

Public libraries and placemaking

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Abstract:

This paper emphasizes the concept of public space, how it is connected to public libraries and why it is so important in the society. The other aspect is the concept of placemaking and the attempt to explain what it means in relation to public space and public libraries. The situation where urbanization is growing and urban planning is an ongoing process offers great possibilities for public libraries. There is a need to encourage librarians to see the role of public libraries as public spaces and to strengthen that role by placemaking, by involving citizens in planning of libraries and their services. European and North-American libraries are used as examples to indicate what already has happened and what the role of public libraries is in supporting democracy and in improving the quality of life in cities.

*The motto for this paper comes from **Brian Gambles, Assistant Director – Culture**, Birmingham Library: “We are not building a library for the city. We are building the city.”¹*

Keywords: Citizen involvement, Democracy, Placemaking, Public space, Urban planning

Public libraries in urban planning

Public libraries are a part of the public space in cities and their importance in urban planning has been recognized. During the last ten to fifteen years so many new public libraries have been constructed in European and American cities that the Danish researchers, Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Henrik Jochumsen and Dorte Skot-Hansen have written a whole book about this, namely *Biblioteket i byudviklingen –oplevelse, kreativitet og innovation (The Library in urban*

¹ Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Henrik Jochumsen and Dorte Skot-Hansen, *Biblioteket i byen – byen i biblioteket*, an article in the Norwegian library journal *Bog og bibliotek*, nr 1/2012, http://www.bokogbibliotek.no/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1634:biblioteket-i-byen-byen-i-biblioteket&catid=89:nr-1-2012&Itemid=121,

planning – experience, creativity and innovation).² In the book they introduce a big number of libraries which can be seen as motivating forces in urban development.³

The researchers also categorize these new libraries in different groups: icons, placemakers and catalysts. The number of new iconic public library buildings can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The most famous of them is Rem Koolhaas' remarkable architectural design of *Seattle Public Library*. It is a real icon for the city (and for the other libraries, too) and a very well-known landmark building. There are more successful examples of libraries as placemakers that are used to strengthen city centers or to revitalize earlier industrial or harbor areas. In Amsterdam the new *Openbaare Bibliothek* with its more than 6000 visitors a day is, according to the authors, a strong placemaker in the city center. Libraries can also be catalysts for local development, like *Idea Store* libraries in the London borough of Tower Hamlets (UK).

In Denmark this seems to be a “top” topic which is on the agenda all the time. In April 2013 the Danish Library Association organized a big cultural conference about libraries as public spaces⁴. It was reported by one of contributors in a blog Public Space like this: “*The library can be seen as a public space.... The potential seems to exist for the libraries to play an even more vital and active role as public spaces.*”⁵

The importance of public libraries in urban planning is seen from another angle of approach in the book “Public Libraries and Resilient Cities” edited by Michael Dudley. The book shows with American examples how some cities have used their libraries in difficult circumstances to make impact. “Resiliency” can be defined as responding effectively to changing circumstances in an uncertain world and in this case in cities. On the other hand there is the question whether the possibilities of libraries have been sufficiently recognized in urban planning but also whether public libraries are able to respond to this challenge. Do they see their role from this point of view?

The question becomes still more important when we know that a bigger number of people are moving in cities. According to *UN-HABITAT's (For a better Urban Future)* Executive Director Joan Clos i Matheu 75 percent of the world's 9 billion people will be living in the cities by 2030.⁶ When the urbanization is a significant trend of 21st century, there should be a lot of more new public libraries. This is a great possibility for public libraries, if they are active in explaining their role in urban planning.

² Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Henrik Jochumsen, Dorte Skot-Hansen: *Biblioteket i byudviklingen – oplevelse, kreativitet og innovation*. [København]: Danmarks biblioteksforening, Det Informationsvidenskabelige Akademi, 2011.

³ Since 2003 new central libraries have been opened in Vienna (Austria) 2003, in 2007 Amsterdam (Netherlands), Drammen (Norway), Turku (Finland), in 2009 Newcastle-upon-Tyne (United Kingdom), in 2010 Helsingør (Denmark) and in 2011 Stuttgart (Germany), just to name a few. The list could be much longer and include other countries. For example in France has been published the book *Architecture et bibliothèque. 20 ans de constructions. 1992-2012*. By Christelle Petit; dessins Franck Bonnefoy. Villeurbanne: Presses de l'Enssib, impr. 2012

There also are some libraries under construction. Birmingham (UK) is scheduled for September 2013, Aarhus (Denmark) for 2014 and Oslo (Norway) and Helsinki (Finland) for 2017.

⁴ <http://db.dk/kulturkonference2013>

⁵ <http://gehlcitiesforpeople.dk/tag/public-space/>

⁶ *Placemaking and the Future of Cities*, Project for Public Spaces, 2012, p. 3. <http://www.pps.org/reference/placemaking-and-the-future-of-cities/>

My starting point of this paper is that even if there already are many libraries designed in connection with urban planning processes, the need is much bigger and there still is a lot of work to do. Therefore I argue, that

- there is a need to encourage librarians to see the role of the public library as public space,
- it is important to explain the value of public space for the cities and neighborhoods,
- active participation in development of the local society creates added value to public libraries and their users,
- there is a need to strengthen the library as public space through placemaking.

In this paper I emphasize aspects which have not been discussed very much earlier in the library context like the concept of “public space” and how it is connected to the library philosophy. On the other hand I also want to argue for a wider concept of placemaking than Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Jochumsen and Skot-Hansen do. Placemaking is also a method how neighborhoods and institutions like libraries can create great public spaces together with citizens and customers. In explaining placemaking I use some concrete planning projects like Aarhus and Helsinki.

Public space and why we need it

*“If public life is not to disintegrate, communities must still find ways to provide, pay for, and maintain places of assembly and interaction for their members – whether these places are virtual, physical, or some new and complex combination of the two. And if these places are to serve their purposes effectively, they must allow both freedom of access and freedom of expression.”*⁷

Public libraries are in fact some of the few public places and spaces left in most cities. Public space is a vague concept, but public spaces are for example those that are open and accessible to all, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age, or socio-economic level, such as town squares and parks. However, traditions related to “the commons”⁸ have suffered with increased privatization: for example, shopping malls with appearance of being a “public space” – but are actually privately owned public spaces.

But how often have we, the librarians, the professionals in public libraries been discussing the term “public”, the definition and the meaning of the term? Have we passed “public” even if it is a part of the name of our institution, *public* library?⁹

The concept of “public” is so important, writes Columbia University urban theorist Rosalyn Deutsche, because the term “*has democratic connotations. It implies “openness”, “accessibility”, “participation”, “inclusion” and “accountability”. ... “Public space” in this*

⁷ William J. Mitchell, E-topia: “Urban life, Jim – but not as we know it”, Cambridge [Mass.]: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999, p. 97

⁸ **Commons** refers to the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable earth. These resources are held in common, not owned privately. The resources held in common can include everything from [natural resources](#) and [common land](#) to [software](#). The commons contains [public property](#) and [private property](#), over which people have certain traditional rights. A good concrete example of commons is the Finnish legal concept known as **everyman’s right**. It allows people of all nationalities the right to enjoy the Finnish countryside freely, but together with these wide-ranging rights comes the responsibility to respect nature, other people, and property.

⁹ Antonella Agnoli, *Le piazza del sapere. Biblioteche e liberta*. Roma: Gius, Laterza & Figli, 2009. This book deals with the theme “public space” and the first part of it is “La biblioteca e la citta”, The city and the library.

*view does not simply refer to already existing physical urban sites such as parks, urban squares, streets, or cities as a whole. ... Public space can also be defined as a set of institutions where citizens –and, given the unprecedented mixing of foreigners in today’s international cities, hopefully non-citizens –engage in debate; as the space where rights are declared, thereby limiting power; or as the space where social group identities and the identity of society are both constituted and questioned.”*¹⁰

The definition made by Rosalyn Deutsche fits very well with public library ideology and confirms how strong the concept of “public library” is. As professionals we often concentrate more on the questions how to manage libraries and how to develop our own working methods. The way Rosalyn Deutsche defines the term “public” emphasizes the role of libraries in the society when it combines people to the public space and points out institutions where citizens can be active. It is also important that in these institutions the identity of society is both constituted and questioned. This is something essential from the point of view of libraries where the diversity of opinions is offered. Even Mitchell’s quotation above connects public space to freedom of access and freedom of expression.

Freedom of access is connected to public space even in the texts of urban researcher Kaarin Taipale who writes: *“Information is a fundamental element of the public sphere. Free access to information is a prerequisite of democracy. Many cities regard providing access to information a basic service. Access to information can be restricted either through political power or business interests.”*¹¹ We all know examples of political situations in which free access to information is limited. In fact whenever democracy is threatened this happens in one or another form and even public libraries are affected. A good current example how business interests influence on access to information is the way the publishers try to limit the rights of libraries to acquire e-books.

Taipale also emphasizes how our collective memory is connected to the public sphere. She combines it to buildings and surroundings like streets, to places where we have own memories in mind.¹² In my opinion we can very well connect the collective memory to public libraries with all their books and other material. Even public libraries preserve our cultural heritage which on the one hand is bound to our own memories and on the other hand offers us the possibility to see wider perspectives than our own. The power of cultural heritage as collective memory can be seen in states of emergencies like wars when some of the essential objects to be demolished are libraries and archives.

Another view of public space is the idea of the “third place” by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg.¹³ The concept of “third place” has lately often been connected to public libraries. Even I have used it myself several times in describing the idea of public libraries. But when I today evaluate

¹⁰ Rosalynn Deutsche: The question of public space.

http://iwalewapublicspace.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/rosalyn-deutsche-_the-question-of-_public-space_.pdf

¹¹ Kaarin Taipale: Cities for Sale. How Economic globalization transforms the local public sphere. Helsinki: Helsinki University of Technology, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, Espoo 2009, p. 103.

¹² Kaarin Taipale: From Piazza Navona to Google or, from local public space to global public sphere, Paper presented at the Conference Public Spheres and Their Boundaries, University of Tampere, Finland, 25-27 May 2006, p. 12.

¹³ Ray Oldenburg: The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community. New York: Marlowe, 1989

Oldenburg's ideas in relation to the definition of public space I realize how superficial his concept is.

Oldenburg identifies "third places" (places apart from home and work) or "the great good places" as the public places on neutral ground where people can gather and interact. He characterizes the third place as follows:

- a neutral ground upon which people may gather,
- a leveler, an inclusive place, that does not set formal criteria for membership and exclusion,
- conversation is the main activity,
- accessibility and accommodation; it keeps long hours,
- the regulars, that is, people who come regularly,
- a low profile; it is easy to come to, and the threshold is low,
- the mood is playful,
- a home away from home, as cozy as home.

Oldenburg also says that "third places" appear to be universal and essential to a vital informal public life. He highlights the concept of public but when he counts cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community as third places he does not name any public space or institution! Actually, all the places he enumerates are *privately owned public spaces*.

Places which Oldenburg describes are all nice places for people to be and to communicate with each other. In fact the "third place" is closely connected to the concept of "the common living room", the cozy place where it is nice to come. Today not only libraries but many other cultural institutions describe themselves as "living rooms". I do not say that public libraries should totally give up the idea of the "third place" but we should perhaps put it to another context. We could use it when we describe library space and atmosphere in the library premises. But whenever we want to emphasize the importance of public library in the society we should connect it to the context of public space which gives a much more profound purpose to our work.

What is placemaking?

But how does a library become a placemaker? In the book *The Library in the Urban Planning*¹⁴ one of the viewpoints is what makes a library to a placemaker. Earlier in time different kind of cultural institutions like theatres, museums, concert halls etc. have been seen as creators of cultural milieus and as places which increase well-being in cities. Nowadays the public libraries seem to belong to the same category. They have to offer, however, something interesting and tempting to reach this position.

In fact it has become more natural for libraries to become placemakers when their own activities and services have changed since the 1980's. The service has moved from collection to connection and from preservation to communication which means that libraries have become more living places than earlier. The users are active DIYs, "do it yourselves", and the atmosphere is created

¹⁴ Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Henrik Jochumsen, Dorte Skot-Hansen: Biblioteket i byudviklingen – oplevelse, kreativitet og innovation. [København]: Danmarks biblioteksforening, Det Informationsvidenskabelige Akademi, 2011, p. 66-72, p.89-95.

by them and not by bookshelves. Today libraries are lively places with many happenings and meetings. All this backs up libraries as placemakers.

Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Jochumsen and Skot-Hansen define a library as placemaker when it is involved in revitalizing a certain area in the city or in creating a totally new area for example in transforming an industrial area into a mixed cultural and business center. They also highlight the importance of the library in creating the public domain of the new expressive city center.

As examples they present two American libraries designed by the architect Moshe Safdi, namely *Vancouver City Library* (from 1999) and *Salt Lake City Library* (from 2002). The latter one is also an example in the article "Where democracy happens" written by John N. Berry III. The following is a quotation from this article: "A sense of community! Much more than merely a new library construction that is what Salt Lake citizens wanted when the library was to expand. 'A placemaker' with a long range of special qualities is what they got."¹⁵

Already in the planning phase the citizens participated and told the architect about their wishes. They wanted more than a building. They wished that the building reflects the idea of an open mind. There are 360 degrees views of the city from it so that you can look outward in every direction.

As a European placemaker the Danish researchers name especially *Openbaare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA)*. This library which was opened in 2007 has become one of the most popular libraries in Europe. But at the same time when the researchers praise *OBA* in many ways they end their presentation by making a very basic question "Top-down or bottom-up planning?" and putting some other questions, too.

How would *OBA* look like if the users had been involved more in planning? Would it be less a show-room and had a bigger variety of activities? Could we imagine a library concept which is not only about consuming the culture but also producing it? Would that kind of library rather support the alternative and stand for creative cultural production?

The questions are very relevant and fundamentally connected to the definition of placemaking. Placemaking is not only creating a popular building but it is also how activities and atmosphere are created by people. It is a question how the space is taken over by people by activating the use of the space and other available resources.

The idea of public space has even got a separate organization *Project for Public Spaces (PPS)* (<http://www.pps.org/>) in the mid-1970's. This organization has a special task to activate the use of public spaces. *PPS* describes its goal like this:

"Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities.

¹⁵ John N. Berry III: "Where democracy happens". Salt Lake City Public Library, article in *Library Space. Inspiration for Buildings and Design*. Editors Hellen Niegaard, Jens Lauridsen, Knud Schulz. The Danish Library Association, 2009, p. 61.

*Our pioneering **placemaking** approach helps citizens transform their public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, spur rejuvenation and serve common needs.”*¹⁶

PPS defines placemaking as follows:

“Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Put simply, it involves looking at, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place. The vision can evolve quickly into an implementation strategy, beginning with small-scale, do-able improvements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them.

*Placemaking capitalizes on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness, and well-being.”*¹⁷

As its best the realization of placemaking can be started already in the planning phase of a building and even a long planning process can be used in a positive way. I present shortly two projects of long duration as examples. They differ in many ways but the common aspect is the involvement of citizens in the planning process at early stage.

Placemaking by the citizens – Aarhus and Helsinki

The political decision of constructing the Mediaspace in Aarhus was made in 2004, ten years earlier than the building was planned to open in 2014¹⁸. At the same time with the decision, which covers the former harbor area and the library as a part of it, it also was adopted the “Aarhus model for development” – a visionary model, which promotes values of equality and openness, ensures involvement of the citizens, and maintains that the processes, methods and professional competencies will be continuously evaluated and developed.”¹⁹

In practice this has meant a special model for customer involvement and creation of a certain kind of development laboratory. Decisions made during the planning process are not based only on theoretical models or repeating the traditional services. Special test beds are created in the existing main library. Transformation space and interactive children’s library are places for tests how professional library communication can be developed to create interaction with users. The strong user orientation in Aarhus is especially interesting while the library even otherwise is top developer of new services. Today the new library has got a name, too. It is called *Dokk1*.

The story in Helsinki is totally different. The discussion about the new central library started already late in the 1990’s but so far there is no final political decision about constructing the new central library. However, there has been an international architectural competition and the winner of it will be announced in June 2013. According to the competition program the library is planned to be opened in 2017. The reasons behind the project to get a new library are the wrong site of the existing central library and the realization of a new cultural center in downtown Helsinki.

¹⁶ <http://www.pps.org/about/>

¹⁷ http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/

¹⁸ <http://www.urbanmediaspace.dk/en>

¹⁹ Marie Östergård: Mediaspace in Aarhus. A user process, article in *Library Space, Inspiration for buildings and design*. Editors Hellen Niegaard, Jens Lauridsen, Knud Schulz. The Danish Library Association, 2009, p. 136.

In this case it has been in the library's interest to describe the vision and needs of the future libraries. To make parts of the vision visible and concrete two smaller units were grounded in 2005 in the very city center: the combined IT and music library, *Library 10* and *meetingpoint@lasipalatsi*. The latter is a library without any books which has totally concentrated on how to use IT and different kind of technical devices around it. "The urban office" which offers meeting and working places for small entrepreneurs and 3D printing are some of the latest services there.

Library 10 is a placemaker in miniature scale: there are over half a million visitors a year in the space of 800 square meters (about 8600 square feet). *Library 10* also is a real transformation space. Since opening 2005 the premises have undergone several changes based on customer feedback and on staff's self-assessment. Customers of *Library 10* are very active and for example 80 percent of the program offered in the library premises is organized by customers. The Danish colleague Jens Lauridsen explains the whole idea very clearly: "*The most important development at Library 10 occurs via this intense dialogue with the users.*"²⁰

Library 10 and *meetingpoint@lasipalatsi* are test units, which will be moved into the new central library. But they are not the only contacts with the customers in planning of the new library. The library has hired an interaction planner, a person whose task it is to have discussions with citizens about their expectations about the new central library. This happens both on the net²¹ and in different kind of meetings. During the year 2012 citizens have told their dreams about the library and there are over 2000 of them. In smaller seminars the citizens have decided how to use 100.000 Euros in different projects which will be realized in the existing libraries. All this is training for the moment when the planning of the new library starts in a more concrete form. It is important to involve citizens while the future of libraries is based on number of visitors in libraries and not on the number of books.

Public library as public space – the success story for the future

The concept of placemaking is strongly connected to public space and how that space is used by activating the citizens. Compared with other cultural institutions public libraries have great qualifications to act as important and essential placemakers. Big libraries in large developing cities make this aspect visible and meaningful but every library – even the small and rural – is able to act as placemaker in its own surroundings. In developing the public space we can of course have different kind of partners, even commercial ones but we have to remember what the character of the public space is and we have to take care that it does not transform into commercial public space. The library is not a shopping mall.

Placemaking is not only constructing a new building and having a big number of visitors there but also connecting the users of the space and of the services in planning process as early as possible. Thus planning will be switched from top-down-planning to bottom-up-planning. In that

²⁰ Jens Lauridsen: Library 10. IT and music library in Helsinki, article in *Library Space. Inspiration for Buildings and Design*. Editors Hellen Niegaard, Jens Lauridsen, Knud Schulz. København: The Danish Library Association, 2009, p. 102.

²¹ <http://keskustakirjasto.fi/en/current-events/>

way the space will be integrated locally and creates social cohesion already in the planning phase and realizes local and individual needs.

Library space as public space and a declaration of the importance of the public space in the society offer a good answer to the question made so often lately: Why do we still need libraries and library premises when bigger and bigger parts of the material will be published in the electronic form or is available on the net? The answer is clear: If democracy is valued in the society it is necessary to have public spaces. In this public libraries have a special position and it is important for the whole society that this central institution which backs democracy will be supported and strengthened. But this also means that we, librarians have to be active and have to be able to explain the role of public libraries for urban planners and politicians. If we succeed in that the libraries and their users will have a great future ahead.

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