



Idea Store Factsheet

- Sites:** Idea Store Bow - 1,100 m² (opened 2002)
Idea Store Chrisp Street - 1,100 m² (opened 2004)
Idea Store Whitechapel - 3,500 m² (opened 2005)
Idea Store Canary Wharf - 940 m² (opened 2006)
Idea Store Watney Market – 1,200 m² (opened May 2013)
Bethnal Green Library – 400m (opened 1922)
Cubitt Town Library - 270 m² (Passmore Edwards building, 1910)
Local History Library & Archives – (ex-public library, late XIX Century)
Shadwell Adult Learning Centre – (late Victorian school building)
- Services:** Library, adult learning, information, online council services, free internet access, café, art exhibitions, Storytime (under 5s), Prime Time (50+), Conversation Clubs, Book groups, etc.
- Activities:** 900 courses for adults and families, book groups, art exhibitions, cultural celebrations, under 5s and 50+ sessions, poetry workshops, etc.
- Visits:** c. 1,600,000 yearly (from 550,000 in 1998).
- Loans:** Nearly 700,000 yearly
- Enrolments:** 8,000 yearly (7,000 learners), on 900 courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages, Visual and Performing Arts, IT, Languages, Health, Complementary Therapies, Fitness, Music, Dance, Business, Textile fashion and design, etc.
- Open:** 69 hours weekly (7 days a week, 357 days a year)
- Staff:** 80 FTEs permanent (+150 teaching staff, hourly paid)
- Awards:** Local Authority Award Winner - Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) 2007
Idea Store Whitechapel - RIBA Inclusive Building 2007
Idea Store Whitechapel - RIBA London Award 2006
Idea Store Chrisp Street - RIBA London Award 2005
Idea Store Bow – Local Government Chronicle Innovation of the Year 2003

Idea Stores – the story so far...

In 1998 the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, having seen users of its public libraries drop to 18% of the population (against 55% in the UK), asked itself a fundamental question: do we still need libraries? The question turned into a major marketing research project, in which people said that they would use libraries, as long as they were more relevant to their needs, with an improved offer of books, information and spaces. Some of the findings were not surprising, but the most important one was that people wanted libraries to fit their

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lifestyle, open longer hours and be located in such a way that borrowing a book could be as easy as buying bread or milk - the choice of location on a high street, therefore, was crucial. The quality data from the research prompted the council to work with Bisset Adams, a London-based architect and branding studio. After two years of close collaboration and public involvement, a new concept was born, one based on widening participation in library and lifelong learning, as well as access to information. The core values at the heart of the concept are:

Engage
Empower
Enrich

These can be summarised as finding innovative ways of attracting, and once attracted, capturing, new audiences (*engage*); once engaged, it is important to listen to their needs and facilitate active participation (*empower*). This is achieved through simplifying some routine functions, so that staff can be more engaged with the public and act as facilitators, rather than custodians of book collections. A good system of self-service RFID units and strong, simple signage solutions are essential in this respect, together with a more liberal approach, because the forbidding formality of traditional libraries contributes to the exclusion of non-traditional users – so this new concept threw away the rule book, and any negative signage (no food, no drink, no mobile phones, etc.) was forever banned. Those who anticipated a descent into total anarchy and anti-social behaviour were disappointed, because a strong sense of civility prevailed, one based on mutual respect and consideration for others.

Open, flexible spaces, with lots of glass and natural light, cafes with lovely views over cityscapes, and the opportunity to enjoy a yoga or salsa dance class (or any of the 900 courses offered yearly) contribute to a quality experience (*enrich*). These core values apply equally to staff, in a holistic approach that is not typical of a municipal service. A key finding in the research also indicated that people responded well to real customer care and a 'retail feel', so the commercial model is the inspiration here too, albeit the purpose remains to deliver a free, not for profit, public service. The physical manifestation of this can be seen as soon as one enters an Idea Store, which looks very much like a quality book shop, with strong graphic imagery, popular books and core collections attractively presented with the covers face-on, and friendly staff floorwalking, rather than sitting behind an intimidating counter. But the similarities end here, because what makes Idea Stores very different from a book shop are its customers: a true representation of the melting pot that is Tower Hamlets, with its 50% non-white residents, men and women, young and old, covering the socio-economic spectrum of the capital.

The collaboration with Bisset Adams resulted in a long-lasting service strategy and robust brand guidelines (still valid 20+ years on), followed by the design of Idea Store Bow, opened in 2002. This was a refurbishment of an existing council property that met the location criteria and out of a rather non-descript building, the architects created an exciting, imaginative, flexible place, with a strong sense of purpose, now beloved by the community.

The second and third Idea Stores, at Crisp Street and Whitechapel, were purpose built and designed by David Adjaye. The branding was developed further through imposing and recognisable buildings with coloured and see-through glass that made a strong impact in the area, and communicated the desire to be open, transparent and truly welcome to all.

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Once established a strong brand identity through the first three stores, the fourth, located in the busy Canary Wharf shopping centre, was simply a shop fit out. Similarly to what happens when retail expands, the economies of scale began to pay off – this was definitely the store that was easier to accomplish. In May 2013 we opened our fifth site, Idea Store Watney Market, again designed by Bisset Adams. Initially the main innovation at this store was the introduction of other council services through the One Stop Shop - a customer facing service point dealing with local residents' enquiries relating to housing, benefits and many other council services. This later developed into Digital Hubs and more recently the local Residents' Hub, which complement the main Residents' Hub at the new Town Hall. While the idea of combining different services under one roof is not particularly new, the strong Idea Store branding here means that the services are truly seamless, and the experience for users, whether they come into the building looking for library, learning, information or any other services, is greatly enhanced.