

A Manifesto Club Thinkpiece

Books for the People Ciaran Guilfoyle



In short...

Public libraries have become focused on anything but their book collections, and take an increasingly patronising approach to the public.

Instead of supporting the serious pursuit of knowledge, they encourage us in marginal activities better conducted elsewhere.

A more egalitarian approach is needed, that places our aspiration for scholarship at its heart.

Books should be free to access for all, and distractions moved outside the library.

Public libraries that truly serve the people are vital to the intellectual strength of our society.

Public libraries contain some of the most intellectually stimulating ideas mankind has ever committed to paper. Enter a public library and you have almost immediate access to what Matthew Arnold described as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world', and with it the opportunity to turn 'a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.' [1]

Many public libraries have suffered from budget reductions and falling numbers of borrowers over the years. Some have attempted to revitalize themselves through rebranding exercises, emphasising their 'trendy' aspects such as DVD collections, IT availability and their potential usage as meeting places.

The city of Birmingham in the UK stands on the brink of venturing down this route. Birmingham City Council plans to spend £193 million on a new 'Library of Birmingham' which will open in 2013 and replace its existing Central Library. The new library has been designed by architect Francine Houben of Mecanoo, and aims to 'redefine the library for the 21st century'.

But there is a danger this redefinition will concentrate too much on peripheral services and not enough on books. Even services that appear to focus enthusiastically on book-ish activities (such as literacy classes and themed promotions) have a tendency to underplay the importance of the book collection.

This Thinkpiece argues that public libraries need to prioritise their book collections above all else. It is by preserving a large collection of books and providing a large, silent space where these books can be read, that librarians provide the highest level of public service. The focus on community regeneration, social cohesion, illiteracy and so on is mistaken.

Librarians might be imaginative, but it is not for them to change the world. Books themselves contain the ideas people need to make the world a better place.

Whatever happened to 'comprehensive and efficient'?

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires local councils to 'provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof'. Although rather vague, this requirement is sufficient to allow librarians to provide the highest possible level of service, to stock their libraries with the best fiction and non-fiction books, popular and obscure, ancient and modern - and ensure these books can be accessed quickly by the reading public.

Today, however, we live in the age of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC), a Government-sponsored organisation that has attempted to clarify the meaning of 'comprehensive and efficient', and seems to believe public libraries are the solution to all society's problems. Its website presents an array of documents advising librarians not just about the requirement to provide a comprehensive and efficient service, but on community cohesion, social exclusion, empowerment, enfranchisement, regeneration, sustainability, governance, citizenship, and any other topic that might be better discussed within political circles.

While librarians have been encouraged to devote their thinking to these matters, the most important job has suffered. Walk into any city centre public library today and the last thing you will see is the book collection.

This is not to say the books are not there; rather, the layout is often rearranged so the books are literally the last things you see. Before you get to the book shelves you must first pass a display cabinet containing baskets weaved by local school children; then a sizable collection of out-of-date 'blockbuster' DVDs; and finally an ever-growing bank of quietly humming computer terminals, together with a motley collection of individuals tap-tapping away as they correspond by email or conduct 'research'. This modernised layout might aim to 'cohere the community' (whatever that means) but it actually underplays the importance of the book collection.

Just as important as layout is the architecture of a library, and developments in this area are also beginning to undermine the primacy of the book collection. It now seems taken as given that any new

library will have an open, airy feel, and will not incorporate any feature that potential users may experience as imposing.

But the most imposing thing about a library should be its book collection. An inert thing, it sits there and almost glowers at the reader, declaring its amassed knowledge and experience to be greater than his. The collection can at first be incredibly bewildering in its magnificence, and one hardly knows where to begin.

But we should not shy away from this challenge. Meeting it represents the first step on a journey of scholarship, in which the reader acquires experience and knowledge for, and often of, himself. Indeed, by reading books and absorbing someone else's ideas, the reader tests, reanimates and reshapes those ideas.

Architecture that aims to downplay the imposing qualities of the collection performs no favours for potential readers. By emphasising the 'friendly' spaces between the books, rather than the books themselves, the architect provides the reader with no warning of the challenge that lies ahead. For instance, by replacing shelving with large tables for group work, the architect is diverting readers away from the great intellectual challenge and towards something else that could quite easily be done in the coffee shop after the serious reading has been completed.

Most new libraries also incorporate great glass frontages, apparently with the aim of deploying natural light in the service of the readership. Norwich Forum and Bournemouth Library are good examples, and their basic design is traced by the new Library of Birmingham. This should be unsurprising, as Birmingham City Council's website originally stated that 'the Library will link the people of Birmingham to the world. It will bring the world to Birmingham.'

The use of glass walls for establishing a visual link between the library users and the outside world is now a firm favourite among architects. But this visual link again confounds the purpose of the library. Perhaps the commissioners of the Library of Birmingham suspected this when they invited us on the Council's website to 'Imagine a place which people are attracted to visit without any specific purpose'. No doubt visitors will admire the panoramic views of the Birmingham cityscape. But all this glass and vista does not help in the serious reading of a book. Indeed, it can become a major distraction.

This is a problem that has arisen in Seattle's magnificent new glass-walled Central Library. From the outside, this library is a delight to behold. However, from the inside, the building seems geared more to the visitors who arrive 'without any specific purpose' than to those

who simply need to get on and read. As one reviewer commented, 'I'm becoming less enthusiastic about Seattle's crystal palace on each successive visit' [2], and he went on to lament the lack of intimacy between reader and book, a problem directly stemming from the architecture.

So, Birmingham librarians beware!

Not only have you the advice of MLAC to contend with, but also the architectural vision of Francine Houben. Both could smother the original purpose of libraries: to be both comprehensive and efficient. Set your sights on scholarship rather than citizenship, and spend your £193 million wisely.

Too many 'ideas', not enough books

One of the standard lines adopted by librarians to defend the new showpiece libraries is that, despite the additional coffee shop, chill-out zone, music library and even theatre [3], the book collection has not suffered. Indeed, quite often you find a new enthusiasm for books, ideas and learning, which would have been thought rather evangelical in earlier times. This attitude may also be found in the smaller branch libraries that have been given a makeover pending acquisition of the funding required to demolish it or merge it with the local health centre. Is this love of ideas a sign of newly enlightened times?

No. More likely it is a sign of an increasingly ambivalent attitude towards books. Books are still felt to be important, but society has lost its use for many of the ideas they contain.

For instance, is it easy today to appreciate Dickens's *Bleak House* for its moral dissection of society, its subtle judgements and eye for mitigating detail, when on offer just a few years ago we had a television serialisation concentrating on its murder plot and 'cliff-hanger' endings? Much as I enjoyed digesting the bite-sized television chunks of Dickens's greatest novel, I can see how such series might dissuade as many people as they persuade to try the book. In the public mind, watching 'great drama' can obviate the need to read.

The act of reading has been emptied of its content. As with voting at election time, it has become a ritual to be observed and no expense is spared inviting young people to join in. This is the case not just with outrageous gimmicks (such as the 5-a-side goal erected inside the Whitechapel Idea Store to encourage boys to enter the

library and learn while they score goals), but includes more sensible learning opportunities and themed displays.

At first glance there may seem nothing wrong with, say, an adult education class held in a public library. After all, we enter the library to learn, do we not? Well, not quite in that way. The relationship we have with a teacher and fellow students is not the same as the relationship we have with a book and its author. The author cannot usually be engaged with in the same way: we cannot ask the author to 'get to the point'; we cannot meet him for a drink afterwards in order to find out more; we cannot ask him how he thinks we are coming along with our studies.

Reading a book requires a lot of effort on the reader's part. To understand the book, the reader sometimes has to wade through a lot of rubbish without respite until, after several blind alleys and perhaps several other books by the same author, the 'rubbish' appears to make beautiful sense.

To introduce classroom learning into the library is to confound two types of learning. It reduces the importance of the sort of learning that can only be carried out alone with a book, and which is essential for gaining knowledge of any depth. Classroom learning is by no means any less important because of this. Indeed, the successful revival of ideas in the classroom relies on a thorough knowledge obtained from books. However, the place for classroom learning is away from the books, in a space that allows students and teacher to interact directly. Recognition of this dual aspect to learning is why most schools and universities have classrooms and separate library facilities.

What is more, library classes tend not to be at undergraduate level, but are basic introductions to the wonderful worlds of literacy, numeracy and ICT. Would it be considered cruel of me to suggest that persons unable to read have no business in a library at all? A ten-week phonics course held in a classroom at a local college would be much more suitable, providing learners with the reading technique, which is simple enough, before attempting to motivate them with 'ideas'.

And, yes, I have placed inverted commas around ideas there, because nowhere is the celebration of ideas so superficial than in modern public libraries. The real ideas, those developed and committed to paper by thinkers over the centuries, then pursued and reinterpreted by the thinkers that followed them, have always been in libraries. Unfortunately, many of these ideas have now been placed in storage and replaced by 'ideas': flavour-of-the-month book displays on topics such as 'black history', Jane Austen, or coping with illness.

Are these really ideas? Only in a superficial sense. The 'idea' of black history may consist of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* alongside CLR James's *The Black Jacobins* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* on a plinth near the issues desk (provided that your local library is endowed with a decent enough book collection from which these can be drawn). Each of these books is worthy of reading, but each for a wholly different reason, and so their juxtaposition on a plinth represents the loosest of intellectual links.

Real ideas, those found in books, make deeper connections with each other. For instance, in the appendix to *The Black Jacobins*, CLR James links the rebellion leader Toussaint L'Ouverture to the revolutionary Fidel Castro. But this is an intellectual argument about the historic significance of the West Indies in world politics; no mere juxtaposition of interesting characters. Librarians should know that each individual book and, indeed, the entire book collection represent in their own way a series of interlinked ideas. Readers know this, and each book they read leads them to the next one, making themed displays superfluous.

Unfortunately, real ideas seem not to feature that heavily in Birmingham City Council's business case for the new Library of Birmingham. It speculates on the future experiences of a fictional 21-year old benefit-claimant called Wayne:

A few months ago Wayne saw a poster outside [the Library of Birmingham] advertising a free lunchtime rap performance; curious, he strolled in among the crowd. Looking around his impression was of colour and light. The big electronic information screens and bright displays dazzled. There seemed to be loads going on: events, exhibitions, displays, festivals, workshops, family days...jobs talks. All kinds of people were milling about, including young guys much like Wayne himself. He joined the crowd gathered near the café just in time for the show – which turned out to be a rap poet from Handsworth, who in no time had the audience laughing. Afterwards, he asked at Customer Services about the jobs talks. Since then he has become a regular at the Library's Learning Centre; the staff are great and it's no big deal that he failed at school. [4]

This seems a far cry from the vision of Antonio Panizzi, Principal Librarian at the British Museum during the reign of Queen Victoria:

I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the

same authorities, of fathoming the most intricate inquiry as the richest man in the kingdom, as far as books go. [5]

Rather than laying egalitarian foundations for the intellectual challenges that are thrown at us, the new Library, it seems, will force the poor student to subsist within the grim confines of what he already knows: rap, 'impressions of colour and light', and jobs talks.

The impact of information technology

The internet is a wonderful place. Its growth in the last decade has meant many people now have access to information and knowledge that before was denied them. Books that were held in libraries on the other side of the country, or even the other side of the world, can now be read online, instantly and without risk of being damaged. In UK public libraries this access is available free of charge (through 40,539 PCs by March 2007 [6]). Surely the rise of IT in public libraries is therefore a good thing?

Maybe; maybe not. Walk into any public library at lunchtime and stroll along the banks of computer equipment available to the public and you will see most people are not in fact using the internet to access obscure books. They are using it for altogether more practical matters: emailing friends, tartying up their CV, or simply looking for a plumber. Welcome to the People's Network.

The People's Network may account for the slight increase in the number of visits made to public libraries between 2002 and 2006 [7]. It is also claimed by library authorities that the People's Network computers supplement the book stock, and that no book-buying budgets have been reduced as a result. But before we crack open the champagne let us consider the impact of this innovation.

First of all, the computer terminals usually occupy space that was once occupied by books, which may have since been put into storage or even disposed. Secondly, far from absorbing sound energy and generally contributing to the overall silence as books do, the terminals reflect noise, giving that part of the library the air of a busy typing pool. The noise is further enhanced by the activity at the nearby help-desk, at which prospective users of the People's Network 'book in'. Finally, introducing and promoting the internet in public libraries emphasises information at the expense of knowledge, and undermines the library's *raison d'être*: the books.

This move from being a place where it was possible to spend time reading a single book, following the ideas of the author as they develop through the pages, to becoming a place where one 'surfs' from page to page, picking up useful information along the way, is perhaps the biggest cultural change affecting libraries. It suggests that the pursuit of knowledge through a book is no longer the worthwhile activity it was once deemed to be. The cool thing instead is to keep oneself informed with just enough information to make the next move in a busy, 21st century lifestyle. The possibility that this view may render libraries redundant seems not matter to the peddlers of the People's Network.

Often this extending of access to the internet is wrapped in egalitarian language, and heralded as 'bridging the digital divide'. It is specifically aimed at people who have no burning desire to read, but who perhaps have an urgent need to purchase a vehicle tax-disc online. Birmingham City Council is no different in the way it sees its library service. In its Business Case it says:

The role of the internet and the provision of free access within libraries has become an increasingly important tool to reach out to some of these new audiences, to share knowledge and resources, opening up our cultural heritage to aid learning. This has substantially increased and broadened the visitor base helping to deliver access to an ever-increasing range of public information and services. [8]

There is something rather patronising in the view that free access to the internet will somehow lead to 'cultural heritage' rubbing off onto new audiences, as if such people only have to skim the surface of this heritage in order to be impressed by it. The view is equally demeaning of culture, assuming it to be superficial enough to be grasped and understood without requiring citizens to actually read books about it.

Rather than free internet access, the best thing that libraries could offer to these 'new audiences' (who tend to inhabit flats and houses with paper-thin walls in noisy inner-city areas) would be a free-to-access book collection and a large, silent space in which one's own thoughts could be heard.

But public libraries today are neither free nor silent. In contrast to the internet access freely given, public libraries charge users for book reservations, and unless the user lives within a short distance of one of the major city lending libraries, usually any decent book must be reserved from another library. This scam generates over £2m a year for

UK libraries [9], and is difficult to justify when libraries could generate this income through offering internet access at marginally lower rates than those found in high street cafes.

The need to read books in a silent space is wholly different to the need for information. The process of acquiring knowledge is not merely an agglomeration of facts and figures obtained from the internet. It is a longer lasting and more thoughtful experience, rather like having a relationship with a vaguely familiar stranger. For this relationship to bloom it needs to be given a space set apart from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life. Without silence, the task of getting to know an author, and – through that author – oneself, becomes exceedingly difficult. Once immersed in silence it becomes possible to read and reflect on some pretty complex ideas.

As for the IT equipment on offer, there is little to celebrate here. Slow connections, blocked websites, no provision to save work and high printing costs usually mean that for many people a visit to the People's Network is disappointing. In the supposed information age information is surprisingly difficult to obtain.

If local authorities were serious about keeping the people 'networked' then they would establish large-scale internet cafés, housing an excessive number of IT workstations with a central server capacious enough to allow users to save and share their work, and in which would be gathered all the information currently held in their libraries: the daily papers, phone books, legal/careers/health advice. Add several meeting rooms/study areas/chill-out zones, instruct users to set their ring tones to maximum, and you have yourself a city forum for the 21st century.

Just keep it away from the book collection!

Serving the people

Why does all this matter? There are good books in the corners of libraries everywhere that have not been issued in years. Surely it is time for public librarians to recognise that people prefer to use the library for other things? Surely it is time for Birmingham City Council to build a library that will not just house the collection but that will serve as 'a meeting point that celebrates the city's diversity'? [10]

To answer these questions, librarians must ask themselves how they ought to serve the people. By counting the clicks of the turnstile

as the visitors arrive 'without any specific purpose'? Or by preserving and ministering to mankind's sum total of knowledge?

Of course, all the social problems that MLAC now believes librarians should be tackling directly, such as exclusion, cohesion and alienation, do need to be tackled – just not by librarians. These problems are the preserve of politicians, social scientists and even librarians in their spare time. All citizens have a right to think about, address and even challenge these problems. But to mount this challenge we need not just a fighting spirit but something in reserve. We need to have a stock of ideas that will strategically guide us, and to which we can return again and again to refine our own ideas and plans. Managing this stock is the public librarian's sole and rightful task. A librarian's position is not on the frontline, but silently bringing up the rear.

In summary, it is vital for the intellectual strength of our society that the members of Birmingham City Council, and anyone else in the enviable position of commissioning a new library, understand this before the first foundations for the new Library of Birmingham are laid. The people need a new library, but one worthy of their intellectual potential. It is time to turn 'a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.'

Endnotes

- [1] Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, 1869
- [2] Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 27th March 2007: http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/ae/309029_architecture27.html
- [3] The Library of Birmingham will also incorporate the theatre of Birmingham Rep.
- [4] Birmingham City Council, Library of Birmingham Business Case, p.179:
<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/libraryofbirmingham>
- [5] These words are displayed on a plaque in the current Reading Room of the British Museum
- [6] CIPFA statistics on Public Libraries for the year 2006/07
- [7] <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dis/lisu/lampost.html>
- [8] Library of Birmingham Business Case, p.114
- [9] CIPFA statistics on Public Libraries for 2006/07
- [10] Library of Birmingham Business Case, p.4

About the author

Ciaran Guilfoyle is a thirtysomething-year-old curmudgeon, with views that simultaneously point to the future and hark back to the past. By day, he is a chartered bean-counter for the local council (not Birmingham, as it happens); by night, a voracious reader of the works of anyone with a clever idea. His love-hate relationship with public libraries stems not from his childhood, but his late twenties, when a wasted youth and the gaping holes in his knowledge began to haunt him. His first article on libraries was written for the Queen's English Society in 2002. He is married with two sons.



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