Urban Mediaspace Aarhus is the working title of a new main library planned to open in 2014 in Aarhus which, with more than 300,000 inhabitants, is the second largest city in Denmark. The public library will be Denmark’s largest and a fulcrum for international library development. The building is situated in the core of Aarhus, exactly where the City meets the harbour at the Aarhus river mouth. This spot is where the first settlements in Aros took place in the latter half of the ninth century, and where later the Viking fleets met and set sail for foreign shores. Eventually growing into a well-known urban conglomeration and a place for trade and commerce, Aarhus developed a wide range of public services. The first public library was opened in 1869 and the existing main library was inaugurated in 1934.

Keywords: Aarhus; library building; user-driven innovation

Urban Mediaspace Aarhus


Schlüsselwörter: Aarhus; Bibliotheksbau; benutzergesteuerte Innovation

La médiathèque municipale d’Aarhus

“Urban Mediaspace Aarhus” est le titre de travail de la nouvelle bibliothèque centrale dont l’ouverture est prévue en 2014, d’Aarhus, une ville avec plus de 300.000 habitants la deuxième du Danemark. La bibliothèque publique sera la plus grande et le pivot du développement international des bibliothèques. L’immeuble est situé au centre d’Aarhus, exactement là où la cité rencontre le havre de l’embouchure du fleuve Aarhus. L’endroit est celui où les premières installations ont eu lieu à Aros dans la seconde moitié du neuvième siècle et où plus tard les flottes des Vikings mettaient les voiles à la conquête de nouveaux horizons. Se développant vers une conglomération urbaine bien connue et une place de négociant et de commerce Aarhus s’est munie d’une grande gamme de services publics. La première bibliothèque publique fut ouverte en 1869 et la bibliothèque principale d’aujourd’hui en 1934.

Mots-clés: Aarhus; construction de bibliothèque; innovations dirigées par l’utilisateur

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1 The political process

The main library was well functioning and very modern for its time in the 1940s and ‘50s but in the ‘60s with demand for new library services it became obvious that the library was not fit to meet the requirements and it was rebuilt and extended in 1965, 1967 and 1977 to a total of gross 9,000 m² or net 6,950 m².

Still, in the 1980s and ‘90s, the fundamental lack of space, partly for media but mainly for users, was a severe problem which was raised every now and then primarily by the library management.

Early in 1998 the City Council discussed the issue of a new main library and decided to have a report on possible locations made. The report was published December 1998 and pointed to four possible locations, none of which was the harbour front. At this time, the harbour front was not a political possibility for a new main library, as an architectural idea competition on the future use of these areas had not yet been completed. Eventually, in late 1999, it turned out that three of the four winners of the idea competition had a library as one of the important components of the urbanisation of the harbour area and the situation changed.

The City Council decision to build a new main library had not yet made, but a very important political paper helped to pave the way. This paper was the Action Plan for Trade and Industry, which contained an initiative on the establishment of a new MEDIASPACE including a new main library in Aarhus. This action plan was adopted by Aarhus City Council in September 2001. Parallel to and succeeding this plan, analysis of construction investments, City Council seminars on financing and open meetings for citizens were carried out. The formal decision on a new main library was finally made in September 2003 with the City Councils adoption of a 10-year investment plan from 2003 to 2013: ‘Investment in the Future’ which among other big investments devoted a net DKK 355 million. In addition, the sales value of the current Main Library and the capitalised value of rent of 3,000 square metres made up an estimated total of DKK 500 million or € 67 million (2006 price level).

A year later the accurate site for the building was definitely resolved and in 2005, the City Council decided to release capital for the planning process. In 2006, the City Council decided on the type of tendering process for the project and adapted the core values which were the results of major user-involvement processes. In the period from 2006 to 2008 it became obvious that the project would gain from integrating other much needed city projects: firstly, additional parking facilities for the City, and secondly, the opening of the river mouth that had been covered with road systems since the 1950s. So in March 2008, the City Council was ready to decide on bringing a major project to architectural competition. The project now comprised the main library including 18,000 square metres for Citizens Services, additional space of 10,000 square metres for rent by businesses or cultural institutions, a parking facility with a capacity of 1000 cars, opening of the river, future-oriented traffic solution and reorganisation of the harbour front. The total cost of the project had by 2008 risen to approximately DKK 1.7 billion or close to € 230 million. Funding partly comes from the municipality, partly from Realdania, a wealthy non-profit foundation aimed at initiating and supporting projects that improve the built environment for the common good.

2 Library concepts

Establishing, maintaining and revising the vision of the new main library, its idea and future services and subsequently materialising the vision into a project has been the focal point of the planning process. In a nutshell, Urban Mediaspace Aarhus is an amalgamation of modern and innovative functionalities of a main public library, a one-stop citizens’ services and spaces and facilities for civil society activities and networks.

Historically, Aarhus Main Library has in its ideas and practice been influenced by many sources of inspiration. From the German concept of “Die Dreigeteilte Bibliothek” as conceived by Dr. Edmunds in the ’70s and later realised in the public library of Gütersloah to the British idea of deconstructing the public library into “Idea Stores” as practiced in Tower Hamlets, a borough of London. On a theoretical level the work of Dorte Skot-Hansen of the Danish Library School on the four roles of the library as an institution for enlightenment, social cohesion, economic growth and entertainment played a role for developing the services in the late ‘90s as did the idea of the Hybrid Library, a concept derived from an extensive study on European public libraries in the information society, combining the space of the library and the physical collections with net-based media and guidance. These ideas, children of the late ‘90s, were later developed into the concept of the “Mash-Up Library” in a process of development work with user-driven methods by Aarhus Public Libraries according to our innovation strategy. The Mash-Up Library is a concept that allows us to develop, implement and evaluate new services and activities at a rapid pace and in close co-creation with the users. Basically, the idea is to innovate through a systematic approach to the development of new services, based on involvement of users’ lives, identities, practices, and needs – thus the term user-driven innovation.

User-driven innovation is a method to increase accuracy in development work. Users should be part of the innovation processes from the creative phase to testing and realisation. Users are not driving innovation, but innovation is anchored in the daily life situations and needs of the users – not in the traditional thinking of library staff.

In order to explore the possibilities of the Mash-Up library concept as a model for Urban Mediaspace Aarhus we have been working closely with research partners from Aarhus University, The Alexandra Institute and the Aarhus based IT-City of Katrinebjerg. The idea is to prototype the future by realising new service ideas in models and expose these to the public in the main library. For that purpose we have cleared a large area just near the entrance and named it Transformation Lab, a space for experiments that almost forces the public to interact.

Among the projects and prototypes are:

2.1 The Story Surfer

The Story Surfer was an installation that allowed children to navigate for books on a giant skate board ramp. By pushing buttons with their feet they could have electronic book front pages projected on the floor, by stepping on the images they would “skate” the front pages to an interactive table that displayed additional information on the book and its placement in the library.

Abb. 1: Story Surfer (Photo by Soeren E. Jensen).

2.2 The Info Column

A digital poster column which was designed to display various digital content on offer at the library. Content could be downloaded to the users’ mobile phone using Blue Tooth technology.

2.3 InfoGalleries

InfoGalleries is basically a software that allows the library to centrally address multiple screens in the library or in various other city spaces with digital advertisements and public relations materials for library activities. Working in network with others, a mixture of own created content and content from other cultural actors can individually be set up as can skins and layouts. The InfoGalleries has later been developed into a web-TV broadcasting channel developed in open source software that allows many Danish public libraries to work together in displaying content. E.g. content from the climate summit in Copenhagen 2009 was distributed to more than 100 Danish library spaces and displayed for free.

2.4 Mindspot

Mindspot is a youth universe with Mindspotters, young people with strong networks and knowledge of youth culture and media; and Mindkeepers, librarians working with the Mindspotters. Mindspot is the frame of youth-oriented activities in and outside the library and on the net such as gaming, storytelling, stand-up comedy, music and video creation using social and portable technologies. Mindspot is working in partnership with e.g. educational institutions and has ongoing activities such as instructions on information searching for secondary schools. Mindspot is very visible in the city and has given the libraries a new brand in the younger part of the population.

Abb. 2: Users in Mindspot.

2.5 The interactive floor

This was a device that projected questions and answers from users to the library floor. The users could pose questions using their mobile phones and the librarians (and other users!) could submit answers. This interactive floor received the Danish Design Award in 2004 and was later developed into the Information Well, a tool for primary schools in Aarhus, where the teachers poses questions to their pupils which they in turn will answer using their mobile phone.

2.6 The Lib-Phone

This device was formed as a two-piece retro telephone. By holding one piece against a book and the other piece to your ear, the phone would automatically read an RFID tag in the chosen book and in a soft voice give additional information on the book.
Abb. 3: Lib-phone (Photo by Soeren E. Jensen).

These are just a few of the prototypes and projects that have been conducted. Others were The Literature Room, The News Room, the Quibbler, The Climate Scene and several others.

Among the many Internet-based library services that have been developed during the last 12 years in Denmark, Aarhus Public Libraries is editor of the most popular fiction literature portal6 and active in many others.

The overall movement in the service profile as presently identified is a change from purely transactional services (loans and search) towards relational services – new services based on facilitating relational communication (meetings, programs, exhibitions, workshops etc.).

3 The idea process

Before completing the competition brief that specified background, visions and contents of Urban Mediaspace Aarhus, a series of citizen- and user-involvement processes were carried out by staff from the library. These activities included enquiries and surveys, specialist meetings and round table discussions with consultants, architects and experts within fields of general learning, adult education, library development, children’s culture, architecture and IT as well as sessions with ten focus groups representing e.g. the elderly, partners in the education area and young people. Some of the activities are specified below.

3.1 Vision Mapping

Staff of the Main Library handed out digital cameras and asked people to document what is good and what is bad about the existing library and its services. The result was a lot of photos that the staff worked with, structured and later displayed on large cardboards for internal discussion and awareness. A great many of the photos expressed wishes and visions for Urban Mediaspace Aarhus.

6 A cooperation between 79 public libraries in Denmark, <http://www.litteratursiden.dk/>.

Abb. 4: Vision Mapping.

3.2 Citizens inspire Citizens’ Services of Aarhus

A panel of citizens connected to Citizens’ Services in Aarhus was in September invited to the Town Hall. The purpose of the meeting was to involve citizens in decisions concerning Citizens’ Services. One topic was how to explore and develop Citizens’ Services in the new Urban Mediaspace Aarhus. Amongst other things, Citizens’ Services is responsible for passports, driving licenses and health insurance and is thus an important authority, which all citizens of Aarhus will need to use at some points in their lives. It is therefore important to gain knowledge about the opinions and wishes of the users of Citizen’s Services.

The citizens and Citizens’ Services employees had an inspiring and rewarding discussion, which provided valuable information and knowledge to the future Citizens’ Services in Urban Mediaspace Aarhus.

3.3 The Experimentarium

Abb. 5: Childrens Experimentarium.

The Experimentarium – a workshop for children – took place in a full week in the summer 2007. It was a week of citizen-
involvement for the youngest citizens. Through workshops involving different materials, printing and images, almost 40 children continuously developed their visions for the future main library of Aarhus, Urban Mediaspace Aarhus.

In the workshops the children came up with innovative and funny ideas, which clearly showed that children have inspiring ideas and desires for Urban Mediaspace Aarhus.

The many products and the video were later placed on view in an exhibition at the main library and more importantly, the video and the ideas became part of the material that the architects had to relate to in the competition!

3.4 Voices of the City

A process of citizen-involvement was carried out in cooperation with one of the adult education associations and the company Voices of the City. The purpose of the project was to gather the voices and opinions of the citizens: Which core values were important to citizens in connection with the development and services in Urban Mediaspace Aarhus?

An interactive table with various scenarios was developed and placed at the Main Library and in the Aarhus Art Building. Sound scenarios and the opportunity to record comments were built into the table. All visitors had the opportunity to speak to the table, thus stating their opinion. Ten focus group interviews were conducted around the table as well.

The voices of the citizens were analysed and the results were incorporated in the seven core values of Urban Mediaspace Aarhus.

Abb. 6: Voices of the City, interactive table.

4 Network and competences

It is not only the library management and staff that have been the driving force behind Urban Mediaspace Aarhus. A network of resources includes a strategically advisory board composed of leading members of the business and education communities in Aarhus. This board has a consultative function for the Alderman who is politically responsible for the project. Another board is the Idea Group, an advisory body composed of leading individuals from the education, research and cultural sectors in Aarhus. This is a consultative board advising me as the civil servant responsible for the building process.

There is a technical project group composed mainly of experts from the municipality, specialised within various fields such as architecture, road building, economy, juridical matters and so forth.

4.1 Master classes

A special activity aimed to exchange knowledge about the building of public libraries is the master classes that we have been carrying out for some years. The participants are leaders and staff from cities that are in the process of planning a new library, e.g. Birmingham, Oslo, Stockholm and others. These master classes have different themes: new learning paradigms and their influence on the building or how to organise citizen-involvement to name an example.

5 Vision and core values of Urban Mediaspace Aarhus

The vision that was a result of the processes is all about the effects of citizens’ interaction with the library and not about media or equipment. Thus, the vision does not mention books or computers:

Urban Mediaspace Aarhus is a place for human development and interaction that shall promote experience, learning, dedication, innovation, sensing, absorption and inspiration through a flexible and programmable building with a special focus on children and their families.

Urban Mediaspace Aarhus is based on seven core values that were the results of the extensive user-involvement processes. The project, the process, the building and all the activities inside the building should be based on these core values, which are the specific mindset that forms the foundation of Urban Mediaspace Aarhus. These are the values which the architects and planners have had to relate to in the ensuing design and planning process. The seven components are:

- The citizen as the key factor
- Lifelong learning and community
- Diversity, collaboration and networks
- Culture and experiences
- Bridge-building between people, technology and knowledge
- Flexible and professional organisation
- A sustainable icon for Aarhus.

6 The competition process

After an open prequalification, six teams of architects and engineering companies entered a design competition following the rules of EU tenders. In this competition, the teams were to deliver a design on a new central urban waterfront and Me-
diaspect in Aarhus\textsuperscript{7}. The library space included arrival area; space for media; spaces for meeting, learning and reading; areas for children and families; an area for tweens (children between the ages of 8 and 12 years); space for citizens’ services; spaces for logistics, maintenance and operations functions and areas for administration and development.

Eventually, three equal winners were appointed by the assessment panel and a new negotiation procedure took place with the three consortia. The negotiation procedure was carried out in the form of confidential, parallel negotiations between the contracting authority and the individual winners of the design competition.

Abb. 7: MEDIASPACE will be placed on the south bastion of the waterfront with a view of the bay and the city.

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Abb. 8: New Central urban waterfront and Mediaspace in Aarhus.

The negotiation procedure took place from September 2008 until February 2009. In an intense process of dialogue and negotiation all three projects were continuously developed throughout the process. The negotiations have been carried out both as central meetings with a joint negotiation group and as decentralised meetings in smaller groups focusing on various themes such as economy, architecture, functionality, materials, construction, urban space, harbour square and traffic. A special focus was devoted to the development process, citizen- and user-involvement and co-operation.

Eventually, the competition was won by schmidt hammer lassen architects with the landscape architect Kristine Jensen and the engineers ALECTIA A/S\textsuperscript{8}.


8 A video on the winning project can be viewed at: <http://vimeo.com/3880626>.