



Case 55 London, United Kingdom: Idea Stores - culture-led revitalization 2002→

Problem to resolve

Public libraries used to be educational centres but have lost a great part of their former customers because of the spread of electronic media and the rather unattractive rules and appearance of these institutions. With the decline of libraries also the familiarity with heritage and culture is fading given space to widespread disorientation among the contemporary urban population.

A new Alternative to the dusty libraries

Fortunately a new generation of 'real' public service centres are popping up, often located right within socially critical urban renewal settings, where citizens are not sent from one office to another but find all type of assistance underneath one roof and can even turn up at late hours. Under the same roof you may also find innovative interpretations of public libraries, where you can watch videos, take the books to the coffee shop or can take evening classes. Obviously, kids from less educational family background feel more attracted to these establishments than to classical borough libraries, and will voluntarily learn 'the easy way'. →Tool URR 3

Case study: IDEA STORES in Britain

Idea Stores¹ are a transformation of conventional public libraries into service oriented one-stop information and learning centres – housed in identity creating flagship buildings on the local high street. The most welcoming characteristic is the character of a real customer care and 'retail feel'. The commercial model is the inspiration here too, albeit the purpose remains to deliver a free, not for profit, public service. The newer ones of the 5 existing 'Idea Stores' also incorporate a One Stop Shop - a customer facing service point dealing with local residents' enquiries relating to housing. Another important factor for the success of Idea Stores, it is that as much effort was put in the concept as on the design of the new buildings.





Idea Store in London²

Philosophy and Practice³

The [Idea Store](#) project shows how an innovative approach transformed an unpopular library service. It involved the integration of Tower Hamlet’s libraries and adult and community education services, and housing the integrated service in dedicated buildings.

In the late 1990s, the usage levels in Tower Hamlets’ libraries were lower than other local councils and falling. Fewer than 20% of the population used a library – though there were more libraries per head of population than in any inner London Borough. Geographical distance from people’s homes was not the overriding factor in usage. The library buildings were not in the right places and often in poor condition, with high maintenance costs. Staff was spread thinly so opening hours were short and inconvenient – and published hours were not always maintained.

Library service review

The council wanted to provide a library service that met the needs of the local community. In early 1998 the Customer Services Directorate conducted a market research programme, a road show and a publicity campaign. They wanted to give every resident and library user the opportunity to contribute to the review and future development of their library service. Approximately one in ten households took part.

The market research included interviews and questionnaires. It told the council that local people really did value libraries (something that couldn’t be assumed given the low levels of use) but they wanted libraries to fit in with their lives. It was also clear that retaining existing buildings was not a high priority for most people, which could have been a reflection of the poor location of most of them. People wanted:

- libraries in the right location
- longer opening hours
- better book stock
- better IT
- access to council services and information

Launch of the Idea Store concept

Results from the library and adult education review led to a rethink of how the service was delivered. There was a clear overlap between the 2 services and opportunities from integration. In April 1999 the council's Arts, Leisure and Sports Committee and Youth and Community Services Committee developed a [strategy](#) to bring the 2 together to become a single service, the Idea Store. It was officially launched by Chris Smith, then Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with £20 million funding from Tower Hamlets council.

Service integration

Tower Hamlet's vision was for a visit to the library and lifelong learning centres to become a regular part of people's lives – to act as a focus as well as a resource for the whole community - with the Idea Stores engaging people that other services didn't reach.

Market research had shown the importance of good locations. Following the retail principles the 7 proposed Idea Stores were to be sited in prominent, convenient positions, with a similar format and contents, while reflecting the local context. The first prototype Idea Store at Bow opened in 2002; 3 years after the initial concept had been developed. Idea Store Bow was located in the middle of a busy shopping centre, next door to a supermarket - designed to fit conveniently into people's lives and able to attract passers-by. This model was followed in the next Idea Stores: Chrisp Street in 2004, Idea Store Whitechapel in 2005, Canary Wharf in 2006 and Idea Store Watney Market in 2013.



Inside an Idea Store⁴

Tower Hamlets kept the local community engaged and updated throughout the process. A magazine explaining the new Idea Stores was published regularly from 2000. The council also stated that no existing library would close until its replacement was opened.

Design of the buildings and the brand was important to get service integration right. The council worked with design and architecture firm Bissett Adams and award-winning architect David Adjaye. Idea Store branding was used on all signage and publications (print and digital), as well as on the uniforms worn by customer-facing staff. Idea Stores removed standard issue library furniture, badly-designed posters and piles of leaflets. Books were arranged in a similar way to bookshops with a lot of face-on display and a large amount of space dedicated to promoting new and core stock. All Idea Stores were established with long standard opening hours. This was central to creating a place that was attractive and somewhere people would want to spend time.

Adult and community education classrooms, or 'learning labs' are visible (not located on a separate floor), to demonstrate what opportunities are available and each lab has a displayed timetable. When the labs are not in use for classes they are opened up and made available to people as a quiet space for study or reading. The Idea Stores don't see 'learners' and 'library users' as separate people. Similarly customer facing staff (working across the service) deal with both learning and library and information matters - although classes are run by professional teachers.

One effect of running an integrated service - bringing together staff from 2 different working backgrounds – has been to question why things are done the way they are. Such as rules seen as unnecessary have been removed as well as charges on library loans for example CDs and DVDs.

Achievements

Since the opening of the first Idea Store at Bow visitor numbers have increased. Previously, annual figures were around 500,000; this rose to more than 2 million after the fifth Idea Store was opened at Watney Market in 2013. Issues and enrolments on adult education classes have also increased – and from a smaller number of buildings.

The council has made no cuts in opening hours or replaced paid staff by volunteers (although there is an extensive volunteer programme). Local people value the service; 92% rated Idea Stores as 'good' or 'very good' in the 2014/15 CIPFA Public Library User Survey. Idea Store is the highest rated council service in the council's own Annual Residents Survey and there is a 98.9% learner satisfaction for Idea Store Learning, making Tower Hamlets the second highest rated council in England.



Bethnal Green Idea Store⁵



Idea Store Bow in London Tower Hamlets⁶

Plans for the future

The library service is still looking for 2 locations for the remaining Idea Stores. The libraries won't close down until they've been replaced.

There is now further integration of libraries and adult and community education, with staff from across the service working together on joint projects including health, employability and digital inclusion. For example, the Idea Store health strategy demonstrates a coherent offer under one roof that includes a wide range of services, health information, fitness classes, therapeutic reading groups, healthy eating, dance, and bibliotherapy. They receive Public Health funding for Health Outreach workers operating out of Idea Stores.

Credentials

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References

¹ <https://www.ideastore.co.uk/> viewed 31/05/2015

² Source: http://cdn.ltstatic.com/2005/March/OW142114_942long.jpg

³ Copied from <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/idea-stores-service-integration-with-libraries-and-learning>

⁴ <https://archive.cilip.org.uk/blog/public-library-innovation-idea-stores-so-last-century>

⁵ https://www.ideastore.co.uk/assets/images/bethnal_library.jpg

⁶ <https://www.ideastore.co.uk/idea-store-bow>