

The Word: A library for the 21st century, delivering social, cultural and economic objectives

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Abstract:

The Word, National Centre for the Written Word in South Shields, represents a real paradigm shift in the community library building typology. It is a library for the 21st century, celebrating the dynamic relationship between people, books, traditional media and interactive technologies, in a truly inspiring environment. The Word is a place for people; the human-centric design placing the individual at the heart of the opportunity to interact, learn and delight.

The Word forms the centrepiece of major regeneration plans for South Shields a coastal town which has suffered over many years from economic hardship due to the decline of local heavy industries. The move to use a public library as a catalyst for regeneration and community cohesion was a bold one. South Tyneside Council outlined a vision for a library which was not only a repository for books, but a place of cultural interest which would underpin the areas wider cultural offer, encouraging visitors from across the region and further afield.

The role of the library in a modern, digital society is changing and The Word reflects this, offering a physical and digital environment which enables each visitor to express their own creativity, providing a gateway to cultural, social and entrepreneurial exploration.

Since opening, The Word has captured the imagination of demographics not usually associated with this building type, creating a diverse and inclusive space which provides opportunities for all. The unique and innovative combination of 21st century library, digital media centre, community hub and national cultural institution, has exceeded all expectations, bringing tangible social, cultural and economic benefits to South Shields.

Keywords: Future, Library, Culture, Community, Regeneration

1. Introduction

During the opening of The Word, National Centre for the Written Word, in the North East of England last year, author Ann Cleeves captured the importance of libraries, saying: “Libraries are of vital importance, they allow us to engage with stories, this allows us to see the world through someone else’s eyes, to see their point of view – this allows us to be more understanding, more tolerant, more human, helping to create a more cohesive and inclusive community and society”.

The building she was opening embodies this ethos, representing a real paradigm shift in the community library building typology. The Word forms the centrepiece of major regeneration plans for South Shields, a coastal town which has suffered over many years from economic hardship due to the decline of local heavy industries. The move to use a public library as a catalyst for regeneration and community cohesion was a bold one. South Tyneside Council outlined a vision for a library which was not only a repository for books, but a place of cultural interest which would underpin the areas wider cultural offer, encouraging visitors from across the region and further afield, as well as the local community.

This paper explores the context surrounding the decision to design and deliver The Word, the decisions taken by the design team to respond to this context, and the overwhelming social, cultural and regenerative impact that The Word is beginning to deliver for its community.

2. South Shields

South Shields is a coastal town at the mouth of the River Tyne, around five miles east of Newcastle upon Tyne, where the river meets the North Sea. The town, with a population of around 75,000, is the main administrative centre of the borough of South Tyneside.

South Tyneside’s traditional industries include shipbuilding and repairing (at one time Tyneside was responsible for around 25% of the world’s shipping fleet), coal mining and exports, and the chemical industries. These industries began to decline from the late-20th Century creating high unemployment in the region. Since then South Tyneside has had to adapt and is now home to new industries, largely in the service sector, although a manufacturing base does still remain.

South Shields was ranked the 8th most deprived large English seaside destination in 2010 in an analysis carried out by the Office for National Statistics (Humby, 2013). The study found that, “places that once thrived on tourism are suffering in terms of health and disability, employment and income compared to the rest of the country” (Davies, 2013).

The deflated town centre economy was being strained by a growing trend for out of town shopping. It had been reported that local shoppers only spent around £3.70 of every £100 in the town, with more money being spent at out-of-town retail parks such as Silverlink, across the river in North Shields (Kelly, 2013).

In response to these trends, after years of planning, South Tyneside Council launched the South Shields 365 regeneration plan in 2013. The strategy represents:

“A sustainable economic vision to breathe new life into the heart of South Shields through new opportunities for residents, businesses and visitors, ultimately realising [the town’s] potential to be North East England’s premier coastal resort 365 days a year” (South Tyneside Council, n.d.).

Ultimately the initiative aimed to:

- Improve the town centre's retail and leisure offer to tempt local residents away from out of town shopping destinations, providing a boost to the local economy
- Expand the town's cultural offer to provide valuable resources for the local community and a first class experience to those visiting from across the region and further afield
- Provide confidence to the private sector that South Shields is 'open for business' and an attractive place to invest

Phase one of the South Shields 365 plan was to construct a brand new public library and state-of-the-art cultural venue at a key gateway location between the River Tyne and the town centre.



Image 1. A panoramic view of South Shields showing the Tyne in the foreground feeding into the North Sea on the horizon. The Word is visible just left of centre.

3. The changing role of the library

A recently published government report from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport claims that the proportion of adults visiting public libraries in England has fallen by almost a third over the last decade.

Summarising the findings for The Guardian, Flood (2016) reports:

“In the twelve months to March 2016, it reported that just 33.4% of adults had used a public library, compared with 48.2% of adults in 2005/2006, when the survey began. This marks a drop of 30.7% over the decade, and is the first time the government department has highlighted a ‘significant decrease’ in the proportion of adults who used public libraries”.

However, the article goes on to highlight the fact that declines in usage are more pronounced amongst more prosperous demographics. Flood (2016) quotes Mark Taylor, spokesperson for the Chartered Institute of Library Professionals, in saying:

“Proportionate use of libraries in the most deprived areas of England is strong, demonstrating the role these unique public services play in improving life chances through literacy, learning and access to knowledge for those communities with the most to gain”.

Despite this fact, the UK economic downturn has had a widespread impact on public access to library facilities with many forced closures due to austerity measures. Many believe that libraries have been seen as easy targets when it comes to cuts to public services, with councils citing decreasing visitor numbers and concerns over a loss of relevance of the library in the digital age. It can be argued that this unfairly disregards the importance of libraries to those that use and need them the most; those that are on low incomes or are unable to work.

It also undervalues the importance of library facilities as a community asset and a focal point for initiatives to promote social cohesion and lifelong learning as Doherty (2014) from The British Council explains:

“Libraries have always been at the heart of the communities they serve. They are accessible and safe spaces, providing access to huge resources of information and knowledge ... [and] an essential part of creating and maintaining an educated and literate population.”

To protect these important community assets we must ensure they remain relevant in the digital age and reflect the changing needs of a modern society.

There has been a revolution in the way that we access and consume information in recent times fuelled by increases in access to the World Wide Web and the proliferation of handheld devices with online capabilities. Instant access to an ever growing array of information sources means that a large proportion of the population are now no more than a click away from resources that once only a library could provide.

A major research project undertaken by the Arts Council (2013) set out to understand the future for libraries in respect to the changing social, political and economic landscape they currently face. It points out that despite the growing influence of the web, “One in four people still do not or cannot use the internet and the need for assistance in digital access is growing”.

As well as calling for the provision of universal access to reading, information and knowledge, the Arts Council (2013) goes on to conclude the following:

“Enabling people to develop new skills themselves is a vitally important purpose of libraries. This is central to the challenges of supporting individual resilience and adaptability, meeting the needs of UK employers for a highly skilled workforce, and supporting our growth as a knowledge economy. Similarly access to the written word, literature and knowledge for pleasure (and leisure) are increasingly recognised as vital ingredients to health, wellbeing and quality of life.”

The report also stresses the importance of our libraries having a clear sense of purpose and communicating it in “imaginative and impactful ways” (Arts Council, 2013).

Despite the trends showing a decrease in visitor numbers to public libraries, Flood (2016) reports that the proportion of adults visiting heritage sites, museums and galleries has increased over the last decade. This suggests that the public appetite for learning and cultural fulfilment in a physical environment remains strong, despite the digital revolution.

4. The Word

The Word represents a real paradigm shift in the community library building typology. Devised with careful consideration for both the historic context of South Shields and the changing role of the library in a wider context, the result is an inspiring community library for the 21st century.



Image 2. The Word's grand central forum.

The Word combines traditional library resources with a wide range of digital interactive zones for learning and exploration, celebrating storytelling in all of its forms. This includes a flexible exhibition space, a FabLab with 3D printers and vinyl and laser cutters, a television and radio studio, a children's immersive storytelling area, an OpenZone IT suite, and a number of interactive viewing platforms with views out over the neighbouring River Tyne. It represents a divergence from the traditional notion of a library as a temple for silence, instead proudly celebrating its role as a place to share and learn without limitations.

The circular building form emerged from all of the influences and requirements set out by the urban grain as well as the social and community ambitions. It is representative of The Word's contribution to society: it is democratic, a community gathering space of equal parts. There is well-established architectural precedent of a circular building form accommodating a library

function. The fine tradition of this synonymous relationship, seen in buildings such as the Bodleian Library in Oxford or Manchester's Central Library, has been redefined at The Word.

Internally, the building provides a rich array of volumes ranging from the grand central forum to individually concentrated reader spaces. The Word's circular form elegantly presents these spaces as a sequence of experiences encouraging visitors to explore all that it has to offer.

5. A gateway for exploration

One of the key aims for The Word was to capture the imagination of demographics not usually associated with the library building typology, to create a diverse and inclusive space which providing opportunities for all, regardless of age, gender or cultural background.



Image 3. Children express their creativity and display the results for all to see.

Traditional elements are blended and supported by a network of integrated digital technologies including super-fast Wi-Fi, interactive activities, discreet audio experiences and a 360° story telling space. This combination supports the existing audience whilst appealing to new user groups.

This physical and digital environment provides each visitor with the ability to express their own creativity, exploring new ways of learning and communicating, developing skills that are much needed in a modern workplace and an entrepreneurial society.

One of many examples of this can be seen is on the second floor where six large monitors are displayed. They are linked to digital tablets upon which children are invited to become illustrators and cartoonists, creating words and images which are then displayed for all to see.

This first foray into media creation is then developed amongst older age groups in the television and radio studio; fully equipped with cameras, recording equipment and a ‘green screen’ for producing digital special effects.

6. A ‘third space’

Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (2009) famously documented the importance of what he termed the ‘third place’ describing it as “a setting beyond home and work (the ‘first’ and ‘second’ places respectively) in which people relax in good company, and do so on a regular basis”. He argued that whilst our lifestyles are becoming “increasingly privatized and competitive”, ‘third places’ provided a focal point for community life and rare opportunities to “construct the infrastructures of human relationships”.



Image 4. The entrance to The Word viewed from the market square with the Old Town Hall far right.

Located in the centre of South Shields adjacent to the bustling market square and communal heart of the town, it was clear from the outset that The Word would have an important role to play as a ‘third place’. To fulfil this role the library would have to be more than just a place to collect and return books. Instead the building must function as a social space, with an environment and the facilities that encourage impromptu usage, leading to the kind of spontaneous social interactions which help build new relationships and reinforce existing ones.

The grand central forum space creates a spectacular gathering and meeting space from which all of the internal activities can be seen radiating out from the centre. On the ground floor a café provides a place to meet and share conversation in a relaxed environment. The central

forum provides a space for community groups to gather, for musicians to perform, or for writers and artists to present talks about their inspirations and creative processes to those aspiring to emulate their success. A shop on the ground floor selling work from local artists, writers and makers provides further reason for an impromptu visit.

The entrance gateway into the building, expressed externally as a modern portico with full height glazing, marries the circular building to the market square, providing a clear point of entry and allowing views straight in to the heart of the building and the activities on offer. On arrival, visitors are uplifted as the bright and voluminous entrance opens up into the central forum, creating a sense of excitement about the opportunities to explore and learn.

7. A cultural beacon

Playing a leading role in the South Shields regeneration strategy, The Word provided the opportunity to expand the town's cultural offer, to provide not just a valuable cultural resource for the local community, but also a first class visitor destination of national significance.

Central to this ambition was the desire to establish a strong sense of place; reflecting the cultural identity of South Shields and celebrating the region's rich industrial heritage, to create a cultural beacon, drawing visitors from far and wide.

The Word occupies a strategic gateway location between South Shields ferry terminal, Harton Quays Riverside Park and the town centre, previously occupied by an unremarkable 1960s office development. This location presenting an opportunity to reconnect these elements, drawing 'out of town' visitors towards the town centre and providing local residents with unobstructed access to the regenerated riverside.

The building's appearance is inspired by the fanning out of the pages of a book, the material selection celebrating the sites distinctive industrial heritage, including salt and coal mining; glass making; and ship building. Three shades of terracotta panels respond to the rich stone hues of the neighbouring Grade I listed Old Town Hall and Grade II listed St Hilda's Church, creating a modern architectural expression which blends with its sensitive context.

Two large glass walls at either end of the building allow visitors to enjoy superb views of the River Tyne and the market square's listed buildings. This has been fully exploited with special viewing platforms – named 'The Lens' – at each end of the building.

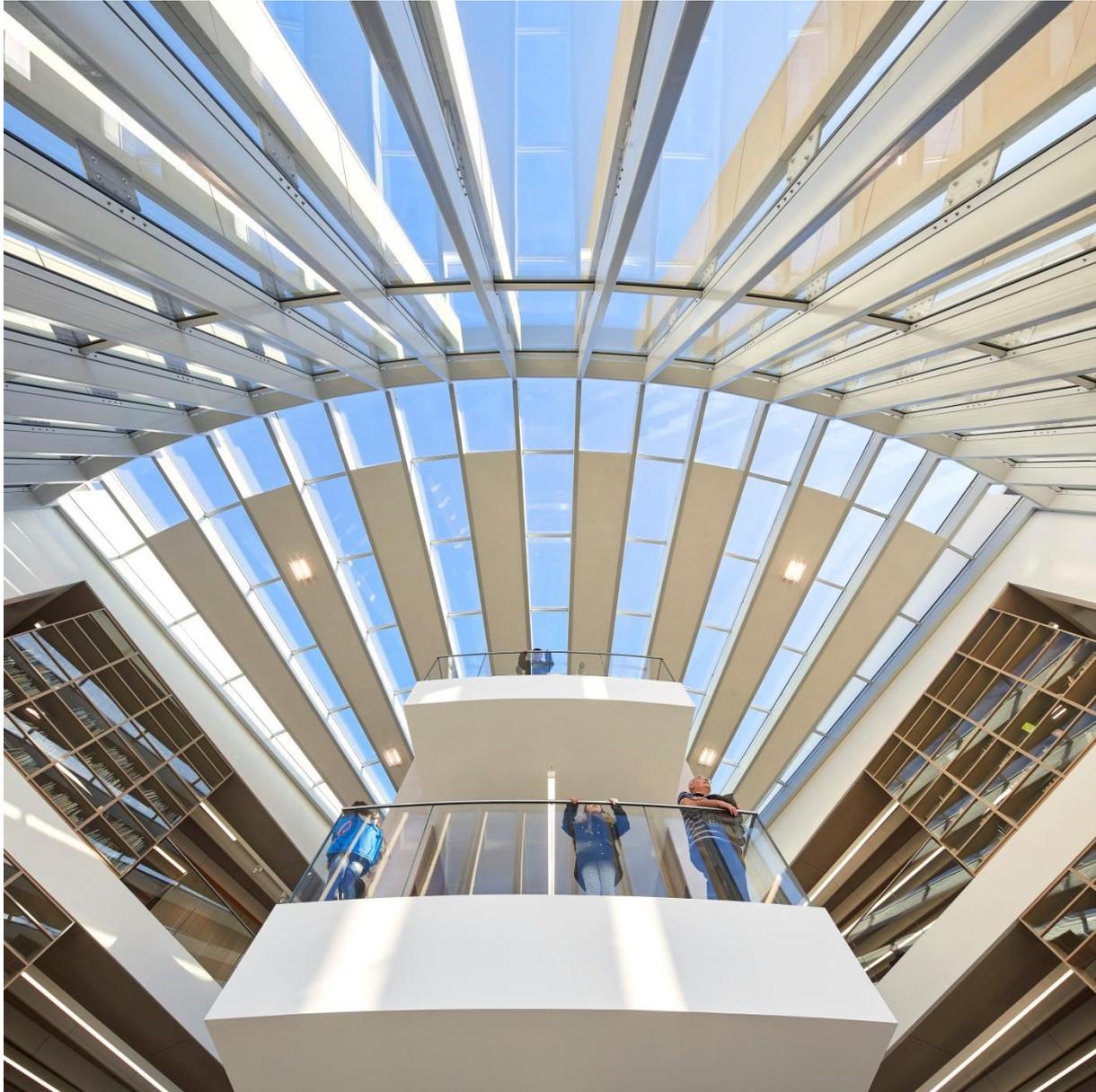


Image 5. Visitors watch passing ships on the River Tyne through ‘The Lens’.

At the side facing the Tyne, ‘The Lens’ provides an opportunity to reflect on the contribution that the river, and the people who have navigated it, have made to the region throughout its history. This contribution is enhanced via a digital touch table which describes the history of the river, the shipwrecks and trade consumerism. A live app streams the current position of shipping in the North Sea, providing an enticing glimpse of the trade and industry which feeds the region.

The Word also contains a large multi-functional exhibition space capable of hosting a variety of exhibition types including touring national exhibits. The environmental conditions of this space are very flexible and allow for full lighting and sound control for immersive scene setting. The space is extremely adaptable and can be partitioned and formatted in a variety of ways to suit the focus of the exhibition. This scale-able provision enables regional and national touring exhibitions to be hosted within the building. The opening exhibition – which

received over 97,000 visitors – illustrated the career and achievements of world renowned film director, Sir Ridley Scott, who was born in South Shields.

The versatility of the spaces within The Word has allowed South Tyneside Council to create a varied calendar of exhibitions, workshops and events with national appeal, securing the long term viability of the building and maximising its value to the local community. The digital versatility of The Word also allows for video links into other regional cultural institutions, expanding the venue’s content potential even further.



Image 6. Visitors learn about the life and works of Sir Ridley Scott in The Word’s opening exhibition.

8. A sustainable resource

The needs of our communities have changed dramatically in previous decades and there is no reason to believe that the libraries we are building today will not face similar challenges in the future.

The design concept for The Word promotes inherent flexibility, allowing it to adapt its offer to meet the changing needs of its community. The internal depths of the floorplates, arranged around the atria, provide a mechanism to support many activities, allowing a mix of open-plan and cellular accommodation. Opportunities exist to extend walls, infill voids and make the best use of the volumes within the building, future-proofing the scheme, and negating the need for extensive reconfiguration works to adapt to new uses.

The building is also environmentally sustainable. One of the defining construction features is the use of exposed in situ and precast concrete, internally and externally. The exposed concrete soffit acts as a heat sync, reducing the amount of cooling and energy the building requires. Pipework has also been embedded within the in situ concrete slab to create water cooled concrete soffits which, when combined with a raised floor, help to distribute cooled and conditioned air around the building; a unique approach for a building of this type.

As a result the building has been rated as BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) Excellent and current energy usage data shows the building is performing at an EPC (Energy Performance Certificates) rating of A.

9. Social impact

This unique and innovative combination of 21st century library, digital media centre, community hub, and national cultural institution, has exceeded all expectations in its first six months of operation, receiving an incredible reaction from the public.



Image 7: Circular patterns in the atrium’s feature chandelier represent the town’s glass making history.

The Word has received over 220,000 visitors in this period, far surpassing the initial target set by the Council. As the reaction to the new building started to filter through on social media it became immediately clear that first impressions were overwhelmingly positive. A selection of these are shown below:

“Blown away by [The Word] yesterday, the kids didn’t want to leave! Proud to have this in my town.” Phil Thornton (2016)

“Fab afternoon visit with the in-laws to [The Word] in Shields. A lovely, fresh, bright, modern place with loads of resources.” Helen Balfour (2016)

“The Word - South Shields is an amazing place! This is the future of libraries!” Nancy Revell (2017)

“One word to describe 'The Word' at South Shields – WOW! Such an amazing space... a real cultural affirmation.” David Allan (2017)

Literary stars such as novelist, screen writer and comedian, David Baddiel and Ann Cleeves, bestselling author of the Vera and Shetland novels, have both visited the building alongside many other writers, poets and playwrights who have inspired visitors with their talks, interactive activities and projects.

David Baddiel said he was impressed by The Word and described it as 'absolutely brilliant'. "To have a whole building dedicated to storytelling in all its forms is just amazing", he added.

Writer Ann Cleeves said: "The Word is a shining example of successful investment in our vital library services, but more than that, it's a lifeline for new, young, and old readers alike", and described The Word as her, “dream library”.

Statistics from the opening six month period are impressive. In this period, The Word has welcomed 2,000 new library members, representing a 235% increase over the same period in the previous library building, in the previous year. This includes a 750% increase in teenage memberships. This is a clear reflection of the widespread appeal of the new facilities to people in all age groups, and vindication of the efforts to capture the imagination of demographics not usually associated with the library building typology.



Image 8. One of The Word's acoustically separated reading spaces.

The variety of new facilities available at The Word too, has provided the scope to expand the diversity of the library programme considerably, offering many services and initiatives that were not previously available and providing fresh impetus to the existing offer.

The library has increased its existing programme of weekly pre-school activities providing regular sessions such as Baby Bounce (gentle finger, knee bouncing and action rhymes for babies), Storytots (stories, crafts and songs for pre-school children), and Wobbly Walkers (structured, interactive music and rhyme sessions for families with toddlers).

This is in addition to the regular programme of sessions held in 'Storyworld', a fully immersive 360 degree storytelling room, where children of all ages can let their imaginations run wild. The acoustically separated room with its own surround-sound system and vibrating floor creates a sensory environment upon which five linked projectors can apply seamless images to the walls, to complete the experience.

Existing adult activity sessions have enjoyed increased attendances such as the Write Together writing group, Library Ukuleles, Clippy Matters (a traditional mat making craft group), and the Library Choir. New adult activities have also been launched, including a chess group.

It has also helped to kick-start initiatives which were trialled at the previous library but didn't receive enough interest to sustain regular sessions. This includes the Cuckoo Young Writers club, a fantastic group providing year-round provision and opportunities for young writers in the North of England, through writing groups, projects, online support, and publications.

A number of digital workshops provide a state-of the-art addition to the educational programme at The Word. This includes a successful programme of workshops in the building's 'Fab Lab', a facility providing access to 3D printers, laser and vinyl cutters, and the latest design software, to teach skills in design and entrepreneurial thinking to people of all ages. Workshops in coding and website design complete the package of education in digital disciplines.



Image 9. 3D printers creating objects designed by visitors to The Word's 'FabLab'.

10. Cultural impact

In addition to the regular programme of sessions held at The Word, over 100 cultural events have been staged. This has included talks and question and answer sessions with nationally and internationally renowned authors, including Ann Cleeves, A.D. Garrett, David Baldacci and Michael Chaplin. These talks are aimed at providing inspiration for amateur writers of all ages to continue to pursue their written word ambitions. A programme of live music held within the central forum space, has provided another cultural element to the offer, and one not usually associated with a conventional library.

To date, The Word has received around £140,000 of Arts Council funding in support of a wide range of projects across the spectrum of art and culture, enriching the cultural offer of South Shields.

Two such projects are WordPlay and the Write Festival. WorldPlay was a mass-movement dance performance featuring over 100 participants drawn from the local community. Using The Word as a backdrop, images were projected on the front of the building drawing upon the rich heritage and literary history of South Tyneside.

Following the success of WordPlay, it was announced that The Word was to hold the inaugural Write Festival. A literary celebration with a packed programme of events for all ages, such as author's talks, creative writing sessions, 'How to get published' workshops, comedy, and children's activities. The festival will look to provide further impetus to the regular role of The Word in igniting people's imaginations and creativity, as well as fostering the writing talent of the future. The festival will also serve to build the national reputation of The Word and South Shields, promoting the latter as a significant cultural visitor destination.

11. Regenerative impact

After only six months of operation it is difficult to draw too many conclusions as to the regenerative impact of The Word. However, even at this early stage, there is evidence building to support this.

The Word's opening marked the end of phase one of the £100m South Shields 365 regeneration masterplan being delivered by South Tyneside Council and its partner, Muse Developments Ltd. Following the opening of The Word, work is now ongoing to bring forward the next phases of the scheme, which will see a new transport interchange, a cinema, restaurants and new shops added to the town centre in the coming years.



Image 10. The Word's appearance is inspired by the fanning out of the pages of a book.

The Word will prove to be a vital centrepiece of the regeneration plans, helping to underpin the cultural offer of South Shields, adding value to the visitor experience and providing confidence to the private sector that the town provides sound opportunities for investment.

As work was coming to a close on The Word, a planning application was submitted to South Tyneside Council for the redevelopment of a site 400m from the building in the town centre. The plans would see a new building replacing a number of existing units and would consist of a mix of provisions for retail and professional services.

Since The Word has opened, plans have also been revealed for a new £200million development on brownfield land 400m to the south of the building to create a high-quality office, residential and mixed-use development.

These plans outline the confidence that South Tyneside Council and its development partners have in the ability of The Word to help reverse the fortunes of South Shields.

The early success of The Word has also led to the allocation of a significant amount of National Lottery funding to further extend the cultural offer of South Shields. The funds have been provided to re-purpose the disused St. Hilda's Colliery Pithead Building which is located less than 300m from both The Word and the Custom's House theatre and arts centre, creating a geographic triangle of cultural centres. The building, which stands as a charming reminder of the industrial heritage of South Shields is to be converted into an art gallery and studio space.

12. Conclusion

In their 2013 report, 'Envisioning the library of the future', the Arts Council reference the following statement made by research organisations Ipsos Mori and Shared Intelligence:

"In 2012 libraries were known by most people as a service around borrowing books, reading and, accessing knowledge and information. In 2022 libraries are known first and foremost as organisations which enable people to create, learn, make, discover and share."

The Word is a leading example of this principle in action. The Word is a place for people; the human-centric design placing the individual at the heart of the opportunity to interact, learn and delight. The immersive nature of the experiences, the diversity of the cultural and educational offer, and the powerful nature of the architecture combine to create a community asset which points to the future, underlining the importance of the library within our modern society.

Furthermore, The Word is a cultural destination of national significance, placing South Shields firmly on the map as a cultural beacon for the North East of England and a visitor attraction worthy of its spectacular surroundings.

As a result, South Shields is already starting to see positive social, cultural and regenerative benefits from the building, and the sustainable nature of its design, construction and operation will provide confidence to all involved that this can be maintained long in to the future.

It is hoped that the lessons learnt in the design and delivery of The Word can be used elsewhere to inspire the creation of community focused libraries which fulfil the needs of a digital society.

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