



Cities as long tails of the physical world: a challenge for public libraries

A challenge for public libraries

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to study if a link can be established between the role of new public libraries in contemporary society and the application of the long tail paradigm to the physical world (according to Chris Anderson's analysis in his 2006 book entitled *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*), and in particular if these new libraries can learn new, useful lessons for their collection and service planning starting from this point.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis will be carried out through theoretical means and the proposal of some case studies of newly built public libraries in Europe. In particular, an Italian public library, the Sala Borsa Library in Bologna, an English one, the Whitechapel Idea Store, and one in Spain, the Jaume Fuster Library. Each of these libraries will offer a different point of view and a different answer for strengthening the relationship between public libraries and citizens' needs.

Findings – The proposed theoretical analysis and the case studies raise the need to evaluate the existing public libraries and to plan the new ones in relation to the following issues: the long tail paradigm, together with other trends characterising the contemporary urban lifestyles, put the survival of public libraries under threat, because a generic offer with limited choice finds no place in today's cultural and economic landscape anymore; central public libraries need to rely upon large and functional buildings, comprehensive collections encompassing hits and niches, extensive opening hours, a broad variety of services and edutainment activities and an aptitude to embody a social role; local/branch libraries cannot survive below certain sizes, unless they bet on very specific niches of the public, for example either people who are less willing or unable to move around the city very much (elderly people, children, disabled people and so on) or topics and subjects which are only superficially covered by other libraries and suppliers on the territory; and in general, public libraries should emphasise their role as service desks functioning as a go-between for other – more specialised – bibliographic services and for other learning, informative, entertaining and cultural opportunities inside and outside the metropolitan area.

Originality/value – An analysis of the consequences the long tail has on the future development of libraries has already been started in library science. However, no specific considerations have been taken on how the application of this paradigm could (and should) change the relations in the urban library networks and help big and small public libraries in finding new balance and complementary roles in satisfying citizens' needs.

Keywords Public libraries, Collections management, Innovation

Paper type Research paper

What is the long tail?

In 2006, Chris Anderson, following the success of his blog devoted to the same topic[1], published a book entitled *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, which marked a shift in the economic theory regarding the impact of the internet on the market of digital products. It indeed started a huge debate.

In his book Anderson points out that, while the traditional economy was mainly based upon mass markets, thanks to the success of the internet, niches have become not



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only economically sustainable but also profitable, particularly for those products that can be distributed in a digital format, e.g. music. Whereas in the past inevitable physical constraints (e.g. the need of large spaces for storage and the inefficiency of having thousands of goods stored for months or years) prevented any distributor from having a large and immediately available catalogue of merchandise, the convergence of an increasing number of products to digital is rapidly overcoming this limit.

This economic paradigm is named “long tail”, after the chart showing that mass products or “hits” are very few but sell a lot, while niche products form a long tail, as they sell far less than hits if taken separately, but are altogether comparable to the mass market in terms of sales and earnings.

This shift is not only due to the success of the internet, but is also reinforced by some characteristics of the post-modern society, in particular the preference of people for the so-called micro-sociological level. According to Desjeux (1996) and other sociologists, nowadays individual identity is more and more defined by being part of small groups (associations, tribes, gangs, etc.), rather than by lifestyles, social classes and generations (the so-called macro-sociological level) (Edmunds and Turner, 2002). These groups are not homogeneous in terms of social belonging, but have their own rituals and cult objects and share the same passions, emotions, ethical approaches in an intense, but transient way.

These new social forms are characterised by high turnover in composition, steady sharing of experiences and heavy participation by members. However, they are not mutually exclusive, as each individual generally takes part in a number of niches according to his various interests and stages of life. Furthermore, they satisfy two underlying needs of contemporary citizens: the need for freedom and autonomy, and the increasing demand for identity and safety. These new communities are far less constraining than the old ones, but somehow respond to the request for social roots.

Under this sociological framework, the internet has given niches the opportunity to flourish (Cova *et al.*, 2007; Maffesoli, 2000), as it has allowed those living in various parts of the world to meet on the web and to share even the slightest piece of personal fondness; in addition, the internet has linked together numerous sellers and distributors spread all over the world and raised the possibility to buy or exchange cult objects by means of web portals, like eBay[2], iTunes[3] or Amazon[4].

In conclusion, the long tail paradigm is due both to a sociological shift and to a technological progress which have come together at once.

The long tail in the physical world and the role of cities

Even though the characteristics of the long tail society are particularly well-fit for the digital environment and the digital goods, this economic paradigm is also partially affecting the distribution of physical products.

The online services, like Amazon or eBay (and many others), give internet users the possibility not only to find and buy digital objects, but also to track down almost anything else, not necessarily digital, thanks to the cooperative network among large and small distributors, as well as private citizens, forming the biggest distributed store in the world with a single display window on the internet.

In the physical objects' case, one of the major constraints to the full functioning of the long tail paradigm is the need to physically dispatch the requested goods to the applicant. One single order could entail one or more shipments: for example, an order of DVDs placed on Amazon UK could require the collecting of pieces from different

distributors and warehouses to a single place, where the package will be dispatched from. Nonetheless, as the long tail flourishes thanks to the availability of goods and the knowledge of its existence, the centralised databases available over the internet make a real difference in accessing and advertising niche goods by channelling scattered information.

Even before the appearance of the internet, niches already existed, though it was very difficult for partakers to satisfy their needs and curiosities, as this required an almost full-time job and a lot of money.

The places where niches have always better expressed themselves and built up their communities are cities, which Anderson (2006) defines as “the long tail of urban space”. In fact, before the internet, big cities have worked as the physical equivalent of the virtual marketplaces. They are the only physical environments which can guarantee a wide-ranging offer in an economically sustainable way, as they can count upon a very large audience and are able to attract people from the outside. Consequently, in cities even the smallest and the most specialised businesses can flourish, thanks to the fact that they can rely on a significant number of people who are interested in them (Galluzzi, 2009).

Over time, cities’ offer, from retailing to entertainment, has specialised in two areas: places where an extensive availability of services and products can be found altogether and places exclusively devoted to a very specific offer. Therefore, large shopping malls, where people can find almost everything in a single place, cohabit with specialised businesses, where people can satisfy special needs.

A few years ago, some journalists wrote that hypermarkets were causing the closing down of small neighbourhood supermarkets and local shops. Apparently, the progressive displacement of customers from the latter to the former kind of stores was mainly due to the changing habits of citizens, the technological revolution and the emergence of the long tail paradigm. On the other hand, specialty shops flourished thanks to their capacity to offer customers an almost exhaustive coverage in their own particular field and to take advantage of an effective cooperative network, which proved essential to make them really competitive. Thus, the specialty shops have their strength in holding or being able to make available almost everything in a specific field, whereas hypermarkets are able to guarantee a high, but not full coverage in many areas. In doing this, hypermarkets count on the fact that customers could be willing to find many different goods in a single place without turning to a number of specialty shops to satisfy different needs (Anderson, 2006; Ritzer, 2008).

On the other hand, those businesses which do not respond to any of these two needs find it hard to keep an attractive and precise identity and to retain their market share. For example, the traditional local bookstores offering a standard selection of books and media or the generic restaurant lacking of character and appeal are mainly neglected even if located around the corner, whereas people are not worried about covering longer distances when they are either chasing that specific CD which is missing from their collection or are longing for experiencing that restaurant their friends have talked about in such a positive way!

This everlasting feature of metropolitan areas has been strengthened by the internet, as it has conferred more visibility to their wide offer and, consequently, has given cities the possibility to outreach far beyond their boundaries and to attract even more people. Somehow, the physical long tail and the virtual one have converged into cities.

Public libraries and big cities

How do all these phenomena have an impact on public libraries?

Nowadays, libraries are facing tough challenges which are putting their very physical existence under pressure. This is due to the success of the internet as a preferred access point to information. An important role is also played by the convergence of media towards digital formats and the changing habits of people in studying, reading, entertainment and research (Lankes, 2008; Le Saux, 2005; Strong, 2006).

In particular, while some types of libraries are betting on specific market niches and on the specialised and unique documents they hold in their collections, public libraries seem to be old-fashioned and lacking of a proper identity, as they are, by nature, generically addressed to all types of users and aimed at satisfying basic informational needs. Because of its all-purpose and general-interest approach, the single public library has some difficulties in satisfying both the mass needs and the niche needs (Agnoli, 2009; Galluzzi, 2009; Verry Jolivet, 2005; Smith, 1999). Nonetheless, new library premises are being built in many cities around the world, particularly in metropolitan areas.

Many of these new buildings are aimed at public libraries, apparently contradicting what has just been stated. However, delving more deeply into facts, another interpretation comes to light. Over the last few years, many cities have been massively reshaped and have worked hard to regain a central role in their citizens' lives (Sassen, 2006). The national and local authorities have funded outstanding projects to renovate the urban landscape and to give new life both to the city centres and to selected outskirts (Amendola, 2004). Main cities around the world compete on the global scene to be more attractive not only to their inhabitants but, above all, to the city users^[5] who take advantage of cities according to their needs and are increasingly important for the urban economy (Nuvolati, 2002).

In particular, cities are emphasising their ability to boost social relations and propose themselves as the best places for social interactions, in order to answer to the double-sided nature of modern life, wavering between the virtual and the physical levels (Castells, 1991, 1996). The growing interactivity of the internet gives us the possibility to create our own relational environment over the web and to keep ourselves linked to this environment everywhere we go. The tools of the Web 2.0 – social networking, chat lines, instant messaging, Voice over IP and so on – affect the way we live and help us in managing human relations not only over the net, but also in everyday life. On the other hand, mobility and proximity are two key points of modern life (Vicari Haddock, 2004): the more we spend time over the internet and use the web for an increasing number of activities which in the past required a physical transfer, the more we move and go around to entertain ourselves and to meet other people. These characteristics of modern citizens are labelled under the tags “compulsion to mobility” and “compulsion to proximity”, and, though apparently conflicting, they actually are the two sides of the same story (Urry, 2007; Friedland and Boden, 1994).

The trend towards building new libraries should be interpreted under this framework, as in most cases these projects are one of the many interventions planned to renovate abandoned city areas or to give new life to focal points of the urban context. Since urban redevelopment projects, in order to be successful, are supposed to offer various kinds of experiences to citizens and city users (from entertainment to shopping, from culture to public services) and to promote social relations, libraries are often

deemed suitable for this aim, particularly public libraries whose social role is at least as important as its cultural, informative and educational roles.

Considering the two above-mentioned phenomena, it becomes quite clear how the crisis of public libraries and the birth of new public libraries' buildings all over the world are not completely incompatible; rather, the existence of these two opposite trends should drive public libraries to careful considerations, as this could be a good opportunity for them to become more aware of the surrounding social context and to come to terms with the issues and the challenges at stake.

Public libraries and the long tail society

Following the characteristics of the "loose-leaf or confetti society" (Brevini, 2008) – which are nothing else but other ways to refer to the long tail paradigm – the two main and opposite trends to be in line with are convergence of services and proliferation of niches. As already explained, the long tail paradigm applied to the physical world determines a situation in which businesses are likely to be successful if they are either large enough to offer a wide range of products and services, or small, but very specialised in fulfilling the demand for those things which are very difficult to be found on the market. In cities, these two tasks could be accomplished by the same subjects, as some providers are growing to such an extent that they can encompass even the smallest niches.

This phenomenon has developed in almost any kind of business, rising up the need to differently interpret the relationship between mega-suppliers and small- and medium-sized ones, in order to avoid the triggering of a fierce opposition. As someone says (Montroni, 2006), in both cases it is a matter of identity and being complementary, in order to retain a meaningful role. On the other hand, there is no doubt that, in an era characterised by the above-mentioned trends, a small or medium-sized service with an all-purpose approach cannot survive.

An analysis of the consequences the long tail has on the future development of libraries has already been started in library science (Dempsey, 2006; Morriello, 2009; Storey, 2005). However, no specific considerations have been taken on how the application of this paradigm could (and should) change the relations in the urban library networks and help big and small public libraries in finding new balance and complementary roles in satisfying citizens' needs. In particular, it is time to wonder how to deal with the following issues:

- How to conceive the new big-sized central libraries with regard to collections, services, spaces and relationships with users and urban life?
- How to reconfigure local and branch libraries inside the urban library network, in order to give them a more specific identity?

Various organisational proposals and alternative solutions would probably guarantee appropriate answers to these questions and good results in terms of increased effectiveness and users' satisfaction. However, specific considerations on this issues are still absent from the planning phases of the libraries recently built.

Three case studies

It is quite difficult to find explicit references to the long tail paradigm and its consequences on the collections and services in the planning documents of the new built libraries. Usually, they remain in the background, though certain choices applied in some

of these libraries seem to respond to the same worries, i.e. having “one-stop-shop” central libraries and local libraries more focused on specific targets[6].

Some food for thought could come from the analysis of three newly built public libraries in Europe. The selected case studies are big-sized public libraries opened during the last ten years and located in medium to large cities. They are:

- (1) the Sala Borsa Library[7], in Bologna (Italy);
- (2) the Idea Stores[8], in the East End of London (UK); and
- (3) the Jaume Fuster Library[9], in Barcelona (Spain).

The analysis of these three cases has been carried out by means of two major methods:

- (1) the direct visit to their premises and some informal interviews with staff members and clients; and
- (2) the collection of documents concerning the planning of their premises, their organisational structures and the applied strategies, as well as the analysis of data and information about collections, services and other activities.

The three case studies represent many ways of interpreting the role of the public library in contemporary cities, just as how their role in their specific urban library networks is different. In particular, the Sala Borsa Library provides some cues for reflection concerning the possible roles of a big central public library in a medium-sized city; the Idea Stores are an innovative proposal of library planning in a metropolitan large neighbourhood, and the Jaume Fuster Library is a more traditional branch library born under the general project of Barcelona’s public library network.

They cannot be compared with each other but are rather representative of three different situations which can relate to public libraries in big cities. It will now be interesting to take a look at the background of all three libraries, as well as focusing on their founding principles and the strategies they have adopted. This will make it easier to establish if and what lessons are to be learnt from these cases and raise some interesting questions.

Sala Borsa Library, Bologna (Italy)

Background information and a short history. The Sala Borsa Library[10] is the central library of the Bologna[11]’s library network. It was opened to the public in December 2001 and partially enlarged and renovated in 2008. The decision to found it was supported by the need to replace the former central library, which was too small and feeble to function as the central junction of the network. Sala Borsa did not simply inherit the collections of the former central library; it rather became a new place and a new bibliographic service for the citizens of Bologna. In particular, it was expected to fully undertake the role of central library and to take charge of the coordination role in the urban network, allowing the Archiginnasio to give up these tasks which did not belong to its core mission (Foschi and Poli, 2004; Brandinelli, 2002).

The library is located in the heart of the historical city, the so-called “urban park” in Piazza Maggiore, where government buildings and the San Petronio Basilica are also situated[12]. These historical buildings, which have a high symbolic value for the city, were built in the thirteenth century (1204) and enriched in the subsequent centuries up until the middle of the sixteenth century (1568).

Over the last few years, promoting their historical value while integrating them into the urban area where they are located has been the main aim of the local authorities. The mixture of squares, courtyards and monuments offers citizens a wide range of opportunities, ranging from cultural to leisure activities. The project called “Urban Park of Piazza Maggiore” converted the historical building which houses the municipal authority and the surrounding neighbourhood from a place devoted to administrative activities to a cultural and social space for citizens. Here, people can now find museums, art collections (the municipal collections of ancient art), courtyards for performances and cultural activities and the library and multimedia centre inside the Sala Borsa Palace (Foschi and Poli, 2004, pp. 63-64 and 66-67).

The library’s success in terms of public and services and its impact on the city’s social life are strictly consequent to its central location and the comprehensive cultural role of the area itself. This has happened despite the fact that the library is scarcely visible from the outside due to concerns regarding its façade.

It is worth mentioning that the original library project was designed for a wider surface area, including the internal square. Afterwards, the local authorities changed their mind and the library took up a smaller part of the building, despite the controversies which followed this decision. Therefore, the librarians had to adapt the original plan to the new situation, giving up some of the most attractive spaces inside the building. During the last seven years, the Sala Borsa Library has proved to be able to cope with these challenges and has been making continuous efforts to update the initial choices according to the internal and external changes. In particular, the library has carried out a reorganisation of its spaces and services. The retail shops, which at first were housed on the ground and mezzanine floors of the internal square, were moved away. In June 2008, the library permanently expanded into these spaces and opened with a new look, as the management exploited this opportunity to partially rethink the collection and service organisation using the feedback information collected over the last few years.

Founding principles and strategies. The Sala Borsa Library was founded with the main goal of satisfying informational and social needs of different kinds of users, preserving freedom and ease of access. Staff intermediation is available any time the public needs it or when help is explicitly requested (Foschi and Poli, 2004, p. 98).

Its collection management and growth are based on the same principles, i.e. the pluralism of information and the critical approach to contents, and tend to represent the variety of interests and points of view of its users, with regard to age, education, culture and profession. The presence of different types of users affects the collection development insofar as it should be in line with the informational needs of the greater public, those of professionals and those of researchers and scholars (Biblioteca Sala Borsa, 2002, p. 32).

The library has been consistent with its founding principle to be a library for all; as a matter of fact, the well thought-out management of its spaces and services allows different types of users to make use of them quietly together: from students with their own textbooks to users who consult its collections for personal or professional reasons, from people who read newspapers and magazines or navigate the internet to the flâneurs who browse open shelved collections without a specific objective.

Lessons learnt and open questions. This library could be considered a good example of a possible way of interpreting the function of a central library in the urban network and a possible strategy for public libraries to regain a meaningful role for

contemporary citizens. In particular, it has invested in its size and variety of collections as well as in the size and internal differentiation of spaces. These two characteristics together allow the library to hold and welcome many different niches for different types of uses (the library as a place to meet, socialise, read, study, spend free-time, take a walk, play with a videogame, watch a movie, listen to music, ask for information and so on) as well as different types of informational needs (from the basic ones to those of enthusiasts and researchers in almost any possible media and disciplinary field).

There is only one aspect still to be clarified: the structure and functioning of the urban library network as a whole. Apart from the relationship between historical (Archiginnasio Library[13]) and contemporary library, there is a need to better define the role of local and branch libraries, both the general and the specialised ones. Some of them have already been closed down or completely rethought after the opening of the Sala Borsa Library in an attempt to rationalise services and staff; others are still waiting for an intervention which could give them new life and a more consequential identity, inside a network where equilibria have been affected by the presence of a multi-purpose and highly attractive central library.

Idea Stores, Tower Hamlets Borough, London (UK)

Background information and founding principles. The Idea Stores are located in the Tower Hamlets Borough[14] of London's east end, which took the initiative and coordinated the project under the framework of a general drive towards innovation and the raising of life standards in this area.

Since the beginning (Customer Services and Education Directorates for the Arts, Leisure, Sports and Youth and Community Services Committees, 1999), the Idea Stores set themselves up as innovative public services with two main objectives: mixing library services and life-long learning together, as well as replacing the traditional and declining image of the library with more modern and attractive services characterised by a more commercial communication language.

The main strategies applied to the planning of the Idea Stores were:

- highly attractive and accessible buildings and settings, preferably new buildings, as people seemed unfavourable to the renovation of historical buildings to house public libraries;
- architectures inspired to buildings devoted to entertainment and shopping;
- wide marketing policies concerning the new buildings and their goals and services;
- extensive opening hours in line with the rhythms and the organisation of contemporary life and with the opening hours of the surrounding shops; the aim was for them to be open seven days a week and to standardise the opening hours of all service points;
- user-centred services aimed at satisfying local needs; and
- promotion of a new image of libraries and learning centres for citizens, also through the creation of a new, eye-catching layout and brand.

In addition, a new way of interpreting the reference and information service characterises the Idea Stores, as – besides the traditional reference desks – the so-called floor-walking staff is available for any need of users in a somewhat informal way.

Though they certainly are lending libraries, the Idea Stores take specific care of their reference and multimedia sections and create all the preconditions to make the user's stay pleasant and functional and to make the library attractive. To do this, some specific choices about the library layout have been made, such as window dressing, quick-choice spots throughout the library, just-returned trolleys available to the public, catchy arrangement of multimedia and so on (Dogliani, 2009).

Furthermore, as the Idea Stores are located in an area characterised by a massive presence of immigrants from the sub-Indian continent (mainly Bangladeshi) and residents of different nationalities, remarkable sections of the library collections are focused on their cultures and written in their languages in order to make these libraries a space for social integration as well.

The need to introduce some changes in the planning of the library and education services of this urban area was envisaged in response to the statistics' results which showed a decline in the usage of local libraries and to the results of a market survey carried out among the potential users of library and learning services living in this area (Customer Services and Education Directorates for the Arts, Leisure, Sports and Youth and Community Services Committees, 1999).

The most valuable finding of this survey concerned the location of libraries and learning centres, as a high percentage of the respondents pointed out that these services were badly located in old schools and areas lying outside commercial routes or lacking in parking places and attractions. The users seemed to prefer having a library or a learning centre where they spent the majority of their everyday lives, rather than finding them just around the corner from their homes. Therefore, it appeared clear that library and learning services should not have been hosted in buildings where people had to go on purpose, but where there were wider possibilities and a number of things to do, for example close either to the main stations of public transport or to retail shops and shopping malls, or to restaurants. If the services were well positioned, even the number of service points could have been lower.

Evolving strategies. The original strategy document assumed that appropriate location choices allowed the cutting of some service points, hence it set up the goal of replacing the 12 existing local libraries (plus a mobile and an outreach library) with seven Idea Stores (Customer Services and Education Directorates for the Arts, Leisure, Sports and Youth and Community Services Committees, 1999). As good results have already been achieved with only four Stores in place (out of the seven planned) and given the current economic situation, the new *Idea Store Strategy* (Tower Hamlets, 2009) has partially modified its approach towards the future Idea Store network. The 2009 strategy does not propose the closure of libraries or the construction of new buildings (except one, the Watney Market Idea Store[15]); it rather suggests changes to the original locations as a consequence of the fact that, over the last ten years, Tower Hamlets has geographically changed and emerging and growing communities have come up with their need to access library, learning and information services.

Therefore, the new strategy "proposes that a new, smaller generation of Idea Stores is needed to address areas of shortage in the borough"; these Idea Store Local sites, though equally aiming at high-quality service, could "be located in existing retail unit[s]". Furthermore, they could share their spaces with other services and should focus on "providing access to information on health and employment" (Tower Hamlets, 2009, p. 53).

The renewed analysis of the national, regional and local situations and the new consultation among users and non-users carried out in 2009 confirmed the initial feeling and the effectiveness of the initial choices. Nonetheless, it added new elements and pieces of information to the evaluation of the current situation, pushing towards a slight change of perspective, or better, an update of objectives according to emerging needs. In particular, the new strategy document summarises the key characteristics of this approach as follows:

- Expand the service offer. Provide targeted advice, information and learning services in partnership with other agencies (e.g. health and employment) and key service access channels where compatible with the service environment.
- Retain core service but with reduced focus on learning for personal development and more emphasis on employability.
- Re-configure the proposed network to consist of anchor stores and satellite Idea Store Local sites.
- Co location of new service points with other services where this meets residents' preferences and is consistent with the emerging LDS [*Local Development Framework*] Core Strategy (Tower Hamlets, 2009, p. 54).

In particular, the decision to expand the provision of high-quality health and employment information is not only part of the Idea Stores' policy aimed at giving their contribution to shared outcomes, but is also based on the findings of the community consultation, as residents expressed a clear preference for this kind of future service rather than others.

An example: The Whitechapel Idea Store. The Whitechapel Idea Store[16] is a good example of this new concept. It is one of the four already opened Idea Stores in the Tower Hamlets Borough (Store Bow, Chrisp Street and Canary Wharf are the other three). It was the third one to be opened (in September 2005) and is located in a densely populated and multicultural area, next to Albion Yard, which is part of an old beer factory, the central postal office and opposite the Royal London Hospital. On the east side of the building, a pedestrian passageway leads to a supermarket through a large parking. On the sidewalk outside the library, the daily street market of Whitechapel Road takes place. Its success is proved by the fact that it has switched from the last to the first ranking among the most attended libraries in the centre of London.

The building by David Adjaye[17] has a simple structure and a functional design, but is not boring, nor severe (Adjaye, 2006). In addition to the traditional reading and consultation rooms, there are classrooms and other spaces used by the library and other learning institutions which are part of the network; classes and learning activities are held here. On the top floor, there is a cafeteria which stands just opposite the newspaper reading area, equipped with sofas and coffee tables: this is perfectly consistent with the Idea Stores' philosophy.

Lessons learnt and open questions. To sum everything up, the Idea Stores have preserved the main characteristics of the typical English local public libraries, but have also taken inspiration from bookstores as far as the arrangement of furniture and collections, the relationship with users and the communication style are concerned; above all, they have emphasised the importance of creating partnerships with other public and private institutions to offer more comprehensive services to citizens (Galluzzi, 2008a).

The Idea Stores certainly represent a possible answer to the effects of the long tail on the physical world; they are an attempt to reorganise the library network of a large neighbourhood and to give new life to a situation which was falling into decay. The Idea Store seems to suggest that the small generic branch/local libraries can hardly face the needs of contemporary society, even when they are located just around the corner, and the appearance and the size of premises certainly are sufficient, if not relevant, variables. Since a local library cannot hold everything nor guarantee a very wide coverage like a central public library, it should rather bet on a stock of well-chosen bestsellers and other multimedia bibliographic materials which satisfy a noteworthy part of the generic needs of users. On the other hand, it could also delve into bibliographic niches, specifically chosen according to the kind of population that needs to be served (e.g. children, elderly people, etc.) and patrons' target linked to the neighbourhood's characteristics.

In addition, the Idea Stores prove that branch/local libraries should complement their bibliographic offer with other valuable services, like learning and training activities, health and employment information, and cultural and entertaining events and exhibitions, as all these things together can encounter the broad-spectrum needs of the people of different ages and cultural belongings living in this area. Furthermore, their experience reminds us that, for local/branch libraries, focusing on the quality of the relationship between staff and users is more important than ever. Therefore, information and communication technology applications (self-servicing systems) and the organisational model (the introduction of consortium procurement and cataloguing systems) should ensure that staffing levels meet customer usage patterns and support the underlying values (which, for the Idea Stores, are engaging/enriching/empowering the users). Lastly, the Idea Stores prove that communication and marketing have been underestimated by libraries, whereas they are of vital importance to boost the local involvement of libraries in their neighbourhood's life, to such an extent that the 2009 strategy document calls for a stronger commitment towards these goals.

Jaume Fuster Library, Districte de Gràcia, Barcelona (Spain)

Background information. As for the Idea Stores, the Jaume Fuster Library is part of a wider project which, in this case, concerns the whole of Barcelona's library network and was conceived under the framework of the general plan of bibliographic services in the city.

It is worth highlighting that, over the last years, many Spanish cities have made major changes, thanks to wide projects of urban development, often entailing the building of noteworthy architectures. In particular, Barcelona has been going through a relevant urban regeneration since the Olympic Games held in 1992, which gave new life to abandoned areas and created new centralities in the urban structure. From this point of view, Barcelona certainly is a good example of what is occurring in many other metropolitan areas inside and outside Europe.

Following this trend, the face of the urban public library network is completely changing as well and, according to the library development plan of Barcelona, the Jaume Fuster Library is one of the 40 libraries which are expected to form the urban network. The main goal of the plan is the appropriate allotment of old and newly built libraries in the metropolitan area in order to guarantee a well-balanced bibliographic offer. In particular, the development plan, by means of the building and opening of new libraries and the closing of others, is aimed at conferring a more specific and meaningful

identity to branch libraries with respect to the characteristics of their neighbourhoods and to the overall bibliographic coverage at metropolitan level (Pavesi, 2003).

Whilst waiting for the building of the new central public library, which is expected to become the focal point of the network with its 250,000 documents, the single branch/local libraries are conceived as social spaces. This is thanks to eminent buildings and architectures that have been chosen after an understanding of the characteristics and social composition of the different areas of town, as well as bibliographic services centred on specific fields and issues, which have been additionally addressed to the needs of disadvantaged groups, e.g. elderly people and children.

Founding principles and strategies. The Jaume Fuster Library is a branch library located in the “Districte de Gràcia”, a neighbourhood which links the city centre with the north and has a less regular urban structure compared to the other areas of the city. This is a brand new library for the neighbourhood, as it did not exist before in other premises and its collection was built up quite from scratch, except for a small part coming from a local library, now reconverted into a school library.

It responds to the overall theoretical approach underpinning the above-mentioned library development plan (Galluzzi, 2008b). Except for the central public library, financed by the Province (*Diputació*), it is the biggest library among those planned; nonetheless, its collection is not that wide, but has a very specific identity, strictly in line with the characteristics of this urban area and its target population and complementary to the network’s other libraries and to the bibliographic offer of the city as a whole.

Specifically, it holds 80,000 documents (though this means that, for the time being, it is the city’s largest public library), but they are carefully chosen and almost completely open-shelved. With respect to the library network, the Jaume Fuster Library is in charge of youth and travel literature, in line with the high presence of young people in this area of the city. The library’s ground floor, which stretches out around the entrance hall and has a continuity with the outside square, houses all spaces devoted to social and cultural activities and those addressed to specific targets or uses. In particular, here users can find the information desk, which is close to the entrance hall, the cafeteria (which also has an outside separate entrance), the newspaper reading room (extensively used by elderly people), the multimedia area and the children area; from here, users can also access the exhibition area and the auditorium where many local institutions and associations organise events of various types. The upper floors are devoted to reading and study and present a variety of different settings for users, offering natural light, silence and facilities for group studying.

As far as its architecture is concerned, the building was designed by Catalan architect Josep Llinàs Carmona[18] and won the FAD Arquitectura Award (the most prestigious architectural prize in Spain) in 2006. The building was appreciated for its functionality and pleasantness and for the well-thought adaptation to the urban space where it is located and to the overall expectations. With its welcoming shape, the library is well functioning in connecting the southern part of the neighbourhood, which is more populated and closer to the centre, to the northern residential part of it (Gregory, 2006).

When the local administration elected to build a library in an area where wider public works concerning public transportation and road network were planned, the citizens were not satisfied with this decision, as they would have preferred a sports complex with a swimming pool. After a while since the opening, the library reached 2,000 visits a day, confirming its success in responding to territorial needs and even attracting people from the city centre.

Lessons learnt and open questions. With reference to the long tail paradigm and the delicate relationship between central and branch libraries, the Jaume Fuster Library proves that even a medium-sized branch library with a limited bibliographic offer could get a meaningful role in the contemporary city, insofar as it invests in functional and attractive premises, in a social and comprehensive role for the neighbourhood and in a bibliographic collection carefully chosen and targeted to specific niches. A pretentious all-purpose approach is not sustainable and not in line with the actual needs, while working on groups, tribes and associations can give even a local library a specific identity.

Nonetheless, in this case a more creative and proactive role of the library in the neighbourhood and a greater push towards continuous change would greatly benefit the library and avoid the risk of going marginal over time.

Conclusions

The three proposed case studies offer some cues for reflection concerning the role of public libraries in contemporary cities as new lifestyles and habits emerge and the physical and virtual long tail change the economic and social frameworks.

Avoiding any risky processes of generalisation (particularly outside Europe, where the urban regeneration processes and the structure of cities and metropolitan areas are different and somewhat peculiar), an attempt to apply the long tail paradigm to libraries in general and to check how some specific libraries seem to give direct and indirect answers to this change could be worthy. Even if libraries act on a local level, they are deeply affected by global phenomena, insofar as the world urbanisation and digitisation concern an increasing percentage of people.

The effect of global processes partly explains why libraries are going through a difficult period, notwithstanding their long history and local roots. The economic crisis and the political and economic preference for short-term investments do not help the centrality of libraries on the political agenda. Considering this context, librarians cannot keep on stating the universal and ever-lasting value of libraries, without trying to adapt organisational and service models to the features of contemporary society. The comment recently posted by Tim Spalding in a LibraryThing Forum[19] concerning the future of library clearly explains the terms of the problem:

Here's the easy challenge. Pit the internet against libraries, refuse to learn from the internet, ignore other changes in the information landscape, pin your value on marginal situations and remnant attitudes, and insist that whatever libraries did in 1990 is of eternal, constant value. Make anyone who sees otherwise into a barbarian and wait for the inevitable result of being so wrong.

Here's the hard challenge. Figure out what has in fact changed, and what is changing rapidly. Understand that arguments like "not everything is digitized" and "not everyone has computers", though true, are less effective arguments with each passing year.

And then, in that light, built the library back up. Figure out what it does that won't be washed away over time. Figure out what can be jettisoned now, to save funds and effort for more effective opportunities. Figure out what libraries aren't doing, or aren't doing very much of, that can provide new value and new reasons for existing. In short, look into the abyss and start building a bridge over it[20].

Otherwise, there could be many others, like Anna Devlante on Fox Chicago News, coming up with their articles on the issue of libraries as a waste of public money[21].

Librarians and library users should be the first to answer these questions. The proposed theoretical analysis and the case studies suggest some possible answers; in particular they raise the need to evaluate the existing public libraries and to plan the new ones in relation to the following issues:

- The long tail paradigm, together with other trends characterising the contemporary urban lifestyles, put the survival of public libraries under threat, because a generic offer with limited choice finds no place in today's cultural and economic landscape anymore.
- Central public libraries need to rely upon large and functional buildings, comprehensive collections encompassing hits and niches, extensive opening hours, a broad variety of services and edutainment activities and an aptitude to embody a social role.
- Local/branch libraries cannot survive below certain sizes, unless they bet on very specific niches of the public, for example either people who are less willing or unable to move around the city very much (elderly people, children, disabled people and so on) or topics and subjects which are only superficially covered by other libraries and suppliers on the territory.
- In general, public libraries should emphasise their role as service desks functioning as a go-between for other – more specialised – bibliographic services and for other learning, informative, entertaining and cultural opportunities inside and outside the metropolitan area. Contemporary citizens do not like anything more than one-stop-shops, where they can access various services and obtain almost any kind of answers.

The comparison between the global and the local level confirms that the new central public libraries should bet on the big size of their buildings, taking advantage of the trend of post-modern architects to create monuments capable of marking the landscape. This way, they aim at setting themselves up as catalysts of various needs and becoming places where people can: find information, read and study, attend cultural events, meet other people and socialise, cultivate their hobbies, navigate the internet and spend their free time. In order to do this, they need more space, more books and media, more seating facilities, more workstations and more staff to provide all these services. In a way, they should act as the hypermarkets of the bibliographic network if compared to the traditional medium-sized libraries. At the same time, even local and branch libraries – as it already happens in the retail market – should offer citizens specific services and contents while proposing themselves as alternative and complementary to the big-sized libraries.

All the above-mentioned perspectives demand some important interventions to cut and rationalise, but also significant investments by the governing authorities, in order to encourage a shift where the library situation is slack or declining, and an open-minded aptitude from librarians, as they should be aware of their role in changing the face of public libraries and provide them with a new boost.

Notes

1. For more information, go to: www.longtail.com/
2. www.ebay.com/
3. www.apple.com/it/itunes/

4. www.amazon.com/
5. An example of the impact of the city users on the urban planning can be found in this study concerning the city of Melbourne: www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/AboutMelbourne/Statistics/Pages/CityUsers.aspx
6. Many more case studies and examples are presented in Galluzzi (2009), where 12 libraries built in medium-big sized cities in Europe and North-America during the period 1998-2008 are described in detail.
7. For more information, go to the library's web site: www.bibliotecasalaborsa.it/home.php
8. For more information, go to the Idea Stores' web site: www.ideastore.co.uk
9. For more information, go to the library's web site: www.bcn.cat/bibjaumefuster
10. Many pictures about the library can be found on: www.flickr.com/groups/1151033@N22/
11. For more information, about the city of Bologna go to: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna>
12. To have an idea of the library location in the city plan, visit Google maps: <http://maps.google.it/maps?f=q&hl=it&geocode=&time=&date=&ttype=&q=Piazza+Nettuno,+3+Bologna&sll=49.280012,-123.114143&sspn=0.010345,0.020084&ie=UTF8&z=16&om=1>
13. For more information, visit the library's web site: www.archiginnasio.it/
14. For more information, go to the Tower Hamlets' web site: www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/
15. For more information, go to: www.ideastore.co.uk/en/articles/libraries_idea_store_watney_market
16. For more information, visit the Whitechapel Idea Store's web site: www.ideastore.co.uk/en/articles/libraries_your_local_idea_store_library_idea_store_whitechapel
17. For more information, go the architect's web site: www.adjaye.com/
18. For more information, go to Wikipedia: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josep_Llinás
19. The debate can be found on: www.librarything.com/topic/93959
20. Tim Spalding in: www.librarything.com/topic/93959, message 20
21. This is the original article followed by a huge debate: www.myfoxchicago.com/dpp/news/special_report/library-taxes-closed-20100628

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