Libraries as spatial incubators

*Impact case study. Department of Architecture 2018*
1. **Summary of the societal impact**

Although some libraries have begun experimenting with new working practices that introduce new possibilities for using library spaces for different purposes (e.g., Library 10 and Kaupunkiverstas in Helsinki), it was not known what kinds of people were using them and why. Also in many places, libraries have become easy targets for municipal savings since they are mainly understood as institutions for providing information. The research project CityWorkLife found that libraries are widely used for working, particularly by freelancers and entrepreneurs, supporting start-ups, for example, so, libraries have become ‘spatial incubators’.

During the CityWorkLife project, a new Finnish Act for Public Libraries (Kirjastolaki) was being prepared, and since the beginning of 2017, the new concept of libraries as spatial services is now part of the national legislation. Instead of defining the tasks of public libraries only in terms of providing information (as in an earlier 1998 Act), public libraries now have the remit to provide spaces for different activities. Libraries ‘should provide spaces for learning, hobbies, working and civic activities’ and ‘the library should have appropriate spaces, up-to-date equipment and a sufficient amount of qualified staff’ (Chapter 1, 2 §). Also, results from the new libraries (e.g., Central Library in Helsinki) were used to provide spaces for working purposes in addition to traditional distribution of information.

2. **Underpinning research/artistic activity related to Aalto activities**

The service innovation that was the result of the CityWorkLife project, funded by Tekes (the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, now Business Finland). It was carried out in the SPACE group in the Department of Architecture (ARTS), with the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management (DIEM), Aalto University School of Science. The objective was to study flexible working in different contexts, such as libraries, coffee shops, open public spaces, urban offices, public transport, et cetera. The partners in the project included Helsinki City Library, Finnair, Telia Finland (telecommunications), Café Köket, and Workspace and Regus Finland office spaces. The project was divided into two sub-projects, led by Dr. Anu Sivunen (PI, DIEM) and Prof. Kimmo Lapintie (Department of Architecture). The innovation of this case clearly implements the updated strategy of Aalto University to advance research excellence and multidisciplinary endeavours toward breakthrough discoveries and disruptive innovation. It is interdisciplinary, combining the fields of art and design (architecture and urban planning and design), ICT and digitalization (new uses of spaces through digital tools and wi-fi), and global business dynamics (innovation from start-ups and individual entrepreneurs to established companies).

3. **References to research / artistic activities**

The results of the project were published in the leading international journal of the field, Library and Information Science Research (JUFO 3), and in the Journal of Urban Technology:


4. Societal Impact, activities and roadmap for the case

The case was done in one of the focus groups of the Department of Architecture, SPACE, which concentrates on the planning, design and strategic development of urban spaces. It includes the professorships of urban planning, urban design and housing design. It is also related to the innovative design of libraries, which is an important building type, thus also supporting building design in the BASE and SMART groups in the department. It is based on internationally acknowledged academic research done in cooperation with business partners and public institutions. The main non-academic beneficiaries are the public libraries in Finland through new legislation, and globally through international publications and invited conference presentations (Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy, the University of Hertfordshire in the UK, Association of European Schools of Planning AESOP yearly congress). It will give them a strong argument for providing spaces for different users, which means that the users of libraries are the main beneficiaries. The timeframe is medium- and long-term: the results have already been used in the design of new libraries since Helsinki City Library was one of the partners in the project, and the long-term effects will come from the adoption of the paradigm shift from information provision to spatial services.

The main message that libraries should be seen as spatial services promoting entrepreneurship and innovation was understood after the first publications of the results were out: ‘Many municipalities are thinking of saving money by closing public libraries. These cuts can however generate costs elsewhere, if the changed role of libraries is not understood. Aalto University made a surprising observation: small entrepreneurs and freelancers have taken the libraries as their home-base. Free public space creates innovations.’ (Finnish Broadcasting Company, Yle, 20 October 2014). The discussion continued in specialized media, such as Kirjasto.fi/Library.fi and Kirjasto-lehti: (the library as an urban office), http://blogit.kirjastot.fi/kirjaston-urban-office/#. WhRTFkx7E_U; libraries attract customers by acting as a public office space, http://kirjasto-lehti.fi/artikkelit/tila-lainaksi/; libraries act as living and working rooms for urban people, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/577d245903596e2e04848bc4/t/587da14ebbd1a5151d2a433/1484646944245/Tuula+Haavisto.pdf.

In the blogosphere, the entrepreneurs themselves could raise their voices: http://www.projectmama.info/2014/10/go-kirjasto.html.

5. Sources to support the impact case

1. The first results of the project were published in a blog, http://mahdollisetkaupungit.blogspot.fi/2014/10/kirjasto-ei-ole-enaan-lainasto-vaan.html.

2. The Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio) interview (‘Professor: By abolishing the libraries, the municipalities are doing a disservice to entrepreneurs’), https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-7534238.


4. In the blogosphere, the entrepreneurs themselves could raise their voices: http://www.projectmama.info/2014/10/go-kirjasto.html.

5. The researchers also gave several presentations and communicated with library experts and architects who had designed or were designing libraries: academic trade union talks featured future workplaces and open science of the project online, including the magazine Acatiimi http://www.acatiimi.fi/9_2015/09_15_17.php; and the Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers, https://tieteentekijoidenliitto.fi/liitto/jasenyhdistyksen/informaatioalan_akateemiset_ina_ry/ajankohtaista/kuulumiset_ina_n_50-vuotisjulhamitkals Cooperatives 2015-news?566, o=15; and the online magazine for polytechnic libraries, Kreodi, https://www.kreodi.fi/en/14/Matkakertomuksia/294/KINE-2015-Työn-muutos-ja-kirjastot-tilallisina-yrityshautomoina.htm.

The earlier Library Act from 1998, according to which ‘libraries should provide library- and information personnel for customers and constantly renewed books and information’ (i.e., spaces or work not mentioned): https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/1998/19980904?search=SBtype%5D=pika&search=Sbpika%5D=Kirjastolaki.
The new Library Act from 2017, in contrast, defines libraries also as spatial services: libraries ‘should provide spaces for learning, hobbies, working and civic activities’: https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/2016/20161492?search%5Btype%5D=pika&search%5Bpika%5D=Kirjastolaki.

6. Future goals

The case was an important learning process, demonstrating in a positive way the added value of partnerships with universities and practitioners. In the future, the paradigm shift from libraries as only information providers requires new types of research with renewed theoretical development and empirical studies. Since the networks of libraries are varied in different countries and parts of cities and regions of countries, more empirical research is needed to assess the effects of the spatial services provided by different libraries in different urban and regional contexts. The challenges for planning and architecture also have to be studied more thoroughly.