

The changing libraryness of libraries

As funding cuts sound the knell for UK branch libraries, a new breed is emerging worldwide. What do these modern marvels say about the role of contemporary libraries, asks **Camilla Sterne**



ust before 9am at Canada Water Culture Space (CWCS) in south London, several people gather in the lobby to await the library's opening. Natural light pools on the oak floorboards, guided by the modern wood-clad spiral of a staircase.

Behind the staircase sits the entrance to a 150-person theatre space managed by local theatre collective the Albany. A cafe hums to the right, burnt sienna walls warm and welcoming. The library is a familiar space, with a twist.

In the last six years, 343 libraries have closed in the UK, with a further 111 closures planned in 2016. Others have been handed to volunteers or privatised, leaving 3,765 council-run libraries down from 4,290 in 2010. In that time, only 50 libraries have opened, but there's something remarkably different about them – and they are part of an evolving tradition of libraries worldwide. Like CWCS, these all singing, all dancing libraries are shiny and modern. The light is bright; the spaces are shared. There is no scent of old books, no dark nooks – no slanting rays of light speckled with dust. They often bear allusive names like “Culture Space”, “Idea Store” or “Lounge”.

The shift was led by the team at international architecture studio Snøhetta, whose first commission in 1989 was the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a contemporary resurrection of the ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt that was destroyed in 270 AD.

The 11-storey library, opened in 2002, contains a planetarium, several museums, a school for information science, and conservation facilities. Striking in its circular, tilting silhouette, the building spans 160 metres in diameter. Its form – and its symbolic and historical value – are colossal.

“The longevity of it as an institution has to do with the value people place on it,” says Snøhetta's senior architect Michael Cotton. “Libraries can't just be warehouses containing books. They need to evoke the ideals of a community.”

This legacy is reflected in Mr Cotton's most recent project at the Ryerson University Student Learning Centre in Toronto, which was one of seven recipients of the American Institute of Architects 2016 Library Building Awards announced in April. Conceived as a “library without books”, the eight-storey lobby cuts a striking figure in downtown Toronto with its triangular motifs and porous glass. Attached to an existing library containing traditional book stacks, the building posed a solution to a lack of communal space for the campus' 40,000 students.

Snøhetta's team drew inspiration

from the agoras and stoas of ancient Greece where communities met, socialised and exchanged ideas. Mr Cotton says he worried that people would be baffled by a space that bore little resemblance to the archetypal library.

But since the Ryerson centre opened in 2015, Mr Cotton says it has been packed with students studying, relaxing, performing spoken word, breakdancing and even hosting a fashion show.

“It's necessary to challenge the traditional library if it's not surviving,” he says. “Bringing people together is the greatest potential of libraries today.”

The design reflects an evolving role for libraries as not only storehouses for information, but as hubs of community and cultural dialogue. It is a concept that architect and social anthropologist Gemma John noted when she toured 34 libraries across North America and Europe in late 2015 and early 2016 for a Churchill Travelling Fellowship. The grant provides backing for British citizens to conduct research abroad and acquire expertise applicable in the UK.

Ms John, who lives in London, studied the convergence of space, programming and culture. She says public libraries are moving closer to shopping malls, market squares and bus stations so they benefit from foot traffic and become integral to people's lives. They are often shared facilities with exhibition spaces or theatre groups, and emphasise activity-based programming.

But she says multi-use spaces place higher demands on the libraries themselves: “Libraries are having to do more with less. They need to accommodate the people who want to browse, people who want to work, people with children. They're trying to carve out space where they can.” This means more audience-tailored book collections, or large collections stored in robotic shelving spaces to make room for people – not for computers, as some might expect.

During her research Ms John visited Dokki, a 30,000-square-metre library in Aarhus, Denmark. The project began in 1998 with approximately £36m from the Danish government and opened in June 2015 with a final budget of more than £230m, padded by private and nonprofit collaborators from across the city. The modern building offers a 360-degree panorama of its site at a former industrial harbour overlooking the Aarhus River.

The team used “design thinking” to gather information directly from the city's inhabitants about their lives and behaviours. They invited citizens to suggest ideas for the building, and held focus groups with young mothers, students, educa-

tors, seniors and others.

“What we wanted to build was a house for people, not books,” says Rolf Hapel, director of Citizens' Services and Libraries in Aarhus. “We had seen a lot of libraries all over the world and we didn't find anything that matched our vision of a modern library. They were all more or less buried in the past, with the book as a denominator for the building.”

Mr Hapel insisted that the architects and designers prioritise citizen's explicit requests in the final design for Dokki. He was surprised to learn that young mothers felt they would stay for long stretches at the library if offered the privacy of an *ammerum*, or breastfeeding room, which has become an integral part of the Dokki's Children's Lab.

One precocious girl insisted that she wanted to hear birds inside the library, which culminated into a “soundscape” that plays recorded birdsong when someone enters the library. Other features include a reading room, study cells, a stage and a “maker lab” – many of which Mr Hapel says may have never existed if it weren't for the iterative and human-centric design process.

But not all of these attributes are unique to Dokki. Maker labs like the one in Aarhus are catching on predominantly in North America as workshops where the public can access power tools, computer software, 3D printers and even sewing machines. Chicago Public Library's Maker Lab, launched in 2013 as a six-month experiment, was so successful that it has become a permanent fixture.

But as libraries across the UK close in droves, campaigners like the Library Campaign's elected head Laura Swaffield wonder about the attainability of these contemporary models, when even local branch libraries are struggling to keep their doors open.

Ms Swaffield says that the London Borough of Southwark, where CWCS resides, represents an exception to the overwhelming majority of local and county councils that have failed to prioritise their library services and view them as a luxury rather than a public right. And though the situation in England looks increasingly bleak (Ms Swaffield struggles to identify a library campaign that has been successful), CWCS' visits have risen from 35,000 to 40,000 since the £14.1m facility opened in 2011. It is a testament to the newer model.

Ken Worpole, author of *Contemporary Library Architecture*, says the way forward is through cultural groups sharing use and management of libraries. This includes integrating libraries into the ground

▲ **The main reading room at Dokki in Aarhus, Denmark**
Rolf Hapel

floor of large retail developments or blocks of flats, though he says problems arise when councils attempt to classify a room full of books in a leisure centre as a library. He favours the notion of libraries offering a “living room in the city” and says it is the model that most architects are embracing over silent sanctuaries of knowledge. “Libraries provide a social setting for the otherwise highly individualised use of the internet,” says Mr Worpole.

Southwark's regional libraries manager Linda Foster has observed a noticeable shift in her patrons' behaviour over her more than 20 years as a librarian. Ten years ago, she says most patrons borrowed books and left without even removing their coats. Now, many patrons come to CWCS with their laptops and stay all day.

“It's a sort of neutral space that anybody can come to,” says Ms Foster. “That's a rare thing. Urban living space is getting smaller and smaller, and the library offers a place where people can come and just look out the window if they like. We don't really mind what they're doing, providing they're not upsetting anybody. It helps combat isolation.”

These new incarnations offer little fodder for nostalgia, seeming to possess none of the traditional “libraryness” of a library. And though the more sentimental among us may mourn their endangered predecessors, the contemporary library remains a beacon of the democratisation of information, and increasingly – of democratic space.

The clock hits 9am in CWCS and the crowd disperses, ascending the modern staircase to the two floors above. Their reasons for coming are their own – study, play, reading, reflection, printing, research. Their space, however, is shared. ●

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▼ **A spiral staircase at the Canada Water Culture Space leads to the study area**
John Snow

