libraries around the city. The beach library is rather self-explanatory. The self-service bookcase is new and the first prototype has found a home at Grøndal Multicenter; one of northern Europe’s largest indoor sport centers. The bookcase allows for checking books and other materials in and out with automatic chip reading. The content of the prototype is geared toward the citizens using the centre. Successful tests with the bookcase open for the possibility of placing bookcases around the city in relevant places with inspiring and changing mini collections.

³ <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>



Figure 9. The self-service bookcase prototype

Even more spectacular are the library-driven events outside the library that become part of the city's pulse.

Blågårdens Bibliotek and the Main Library turned a cold autumn into a rare literary trip with the Death Ship for a moment turning the Copenhagen canals into the river Styx. Organizers were fully robed, the boat was equipped with light and sound effects and performance art was ready on the dock.

The subject was death in literature and whereas the participants had an unforgettable evening, Copenhageners and tourists watching the death ship sail by are also not likely to forget it anytime soon. The event made use of all our communication channels using web site, social media and podcasts.⁴

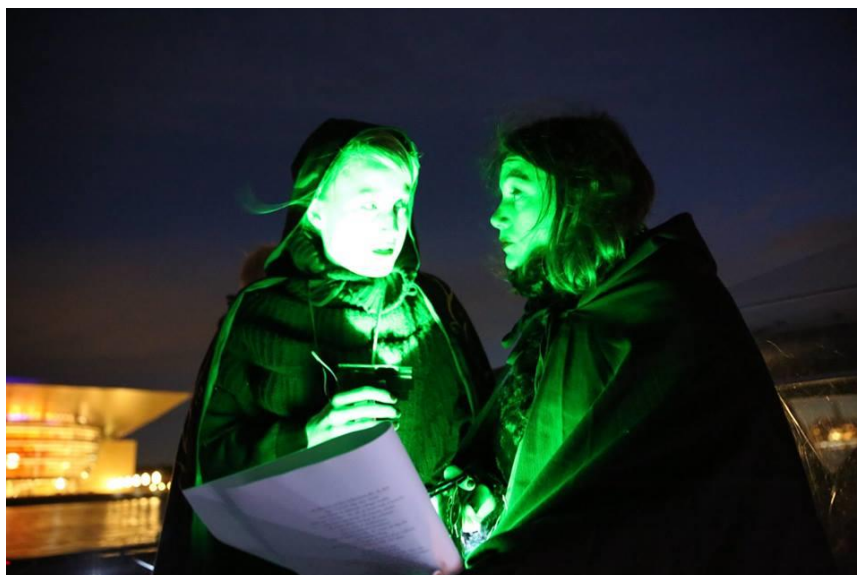


Figure 10. Poetry reading on the Death Ship with Caroline Enghoff Mortensen and Suzan Erdogan Borglind

⁴ <https://doedsskibet.wordpress.com/>



Figure 11: Bus trip to Paradise vol. 1 with Lars Kjellfred

A bus tour to Paradise vol. 1 was an experimental event in the city by music librarian Lars Kjellfred of the Main Library. The bus rode along a route of important places in Copenhagen music history, and local starts were playing onboard the bus. In the middle of the trip was an analogue recording session for an album.

The same department of the Main Library organises sing-along sessions every Wednesday morning and they have become urban legend almost. Not less so since Brian Eno turned up one Wednesday last year to lead the singing that morning.

1.7 Conclusion

At Copenhagen Libraries we realise that providing access is no longer enough to fulfil our mission statement. We also realise that especially the younger generations have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to entertainment and information. In order to grab our citizens' attention we need to open up the library and we need to proactively engage with our citizens outside the library.

Therefore we have started a whole line of initiatives that make it easier for Copenhageners to engage with the library – both in the traditional sense and in more event-like forms – at the library and outside the library. Our events always have a focus on bringing citizens together, which is where the library contributes maximum value to the chain of culture and knowledge.