

A Dream Come True of Citizens – the New Helsinki Central Library

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Abstract:

What a discussion about libraries by the politicians in the Helsinki City Council! In January 2015 the final decision worth 100 million euros on building the new Helsinki Central Library was made. At the end, 75 votes were given for and only 8 against the construction. During three hours, high quality and detailed speeches on the importance of libraries were given, one after another.

How was this possible? Has the fair wind continued? The key was – and is - simply [involving the citizens](#) genuinely into the project from the very beginning. Since 2012, there have been numerous large and small efforts to make choices and plans with users-to-be of the library. All in all 2300 [Dreams](#) were collected first, and analyzed to be used as one planning material; it is clear that this information has improved the quality of planning. The architectural competition included [consultancy of the public](#) on several phases, and all the services have been planned with service design methods. The building got its name Oodi via an open competition, where 2600 entries were received. New forms of participation are to come soon. [Up-dated information](#) from the construction site is given continuingly.

These activities have resulted booming and concrete public support to the project, well known by the politicians as well. Inside the library it has demanded new thinking and learning new skills. Introducing participatory methods means kind of revolution if it is taken seriously. Telling stories, creating stories with citizens is an essential part of the package.

This presentation gives information on and analysis of the process along the years.

Introduction

Once upon a time there will be... the new Helsinki Central Library! The new pulsing heart of the city will be opened in December 2018 in the very centrum of the city. Opening the library will be

the end of a good story, as well as the beginning of a new story. It will be an important point in the history of a dream-come-true, shared by citizens, library professionals and politicians.

The final City Council decision in January 2015, to realize the building was nearly unanimous. The political discussion before the voting was of high quality with well-based opinions pro libraries and their importance in the society. How was that possible? As we know, it is usually hard to get a decision made on building a new expensive public building, without any perspective to get the economic costs ever covered.

One key is that Helsinki people in general supported and still support the project strongly, and the library has been able to make this support visible. The main method has along the whole planning process been involving citizens actively and listening to them. The project was one of the pioneering efforts on this field, which has guaranteed positive media interest to it.

On the other hand, politicians also recognize the need of this kind of public space in city centres. In these years, Helsinki is not the only city building a big central library. At the same time, the new Deichmanske bibliotek in Oslo is under construction. We have been admiring DOKK1 in Århus, we know new fine centrally located libraries in Canada, eg. Halifax, and some of our staff have just got acquainted with new library buildings in northern Spain, in the Basque country.

Background

In addition, public libraries have a special significance for the Finnish people and in our history. Libraries are loved and well used across the country, and we still have a relatively equal library network in the whole country, though tightening economy is more and more threatening it. Finland has high usage numbers (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012, 'Finns are avid readers and library users') in comparison with international standards (Libraries.fi, 2016, 'Finnish Public Library Statistics') making library services the most used culture service in the country (Sokka et al., 2014, pp. 20-21, in Finnish). Here I have to add, that school libraries are rare in Finland: schools and kindergardens are served by public libraries and especially mobile libraries.

Citizens' favourable attitude towards public libraries reflects also to the public discussion on the Central Library. Over the course of the planning process, no opposition to the project has raised, nor strictures against the building itself after the announcement of the architecture competition winner in 2013.

The favourable public opinion of libraries is also widely shared by the Finnish decision makers. The initiative for the new Central Library building came originally from then Minister of Culture Claes Andersson in 1998, known and appreciated also as a poet, psychiatrist and football player. In 2013, Culture Minister of that time Paavo Arhinmäki declared the Central Library as the headline project of Finland's independence's 100th jubilee celebrated in 2017. By giving the Central Library this remarkable status, the government also committed the state to take part in funding the project. The government financing covers ca. 30% of the building costs.

What the Helsinki politicians recognized, was a genuine need for public space for citizens in the city centre area. A very concrete case is to be seen in Helsinki: University of Helsinki opened a new main library Kaisa House in the city centre in 2012. It was originally planned for 5000 daily visits but proved soon to be much more popular than expected. The building's daily usages peaks now at over 9000 visits and the range of users isn't limited only to students and academic researcher. Because university libraries in Finland are open for everybody, common citizens come to the Kaisa House as well as academic students and researchers. This doesn't only show the need for public non-commercial space in the city centre, but also expresses people's enthusiasm to make libraries their own shared space.

Helsinki City Library has also a visible own case concerning the need of open public space in the city centrum: since 2005, Library 10 has operated in the Main Post Office Building nearby the future Central Library. Its floor space is only 800 m², however the library attracts approximately 2000, even 2500 visitors per day.

The usage numbers of the Kaisa House and Library 10 were in essential role in promoting the decision to build the new Central Library.

Participatory practises from the very beginning

The real story of the new Central Library begins in 2007, when the Mayor of Helsinki Jussi Pajunen launched a central library review process. It was led by a consult outside of library world Mikko Leisti. The final report of the review process, *Heart of the Metropolis – the Heart of Helsinki*, (Leisti and Marsio, 2008) laid a long-lasting foundation for goals and visions of the project.

Already the review process included ordinary library users to this early developing stage: different kind of users were interviewed and participated in group discussions. In fact it was just at this point,

in the review process' final report, where the user consultation was outlined as one of the key elements for the steps forward.

After publishing the review report in early 2008, Helsinki City Library started the planning process in earnest. The ambitious vision was to model the Central Library planning project as a new kind of inclusive city planning process which would not only ask people's opinion through surveys but actually include them into the planning, thus creating a library which will be truly owned by the citizens. Now, ten years later, one can state that the goal has been well achieved.

How did the library engage and involve citizens in rather bureaucratic and distant planning processes? The Central Library project brought about various approaches to this problem and continues to experiment ways in which library users and regular citizens can be brought into different stages of planning processes.

One of the early and most successful participatory practises was the launch of the Tree of Dreams in 2010. It was both a digital platform and a real tree touring around the city in different events, collecting library dreams as leaves to its' branches. People were simply asked to write down their wishes of what the future library might be. What it should offer to the citizens? The Tree of Dreams collected approximately 2 300 ideas. All material was categorised, analysed, and further developed into pilot projects and trials developing content and services for the future library. E.g., when the planning of the interior design begun in 2016, the related dream material was studied as one source of inspiration and information.

When thinking of user participation, budgeting is a difficult topic to be included. However, Helsinki City Library has pilot projects on that aspect as well. We gave library users a say in what kind of services will be offered in public libraries. In 2013, through budgeting workshops, citizens were given a choice how to spend 100 000 euros to develop library services.

From the Tree of Dreams ideas, eight dreams were chosen to a short list and developed into pilot proposals. In the autumn of 2013, three participatory budgeting workshops for citizens got together to discuss the pilot proposals and how to spend the assigned sum. The project proposals were individually budgeted beforehand so the threshold to participate was kept low. The workshop participants weren't required any special skills for project planning or budgeting. Four projects from the short list were chosen to be realized in 2014.

Through the participatory budgeting project Helsinki City Library acquired concrete directions from the citizens for what kind of public library services are anticipated and needed. One can also say,

that by giving the owners of the libraries, the city residents, a say in financial decision making, Helsinki City Library fulfilled one of public libraries' basic tasks as advancers of democracy. The feedback was clear: e.g. one of the workshop participants stated that it was actually great to see close-range democracy in action.

In 2016 and in 2017, we have offered the citizens also a possibility to give their opinions on the book acquisition for the new library. User's opinions really help to acquire e.g. books in English in a country where English is not a native language.

The open international architectural competition was organized in 2012-13. Common public was consulted also in this process, however more lightly than in many other participatory efforts. The reason was the particularly high esthetical and eco-efficiency requirements of the building. It would have been too complicated to translate all these requirements into common language, there were too many elements on board at the same time. However, the public got the possibility to see all the 544 entries and give their opinions on them. A good example of the popularity of the Central Library project is, that the entry exhibition was originally scheduled to be open only for a week, but due to a public demand, it got continued for another week.

In the second phase of the competition, six proposals were short listed by the jury. They were exhibited in the Helsinki City Museum, online, and on touchscreens throughout the city centre. Again at this stage, the public was able to comment the proposals and vote for their favourite building. On the second phase of the competition over 3200 citizens voted for their favourite.

Public vote on the future building wasn't the decisive factor for the new building, as the winner was chosen by a jury. Nonetheless, having a transparent architecture competition, during which people were invited to view the competition proposals and light-heatedly vote on their favourites, created a feeling of openness and participation.

The Friends of the Central Library (2014-15) are another good example of participatory practise, which has consolidated its status as an ongoing user-thriven development tool. Friends of the Central Library aimed to engage a diverse group of citizens to the planning process through workshops, questionnaires, and online tasks. The goal was to create a user-developer community by putting together a group that would be a good representative sample consisting of people from different parts of the city, different age groups, sexes, and different set of skills. The emphasis was put on getting on board people who were enthusiastic to influence in decision making and willing to commit to work in the group.

The group members were selected through a method imitating job seeking: they wrote a “job application” describing themselves and giving reasons why they wanted to join. From 95 applicants, 28 were chosen to participate in the pilot phase.

Throughout the Central Library project the nature of participatory measures have changed also according to the needs of the project. In the year 2016, the project was in a phase of service design, mainly to feed material for the interior design. Through analysing users’ needs, certain aspects of services and needs have risen and taken to further development. One of the service design projects was family services and library’s functions from families’ point of view. The family library planning was carried out through workshops with families, run by service design professionals. The workshops concentrated to service design as entity rather, than just single services. They outlined directions for usability for the whole building starting from signage and other functionalities, such as parking baby strollers and how to add playfulness to the building. Families are one of the main focuses for the building. The Department of Early Childhood Education and Preschool Education will be one of the permanent partners located in the building.

Participatory planning has always several dimensions adding value to library planning processes, offering a channel for close-range democracy, but also opening city decision making process to the citizens. One future idea to open up Helsinki City’s acquisition processes, while offering the public a chance to influence on interior design decisions of the Central library, is furniture testing. The idea is that residents will get a possibility to test out different pieces of furniture, chairs, tables, etc., and get to vote for their favourites. This could be realised in a way that it also opens up the chain of decisions and measures of city’s acquisitions increasing transparency of public spending and decision making.

Participation in planning isn’t limited only to users’ involvement. In the new Central Library, numerous partners will be working under the same roof, e.g. the National Audiovisual Institute and Aalto University. These partners are a vital part of the planning process for a new multifunctional building. The entrance lobby area of the library will be a hub for partnership in the library and the lobby’s service design is been developed in close cooperation with the different partners.

As shown, the Central Library project has introduced new methods of participatory planning into public planning making the process more democratic and creating a sense of common ownership of a public institution. Also, the building and its services reflect new library thinking where the users are active doers, rather than passive consumers.

Keep them informed!

Summa summarum, from a decision makers' perspective, there are many tempting elements in the Central Library project. First, the great popularity of the project is of course attractive. Secondly, City of Helsinki is genuinely interested in giving citizens a say in city policies and processes. The Central Library project feeds this interest continually with a variety of tested experiences. Thirdly, the Central Library is the final element in fulfilling the central Töölönlahti area, which is important in terms of city planning: the cityscape will get an esthetical crown, thanks to the architectural level of the building. The library is also expected to be a tourist drawcard: nowadays visitors want to see 'everyday life of a city', and in Finland libraries are an everyday phenomenon.

The library staff and other key players of the project like Deputy Mayor and the City Construction Office have succeeded to keep the politicians and higher city officials well informed about all these efforts and results. The relations with the media have also been favourable for the project from the very beginning.

Involving decision makers in the story

There is little sense to build a book depository in one of the best locations of the city centre. The new library will offer traditional library services, like lending books, but the shift also in public's need is more and more from borrowing to doing. The new library law ([Public Libraries Act 1492/2016](#)) in Finland underlines public libraries' duty to promote active citizenship and democracy, but also requires libraries to offer spaces and facilities for learning, working and different leisure activities. This project as a whole has reflected well the spirit of the new law by promoting active citizenship during the planning process, and by continuing doing that after the opening in 2018.

All this material forms a good story. Our decision makers have the well-founded feeling that they are part of a success story: they are along in creating free and safe, culturally rich and innovative, public space with numerous potentials, a library that would be a people's library in as broad sense as possible.

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