

PRACTICES

The New Role of Libraries: Places for All

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are reinventing the concept of open public places for everyone by becoming third places. "Third places" is a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg and refers to places where people spend time between home ("first" place) and work ("second" place). Famous coffee chains brand their stores as third places. But the most effective third places come from the community in many forms, from creative breeding grounds to cultural centres, from neighbourhood gardens to open public spaces and to libraries. Third places are playing a growing role in cities as they function as meeting places for a variety of people, as spaces for cooperation, connection and inspiration. The text presents three recently designed and built public library buildings—De Krook in Ghent, Dokk1 in Aarhus and Oodi in Helsinki.

KEYWORDS

Libraries; Third places; Ghent; Aarhus; Helsinki.

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Libraries are reinventing the concept of open public places for everyone by becoming third places. “Third places” is a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg and refers to places where people spend time between home (“first” place) and work (“second” place). Famous coffee chains brand their stores as third places. But the most effective third places come from the community in many forms, from creative breeding grounds to cultural centres, from neighbourhood gardens to open public spaces and to libraries. Third places are playing a growing role in cities as they function as meeting places for a variety of people, as spaces for cooperation, connection and inspiration. In Ghent, a vast third place opened in 2017: De Krook library, Ghent’s new landmark and cultural centre, a place to read, to learn, to live, and to simply be.

1 The shell: an open balcony to the city

The idea to build a new library in Ghent dates back to 2005 when the old library was outgrowing its building in use since 1992. But for the first time in its 216 years of existence (the library was established in 1804), the city library ended up in a building that was truly designed as a library.

The building of De Krook must be seen within the framework of a large city development project for the city of Ghent. Plans to build a prestigious Music Forum were abandoned due to lack of funds and public support. The Flemish minister of culture at the time, Bert Anciaux, together with the alderman of culture in Ghent, redirected the plans towards the most accessible cultural temple of all: the library, where everyone is welcomed and can feel part of society.

The monumental building, which incorporates a work of art by Michaël Borremans¹ on its plaza, was designed by the Ghent architecture firm Coussée & Goris Architecten² and their partner RCR Arquitectes³. This Spanish architecture firm also won the Pritzker Prize in 2017, the highest international distinction for architecture [Fig. 1].

The idea of the architects was to create a building that would look like a city within a city with its streets and squares, an open balcony to the river, a shell that would become Ghent’s new living room.

From the outside, the building can be read as a stack of horizontal plateaus with a view on the river Scheldt. Once inside, the building functions like a traditional department store, with its large atria and signature staircases which almost seem to be able to draw people upwards into the building. Going up, readers and visitors can enjoy the surrounding city and its attractive views, which create a physical link with the urban landscape. Extremely transparent and open, allowing local residents to meet and

1. http://www.zeno-x.com/artists/MB/michael_borremans.html, accessed January 22, 2020.

2. <http://www.coussee-goris.com/>, accessed January 22, 2020.

3. <https://www.rcrarquitectes.es/rcr/>, accessed January 22, 2020.



FIG. 1 De Krook, Ghent. Photo City of Ghent

discover what this reclaimed place has to offer, the building is thoroughly at home in its location.

2 Safe space for all: Ghent's new living room

In this digital era, city libraries are still relevant, but their roles are definitely changing. In a society which offers an abundance of information, there is a growing need to help people navigate the available knowledge. Ghent's new De Krook library has tailored its activities accordingly. The library's goal is to help people understand the changing world and help them add meaning to it. It is doing this by taking a central place in the debate on the knowledge-based society.

Of course, the library wants to remain an oasis of peace and quiet, with the same extensive collection of books, CDs, DVDs etc. It has more cosy reading corners and quiet reading and study areas than before. An unusual space to read and stay is De Trap van Steen en Wolken: the experience staircase "of brick and clouds," named after a famous book written by Flemish author Johan Daisne. Library visitors use it to rest, to read, to listen to monthly Library Sessions. Since its opening, the more "classic" role of the library is doing surprisingly better than expected or hoped. Library loans, instead of stagnating at a status quo—have increased by almost 10% [Fig.2].



FIG. 2 De Krook, Ghent. Photo City of Ghent

De Krook's basic services remain free: one doesn't have to consume here. One can just be. But the library is more than books. It is also a place to meet other people during lectures or debates, to develop skills in workshops, to experiment in the "maker's lab," to collaborate on research. The building also includes a multi-purpose room, a study room and a reading café, places highly appreciated by students who storm in at opening hour to get a space. The library also hosts several free advice services for legal question or career orientation and study. One highly appreciated service is the Digital Talent Point: a service that enables people to acquire basic IT skills, helped by trained staff. This service has become indispensable to the library, not only because there is a clear need to be helped in this digital age but also because the library adopted new systems and applications that require users' support as well. One such application is the "Ghent reads", an inspiration tool directly built into the bookshelves. Based on what other Ghent citizens borrowed in the library, the tool provides users with personalised advice on what to read next.

De Krook is a library of partnerships. Four key actors made it happen: the city of Ghent, the University of Ghent, the province of East-Flanders and imec (the Flemish research centre for nano electronics and digital technologies). In addition to the city library, imec and UGent are housed at De Krook. The various institutions work together and offer services at the site. They are known collectively as "the inhabitants of De Krook." The library is also working with 30 local partners, which makes De Krook much more than a house of books.

3 Creating expectations and adjusting to uses

The opening weekend back in 2017 drew 20,000 people into the building. Only seven months later the library welcomed its one millionth visit. The Ghent citizens have embraced this new third place as their own. And the library clearly tapped into a need. Ghent's residents find the way to the library, enjoy being here and are coming back.

De Krook wants to evolve towards a level of service that is tailored to the needs and expectations of all the Ghentians. The changing socio-demographics of the city have an impact on the library as well, and the library has to adapt to those: migration, rejuvenation, aging population, diversification, but also multilingualism and poverty are all typical city phenomena which require special attention and adapted actions [Fig.3].

But a brand new place using brand new systems require testing and a lot of care, and adjusting them to users' needs can take time. At the beginning, the adjustments needed for the building and physical installations were putting pressure on the operation of the library, pressure which was aggravated in the case of Ghent by the unexpectedly high usage of the place and premises. While exchanging with other cities about their experiences of opening new cultural premises as big as De Krook, colleagues from the city of Aarhus explained to colleagues in Ghent that about a year and a half of operation is needed to outgrow the "technical teething troubles." And they know what they are talking about.



FIG. 3 De Krook, Ghent. Photo City of Ghent

4 Hear what the Danes have to say

Aarhus's new library opened in 2016 as a multifunctional new complex, a perfect example of post-industrial regeneration: the Dokk1 building⁴ houses the main public library of the city (the old venue has since been sold and used for other purposes), but creativity and resources have produced a centre with a much wider scale of functions. During its first year of operation Dokk1 has had 1.2 million visitors. Beyond the functions of a cutting edge 21st century library, the building houses an ultramodern automated parking area and an official citizen services centre that is not fenced off from the reading, internet and leisure spaces of the library.

The setup is what could be labelled a Danish type of public-private partnership. The investment was initiated and steered by the city, managed by a national foundation that has the right to run the parking place for a proper length of time; as in cases of other cultural investments a number of further business based foundations have contributed to the financing of the construction as well as some of the functioning costs [Fig.4].

Designing the many details of Dokk1 was done upon the analysis of the basic needs of people, having human growth in sight. With the evolution of the answers given to the perceived needs a centre was produced that responds to needs that the city had not even identified at the very start.



FIG. 4 Dokk1, Aarhus. Photo Aarhus Public Libraries

4. <https://dokk1.dk/english>, accessed January 22, 2020.



FIG. 5 Dokk1, Aarhus. Photo Adam Mørk

Dokk1 is open seven days a week from 8 am to 10 pm, unstaffed in the late hours. The various spaces are regularly used for events—readings, performances, debates etc.—about 40% of which in conjunction with co-organisers and 20% fully by external partners. Dokk1 houses offices for over a hundred clerks at the citizen services; library staff is 60 people plus 40 IT specialists. The 1% of the investment budget that Danish law assigns to artistic works allowed, among other things, the creation of The Gong—a huge metal tube that gives sound whenever a new child is born in the hospitals of the city.

From the opening Dokk1 has been used intensively by citizens and has instantly been incorporated into the tissue of the city. The project has successfully reintegrated the former harbour area into the life of Aarhus, contributing to the upgrading of the neighbourhood, attracting various businesses and services in the area [Fig.5].

Both Aarhus and Ghent needed to adjust some of the work processes to the reality of the new building, the new operation, the unimagined high use by visitors. While settling in the city, libraries also need to finetune the

innovative work processes for functions that are new to the library, such as meeting room exploitation, the maintenance of the book transport system, or the reception of visitors that do not come for the library. All these new tasks are part of cutting edge libraries that want to be more than places of reading, and turn into third places.

5 Lessons for all when developing places for all

These lessons from Ghent's library are lessons for all cities. When designing third places, city makers have to remember that they are about and for people. Dutch architect Aat Vos⁵ identifies five dimensions that need to be taken into account when developing third places: people, places, experience, programming and future. The primary task would therefore be to ask people what they want their spaces to look like [Fig.6].

Another good example comes from Finland: Helsinki Central Library Oodi⁶ was a project for the 100th anniversary of Finnish independence. Oodi is a 185,677-square-foot public library that sits in the centre of the city, directly opposite the Finnish Parliament. In Finland, access to all libraries is guaranteed by law, and this three-floor, energy-efficient library was designed by Finnish architecture firm ALA Architects⁷ to be a "living room for the



FIG. 6 Oodi, Helsinki, skyview. Photo Kuvio

5. <https://aatvos.com>, accessed January 22, 2020.

6. <https://www.oodihelsinki.fi/en/>, accessed January 22, 2020.

7. <http://ala.fi/>, accessed January 22, 2020.



FIG. 7 Oodi, Helsinki. Grand opening. Photo Risto Rimppi

nation” made with 99 miles of Finnish spruce timber. There are even nine living trees on the third level, bathed in light with floor-to-ceiling windows.

Oodi has been designed by listening to and engaging its users so that it would match city residents’ hopes and needs in the best possible manner. In 2012, hundreds of library dreams of residents were collected, and with the help of participatory budgeting city residents were able to allocate funds to the development projects of the Central Library. Over the years, various customer panels and development communities have shared their input as users in Oodi’s design process. Future users have had their say, for example, in the choice of Oodi’s seats and the collection of magazines and journals. The name of the library, too, was selected through an open name competition [Fig.7].

These tips are part of a non-exhaustive checklist for city makers. Other recommendations include to develop an open and transparent place, both from the inside and the outside; know the users; make the place accessible for free; create meaningful experiences; diversify the offer; merge public and commercial; and do not shy away from experimentation. In Ghent they embraced a participatory approach as much as they could. For instance, while designing the Youth Library they involved youngsters intensively for a few years. First living lab research helped the youngsters frame what their library should look like, later with a group of young ambassadors called Team Krook they defined the activities to be held here. Youngsters asked for a gaming corner which is very much used today and is one of the library’s many successes.

More info: <https://dekrook.be/> (accessed January 22, 2020).

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