

Meet, work, learn: The public library as a center for learning, by Liv Sæteren, Oslo Public Library

Let me first introduce myself, I am the director of Deichmanske bibliotek - the Oslo Public Library. Norway's largest public library as it is based in Norway's capital – the city of Oslo. Oslo is the largest city in our country, the population slightly above 500.000 inhabitants. It is located at the innermost part of a beautiful fjord surrounded by wooden hills.

You may have the impression that Scandinavian libraries are very prosperous and impressive. The Oslo Public Library however, is not a typical Scandinavian library in those terms – nor are most other Norwegian libraries. The reason for this is that Norwegian libraries in general and the Oslo Public Library in particular have extremely low budgets compared with the neighbour countries. Budget per capita is approximately just below half of what it is in Denmark and Finland, and also well below the budgets in Sweden and Iceland.

Our budget is NOK 118 million, about EUR 15 million. Probably not too different from the funding level in many German libraries?

The activity level for the Oslo Public Library System (main library and 13 branch libraries) is approximately 2 million loans and about 2.5 million visitors.

The future libraries – development or fading?

Many libraries are being built these days all over the world. At the same time, ongoing debates are questioning the existence of libraries themselves in the future. Questions are being raised as to the libraries' legitimacy as areas of public focus and spending. There is an uncertainty within the public sector in general, and this uncertainty affects libraries in particular. One of the main concerns in public opinion is whether libraries at all are necessary in the Digital Age?

This uncertainty causes a lack of focus and direction in library development.

When discussing this issue, I find that libraries in general are relatively unclear about their aims, goals and strategies. At the same time, libraries are relatively obvious institutions – everybody knows what a library is and everyone has a certain perception of what a library should be. This perception is usually that a library is a place where one can borrow books, where it is quiet and friendly, but possibly even a bit strict and serious. The libraries are usually well liked by most users, but also considered a bit pathetic – as something outdated or passé, as something which does not fit in our modern, fast paced society. A “leftover”?

So popular and well liked, but still so vague and invisible – how is that?

Internal discussions and self-image in the library world might be part of the explanation. Should the library be an instrument for strategic development of the 'knowledge society'? Should it be an instrument in solving social problems, like partial illiteracy or social unrest? Should the libraries be the fortress of knowledge and tradition - the caretaker and provider of the 'good book'? Or perhaps a social welfare institution targeted mainly at the less privileged?

Is it 'literature' versus 'the Digital Age'?

And are these contrasts that exclude each other, or concepts that can be combined?

Striving for consensus seems to prevent action, experimenting, profiled strategies.

In my country it is a “nervousness” and unwillingness to explore – or even discuss – the possibility of other sources of funding than public fundings. Free access to information is a wonderful principle, and services free of charge for the end user is an important platform for the public libraries. But taken to the extreme it can be a barrier against developing certain library strategies. Sponsoring, selling library services to companies, offering charged consulting services or varied personal tailored library services for individuals - is considered to be “out of the question”.

This dogmatic interpretation of very important and good principles tends to limit the public library strategies like this:

Public libraries should stick to the literature and let private companies – or to some degree scientific libraries - deal with the services that requires financing that supercede the city councils willingness to provide services.

When even the idea itself of engaging in commercial alliance building in order to provide special services is controversial, this contributes to an image of the public library as introvert and reluctant. This might be a special Norwegian approach though.

We must anyway consider that in many countries the prevailing stereotype of a public library is an institution within the frames of the “culture policy”.

Such policy, with its primary aims and means directed towards the public’s spare time, which the public presumably spends on relaxation, rest and leisure, becomes quite dominant also in its effect on the library sector – since public spending on the public’s spare time and leisure has always been fairly limited.

The opposite of that would be to consider the public libraries as an inseparable part of the information, education and even trade policies, in which the public libraries’ purpose and means are directed towards people in their life-phase where they are dealing with education, development and work – a life-long life phase. To manage one’s own life, develop competencies in all areas, especially the competence of creative thinking combined with the ability to learn in terms of adaptive behavioral change, to develop insight and reason – all these are all life-long processes and life-long needs which the public libraries should facilitate and satisfy.

My approach is that such an instrumental role is the natural development. Otherwise the public library’s future is to fade away. It has always been the library’s purpose to contribute to education and acculturation – two concepts that cannot be seen as opposite to each other. Intellectual capability, creativity etc are all important elements in a learning process. After all, what shall we do with all these authored words, either on the screen or in books, in poetry or in essays – unless these words are there to help us master our own life? Mastering is crucial for our studies, at work, in our life off work, and in our constant communication with others.

So far with my own philosophy – where I continuously try telling my politicians about the advantage that we the libraries have, as keepers, collectors and providers of the many variations of the way intellectual property and knowledge are presented – on video, DVD,

CD, Internet, books or magazines – is the ability to structure and find our way for the public in the jungle of words and meanings that has been created through centuries. This advantage, combined with the tremendous infrastructure that already exists in the form of the public library sector, is just waiting to be developed further, in order to be used and expanded, by and for everyone.

We have – however – to face the fact that the future development of the public libraries is questioned. Whether public libraries are able to, or should be able to contribute to the development of active arenas, thus becoming instruments for learning and competence training in society - is not evident for all. Developing public libraries is not without challenges.

And there must be some changes.

We need among else to develop different financial frameworks.

As a director of a public library I have not left my philosophy that the basic and fundamental services (which of course will be different at different times) will have to be based on public funds and thus offered free of charges.

But we must be open to new forms of funding in addition. Both individual charging, sponsoring, and various forms of cooperation with business alliances.

Where the borderline is between public and commercial funding? We do not have answers – but have this questions under serious consideration.

To push development, we also need some “break-throughs”.

In order to get there, one of our strategies is to start with demystifying the library and changing dominant stereotypes.

Enhancers of the existing myths are

- The terminology we use
- The self perception and introversion
- The physical form of libraries
- The visual profile and structural framework

...all these combined only enhance and preserve the old myths about what a library should be.

This brings me to our most important strategy in Oslo at the moment. Not to debate, not to formulate recommendations. But to actually create a new main library that communicates visually a new library concept. At this stage we have temporarily given this new library concept the title of ”meet, work, learn”.

In the following a few quotations from the programme we have just made to the architect competition of the new library:

“The prevailing typology

Library architecture has been cast into a typology marked by the old conception. Even today, libraries are being built with bookshelves as the structuring element, lending books as the primary service, and with public work spaces separated from the books on the one side, and technology on the other, both as tools for learning and as information.

Thus, the design of library premises contributes to strengthen myths about libraries, and work against their modernization. The prototypes refer to the past, to the traditional functions and working methods of libraries.

The modern public library – our concept

Knowledge and learning are based on interaction. Users of information sources and creative forms of communication relate actively to these sources in order to acquire and develop new knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the library's role is to guide individuals, groups and organizations through the process of finding and processing information so they can accomplish their particular, and often individual, goals.

A modern library is an active promoter of literature and creative works. A kaleidoscopic urban society challenges a library's direct dissemination activities in that it calls for varied and exciting experiences, both in terms of special arrangements and a design/profile that invites the public to make use of the library. The modern library is a meeting place with contents that are useful and inspiring to everyone, and is, in this sense, an important arena for integration and diversity.

The library must:

- Offer ample possibilities for collecting and processing knowledge and information,
- Make the necessary facilities, resources and information accessible to groups and individuals, and act as a gateway to other services and sources,
- Provide a stimulating arena for meeting, working and learning - a laboratory for creative teamwork and dialogue
- Function as a meeting place for integration and diversity, and be a literary venue in the capital city,
- Be an important node within the city's cultural life and network of knowledge.

The public library as a forum for learning

Books, lending services and reading are still major vehicles for enlightenment, education and culture, but their portion of the library's total services is gradually decreasing, and they will be somewhat less prominent in the physical environment. The library's role as a forum for learning and the interactive sharing of ideas is becoming increasingly significant and popular, and this is where their architectural typology requires new solutions.

The library as a forum and place of work plays a key role in the process of learning. Its physical environment, facilities and services, including the personnel's working methods, will have to be set up to support these learning processes. The library will be an important precondition for Oslo as a capital city and center in terms of raising competence levels in Norway. Life-long learning will be key words for understanding future developments. All of the target groups are included in the library's services as a forum for learning: children, students and adults adapting to new circumstances and learning situations.

The fact that the production of knowledge is in a constant state of change emphasizes the importance of working with new participants, new organizations and new institutions. In this way, the library as a forum for learning will be an important node in the capital city, where different participants from different networks can meet, work and learn together. The growth

of information and communication technology has, strangely enough, resulted in an even greater need for libraries as physical meeting places for learning and exchange.

The public library as a meeting place for cultural life and experiences

The library will be an important meeting place both for work and leisure. More than any other arena, it will be used by persons from all generations, educational levels and classes. Members of the multicultural population are especially frequent users of the library's services. The library's function as an arena for integration and diversity is a key factor.

There are few non-commercial meeting places for children and adolescents in the center of Oslo. We should make it possible for all user groups to come together in conjunction with learning and discovery, for example, multimedia and physically-based programs, instructive technological innovations in the form of robots etc. Since the capital city lacks these types of meeting places, the library's services will be especially important. Special events and attractions, both in terms of the interior and its content, are important motivators for using the many types of source material in a library. “

No more quotations – but the programme continues with consequences of the library concept for the architecture. – as flexibility, availability of technology all over the library, varied interiors with varied atmospheres for the diversity of target groups and functions, organizing principles for all kind of materials and tools in accordance with how people meet, work and learn, in groups, alone....

Those with special interest can find the comprehensive programme on our website.

For me it is important to point out that this programme is authorized by the political authorities in Oslo. Authorizing the role of the public library as a center for learning

Till now I have not been specific about IT - the new role for the library in developing IT Competence in the Society. That is mainly because I find the major challenge as to make the public library recognized as an important instrument for developing competence in the society. This implicates IT competence as well.

Some comments though:

The services and methods in the public libraries that contributes to IT-competence are indeed many and varied. I foresee the development along several dimensions as natural – with the traditional library services and methods as off-spring. But in addition there are several possibilities of developing new services, that differs from established methods and services in a public library.

I will not comment on the various forms of library automation, selfservice etc. But as contribution to IT competence in the society and for the individuals I see the public libraries maintain , improve and develop services like

- providing general access to technology : equipment, both hardware and software - and the electronic information itself . As of course allready established in libraries all over .

- guiding, teaching in how to use the equipment, and how to search.. Well established services all over i presume.
- selecting, categorizing, making gateways to special and valuable information sources, or sources important to special target groups.On line reference services. Well established public library services several places - as improvement of traditional library services.

Not so evident, but a natural consequence of a librarys function as a learning center – would be to

- provide technology – and training i work methodology for groups, working in projects .
- be the show-room of new technological devices for the general public
- provide technology in terms of universal tools.

I would even presume that public libraries could be interesting partners to companies in developing methods and tools for working and learning processes. The public library is a meeting place for the general public, and the library staff will have competence in how various technological tools can be improved – to facilitate the users needs.

I have used most of my speech to talk about the challenges and some possible strategies to develop the public library into a better, more useful and more visible institution.

Since the invitation to this conference has the main subject: High quality for everyone – and what it costs – I would like to conclude like this:

When talking about ”everyone” as our target group, in my opinion the public library is exactly the institution that has the predefined opportunity to reach that ”everyone”. It is thus absolutely critical to encompass the public libraries in the center of the development of an enlightened, competent, creative and self-mastering public....

To what costs? Well – what would be the costs of inventing a new kind of institutions for the future – doing almost the same.