

Idea Stores 10 years on: the next generation

by Sarah Godowski, Director of Bisset Adams, and Sergio Dogliani, Deputy Head of Idea Store

1. The Designers' view by Sarah Godowski

It is now ten years since the first of Tower Hamlets' ground-breaking Idea Stores opened in Bow, and it's still seen as one of the best and most exciting library services in the country, referenced widely as an exemplar of innovative best practice. Bisset Adams has been involved in the Idea Store programme since 1998, working with Tower Hamlets council to devise a new model for customer engagement in learning, libraries and the community.

The Idea Store programme has been a very different experience from the designers' viewpoint, owing largely to the innovative and forward-thinking character of Tower Hamlets council as a client, understanding the value of design and treating the designer and brand consultant as an integral part of the team. The success of the Idea Store programme has been largely due to a willingness to explore ideas, with radical results and successful engagement with the community; local people feel a real sense of ownership of the Idea Stores, and visits, membership and book issues continue to rise.

After the largest-ever public consultation on the future of libraries, the team identified that local people wanted libraries to broaden their remit: offering better bookstock first and foremost, but also a range of other facilities from café to learning, and



in more convenient locations alongside shopping or transport centres.

We at Bisset Adams found early meetings memorable for the freedom of ideas: at a time when everyone was scratching their heads wondering how to save money on libraries, Tower Hamlets had recognised their potential and had fixed on the library service as a key partner in a broad learning

Idea Stores: the next generation

offer to stimulate regeneration and foster inclusion. They also realised the name 'library' meant little to many of the local community to whom the stock of old libraries in run-down buildings had little to engage or offer.

Bisset Adams took a bold approach to designing the identity of the new service: the new brand was 'Idea', based on the concept that everyone has ideas, and believing in your ideas can change your life. The core values of 'Engage, Empower and Enrich; describe the customers' journey was engaging with the brand, being empowered, and enriching their lives through the books and services. The name 'library' appears in the strapline (Library, Learning and Information), but it was felt the new



Idea Store branding

Idea Store Watney Market



Idea Stores: the next generation

name would engage and appeal to local people to signal a much-needed innovation within the borough.

Bisset Adams was the architect of the pilot Idea Store in Bow in 2002, and is now architect on the newbuild Idea Store at Watney Market, a landmark building currently in construction.

The key to the success of Idea Stores has been to engage with previously excluded audiences, creating a genuinely vibrant community hub of learning, library, business, arts and community events. The café is used for business meetings; the learning labs for everything from language classes to baby massage. The latest Idea Store at Watney Market follows a new model as a 'marketplace of information' with the council's partners. The library space is spread over three floors with dedicated space for adults, children and young people, and 'learning clusters' provide a highly informal learning environment, part of a range of learning opportunities offered in the Idea Stores as well as in partnerships with local schools.

In difficult financial times, it's exciting to be working with a local authority which recognises the value of libraries for local communities and for fostering regeneration and learning.

Sarah Godowski

2. The Practitioners' view by Sergio Dogliani

They say that time flies when you have fun, and looking back over the last 10 years, since Tower Hamlets Council opened its first Idea Store in Bow, one can't deny that our journey that eventually turned around libraries in Tower Hamlets has been hard work, but fun too.

We set out with the aim of transforming our libraries, and put them at the centre of people's lives, because that was our mandate from Tower Hamlets residents. How did we achieve that? First of all by working very closely with like-minded architects such as Bisset Adams, who very involved from day one in a new concept, not just a new building – we think it is this marriage of creative minds that resulted in such an innovative project. We then started by re-locating our buildings where people were, on the high streets, and by investing in books and IT.



Idea Stores: the next generation

We then had to throw away the rule book (the one that still makes many libraries too daunting and austere, with silly signs on the doors telling you the 1,000 things you cannot do as you enter), and try to create a place where mutual respect is the norm. Our 'no rules' policy has brought in thousands of people who had never been to a library before, and as a result of our widening participation policies, social cohesion is now a reality, in a diverse borough like Tower Hamlets, not just a desirable outcome.

We then had to learn a few tricks from the retail sector (because they know how to engage with ordinary people), to the dismay of traditionalists and lazy intellectuals, who immediately jumped to the conclusion that we were selling out - we are proud to remain a public service, we are efficient in our use of resources, but profit is definitely not on our agenda. So, longer opening hours (seven days a week), books attractively displayed (as in the best bookshops), customer focused layout design, and competent staff who care. Add to these art galleries and cafes, events for all ages (all year round), an ever-growing free reading festival with diverse audiences (Write Idea 2012), and you get the idea of a place that continues to be a choice destination for many: yearly visits of 2,100,000 (up from 550,000), and book lending up by 27% have put Tower Hamlets among the very top in London, after being at the bottom 10 years ago – this is remarkable, particularly considering the chronic decline in most library services in the UK.



top: The first Idea Store at Bow

below: Idea Store Canary Wharf

Idea Stores: the next generation

We continue to live by our values (engage, empower, enrich), so we still engage, and continue to seek novel ways of capturing the attention of users who are increasingly attracted by other offers in modern life; we continue to empower our people, by making things easier for them and by listening, taking on board their demands. And we continue to enrich the lives of those more in need, bringing an ever expanding range of services to an ever wider audience: we are now focusing on employability and health, the basis for improving the quality of life in Tower Hamlets, and use reading and learning opportunities to achieve this. So, we offer 800 courses yearly: literacy, yoga, complementary health, cookery, computing, numeracy, languages, fitness, design, sewing, dance, photography, accounting, music - the list goes on and on, and for each of these, we provide books and online learning materials, greatly enhancing the learning experience.

We are now working on our fifth building, and it is interesting to note that at each stage the architects we've worked with - Bisset Adams at Bow and Watney Market, David Adjaye at Crisp Street and Whitechapel, Dearle & Henderson at Canary Wharf - have contributed in different ways to the project, whether it was a refurbishment, new build or fit out, proving the strength of the concept.



Idea Store Whitechapel

Idea Store Watney Market, the first of a new generation of Idea Stores



Idea Stores: the next generation

Many ask us: what is the key secret of your successful formula? If we were to single out a factor, we would say it is the attention we have always put on people (customers, staff), not just on things (buildings, books). Great buildings are certainly important, and you must have enough books to fill the shelves, but we think a truly great library service puts the customers first, and concentrates on removing all barriers to participation.

Attitude is everything, no matter how wonderful a building, no matter how comprehensive the book stock, you need to have staff who are able to combine fantastic people's skills with the competencies required to deliver great reading, learning and information services. Too many times you see short term strategies (in the UK and abroad), where local authorities think you can remedy library usage decline by building a new library, and after the initial excitement, when the honeymoon period is over, the service continues to decline, because it was not supported by a solid concept, by a long term vision – in the Idea Store case, we went the whole way, people and things, seamlessly entwined, because you can't have one without the other.

So, 10 years on, and we still continue to receive many foreign delegations who study our model, and are asked ourselves to travel to faraway places to talk about how we do things 'the Idea Store way'. The fact that most of the interest comes from Scandinavia, where you can arguably find the best libraries in the world, fills us with pride. But why are we so popular in Tromsø, Palafrugell and Seoul, and

not so much in our own country? Why did cities in the United States, Holland and Italy based their library services on our model, and yet no one has given this serious consideration in the UK? For all the money we've invested in new books, we wish we could find one that answers that question. As dozens of libraries around the country close or severely reduce their services, can the UK library world outside Tower Hamlets really afford to ignore the future-proof Idea Store model for another 10 years?

Sergio Dogliani

