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A new model for the public library in the knowledge and experience society

New context – new challenges – new library model

In the mid-1990s the book *Det lokale bibliotek – udvikling eller afvikling (The local library)* (1996) described a model for the local library's profile. The model reflected the ongoing debate about the library's role as cultural centre, knowledge centre, social centre and information centre, i.e. centres that relate somewhat statically to specific sectors in (local) society.

The model was to be regarded both as an analysis model in relation to the library's actual activity, but also as a tool for prioritisation on behalf of the local library. 'Profiling' was in the mid-nineties a positive word in library development, and the idea was for each library to sharpen its individual profile. With the information society as the new paradigm for the development of society it was, however, particularly the debate about the cultural-centre profile vis-a-vis the information-centre profile that coloured the debate in the library world, a debate which was further intensified in connection with the demands in the report *The Info Society 2000* that the libraries were to 'save' the information society's B-team.

Over the past 10-15 years the societal context and thereby the libraries' societal legitimacy has changed. A new library model is needed that takes into account the challenges, which societal development poses in relation to the libraries, and which highlights the potentials of the libraries for fulfilling the users' needs in the late-modern knowledge and experience society. Tendencies towards globalisation, de-traditionalisation and cultural liberation mean that more than ever we need to know who we are, that we open up in relation to other people and to society as a whole, that we believe in our own strength and value, and that we are able to relate to – and ourselves initiate – change. In this societal context the library's objective becomes to support the following goals:

- Experience
- Involvement
- Empowerment
- Innovation

Where the first two objectives have especially to do with supporting each individual's perception, experience and involvement in his quest for meaning and identity in a complex society, the other two objectives to a greater degree underpin societal goals: Empowerment has to do with the development of strong and independent fellow citizens who are able to solve everyday problems, while innovation has to do with finding new answers to practical problems or developing completely new concepts, methods or artistic expressions. Both are vital if we as a nation are to hold our own in the global competition. But seen in relation to the overall theme about how the libraries can contribute to realising the Danish globalisation strategy, it is particularly interesting to examine how the libraries' can inspire to and strengthen creativity and innovation as a competition parameter in the knowledge society.

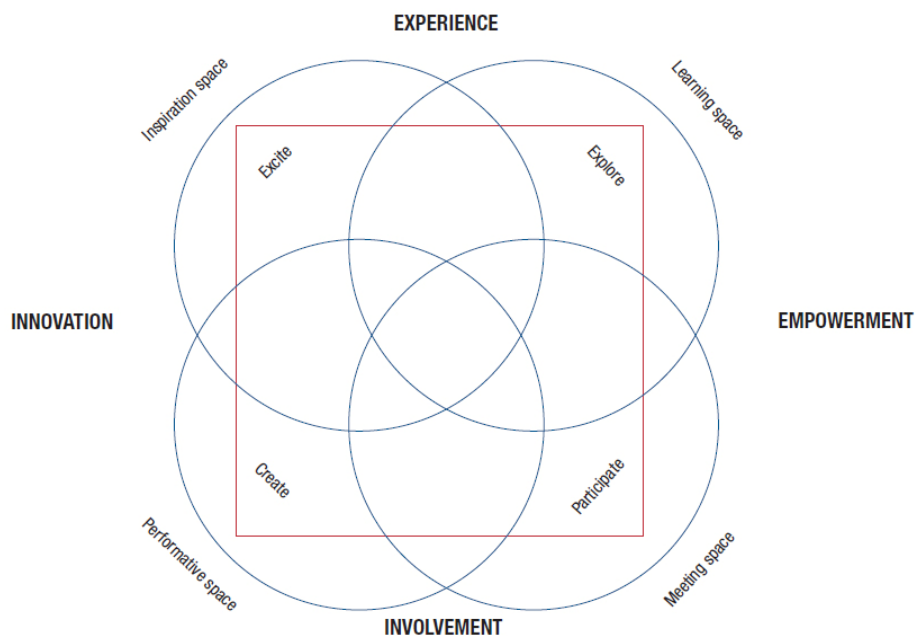
One of the major future challenges will be to open up for activities that can inspire to creativity and innovation. In a future society we must not only have something to sustain us, but also something to live for. This is where the library can make its contribution in the form of learning, experience, inspirational and engaging meetings and possibilities for expressing oneself in a creative way. These things cannot be considered in isolation and individually, but must be seen as overlapping functions that interact in the library space both physically and virtually.

The new model should not be seen as a tool for prioritisation, but rather as a model that indicates the possibilities that the new library must offer the users of experiencing, discovering, participating and creating. In this way the model is not just an analysis model, but it also contains a vision for the library of the future that consists of four different overlapping “spaces”:

- The inspiration space
- The learning space
- The meeting space
- The performative space.

It is not a question of concrete rooms in a physical sense, but rather of possibilities that can be fulfilled both in the physical library and in cyberspace. In an ideal library these four spaces will support each other, and thereby support the library’s objectives in the knowledge and experience society. The task is to make all four spaces interact by incorporating them in the library’s architecture, design, services, programs and choice of partnerships. The model itself and a further definition of the individual spaces follow below.

Model of the library as ‘space’ in the knowledge and experience society



Inspiration space

This is the space for meaningful experiences, i.e. experiences that move our perception. The space must open up for the irrational, emotional and chaotic by mediating a multitude of aesthetic

experiences. This can happen through story-telling and other artistic expressions within all media, culture patterns and genres. The inspiration space should make you want to move beyond your familiar choices and inspire you to return. The library space can also be an experience in itself and act as a stage for cultural events.

The inspiration space underpins especially *experience and innovation*.

Learning space

In this space children/youngsters/adults can discover and explore the world and thereby increase their competences and possibilities through free and unrestricted access to information and knowledge. Learning is seen as a dialogue-oriented process that bases itself on the users' own experiences and their wish to define their own learning needs.

Learning in the library is always an offer and learning here takes place in an informal environment – it happens through play, artistic activities and many other activities. The learning space therefore has to meet particularly young people's needs of a more experience-oriented learning through the development of playful, interactive and social learning patterns. Apart from access to information and knowledge in analogue as well as digital media learning is strengthened for example via homework cafés, study places, open courses and experiments.

The learning space underpins particularly *experience and empowerment*.

The meeting space

An open, public space where the citizens as a third place between work and home can meet other people, who are both like them and differ from them. You need platforms where you come across people with different interests and values from your own and encounter opinions that challenge you through discussion and debate. The meeting space provides the frames for both non-committal, accidental meetings in lounge areas with newspapers and café facilities and also more organised meetings, where topics and problems are analysed and discussed. The latter can happen live as well as on the net through chat groups, blogs or other social technologies.

The meeting space underpins particularly *empowerment and involvement*.

Performative space

In the performative space the users can in an interaction with others get the inspiration to create new artistic expressions in the meeting with art and culture. Here they have access to tools that support their creative activities through interactive games, writing-, sound- and video workshops, and they can get support for their creative activities through workshops with professional artists, designers, multimedia developers etc. Finally, the performative space can act as a platform for mediation by publishing and distributing the users' works and products and by providing stages for their activities.

The performative space underpins particularly *involvement and innovation*.

How to use the model?

As mentioned before the model can be looked upon as a vision or a concept for the new library. But the realisation of a vision requires concrete actions, and it requires a major and sustained effort. Here the model can be used as a tool for clarification at various stages along the way.

First and foremost it can be used as a framework for the discussion about the library's overall purpose and legitimacy internally in relation to its employees, but also externally in relation to politicians, users and partners. Is there consensus on the four major objectives, what do they mean exactly, and are they comprehensive and sufficient for a description of the library as an institution and its political legitimacy? Do we want to support all the four spaces listed, or is that too ambitious and unrealistic in relation to the library's size and resources? What do we want to prioritise and how are we going to achieve these goals?

Next it can be used to do a 'mapping' of the library's actual offers and functions as a basis for a change of décor, services and activities. As part of this mapping the involved parties must translate the model's more abstract concepts into a concrete reality, an exercise which in itself is a good tool when rethinking the library. In this mapping an overview of the library's partners can be used to illustrate what are today the library's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the surrounding community.

Finally the model can be used as the basis for developing more detailed programmes, which support the content and functions of the individual spaces. Here one has to remember that the spaces are not necessarily separate, but rather aspects of the library's activities in both the physical and the virtual sense. How do we get the spaces to interact, and how will the physical and the virtual library be able to support each other in relation to the overall objectives? And what kind of partnerships can support the desired development?