

An exciting new chapter

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Revamped and rebranded, previously stuffy libraries are being turned into cutting-edge cultural centres that add a consumer touch to the pursuit for knowledge, says David Spittles

WHAT do you do when your organisation offers a hugely popular service, is visited by more people than attend football matches, yet fails to attract new customers? You rebrand, and create a completely fresh and glamorous concept, more relevant to the needs and aspirations of the consumer.

Tower Hamlets council has become the first local authority in the country to rebrand its library services.

Welcome to the "idea store" or what was originally known as the municipal library. This retail-inspired project will see seven idea stores built over the next five years, costing a total of Pounds 20 million.

They will be showpiece buildings in local shopping areas or the heart of a neighbourhood, and will offer much more than books. The first is already up and running in Bow, and early indications are that it is a rip-roaring success. Visitor figures have jumped 40 per cent.

Gone is the hush, hush environment that characterised traditional libraries.

Enter the store and you will find a cafe selling cappuccinos and cake, and offering business lunches.

Elsewhere is a "surfing space" for internet terminals and "sight and sound" stalls for DVDs, videos and CDs. A sign points the way to a crèche, and tucked away at the back are learning laboratories and well-stocked shelves with books on them.

Almost 30 per cent of the population use libraries.

There were 290 million visits last year, but during the past decade visits have fallen by 17 per cent and book loans by 25 per cent. Idea stores are designed to bring them back, and future stores will incorporate performance venues, exhibition space and even chill-out zones where youngsters can watch MTV. They will be open seven days a week.

As well being new beacons of learning, libraries of the future will be a meeting point for local people and a communication centre for mobile workers, or even

tourists, to plug into online services. Electronic links between home and idea stores will also increase.

Another idea store will open in Poplar this spring, to be followed next year by a striking glass structure in Whitechapel, designed by architect David Adjaye. A location near Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs has also been earmarked.

Tower Hamlets says this type of store reflects the retail approach to consumerism, both in terms of location and design. The logic is that people are more inclined to borrow books or use services if the ambience reminds them of a designer superstore.

Adjaye's 3,600sq m glass box is described as "accessible and transparent", a shape and style that encourages participation. "We want to remove barriers - make it easy for people to see inside it, to enter the building and be part of the space," says Heather Wills, idea stores programme director.

Adjaye made his name with projects for the potentates of BritArt and fashion, but the idea store is a place where ordinary people will spend their lives. He says he wants these centres to become "as ubiquitous as telephone boxes".

Across the Thames, Peckham's funky new library, the creation of architect Will Alsop, shows how community architecture can help to revitalise an area.

However, according to the Government's Commission for Architecture (Cabe), "design is not just about the big iconic buildings, it is also about the small branch libraries and thoughtful refurbishment and conversions".

Cabe cites several libraries outside London as good examples. One in Bournemouth, funded by the Private Finance Initiative, is described as a "new public living room" for residents. Shaped like a horseshoe on two open-plan levels, it has a reader area overlooking the central exhibition space and views over a landscaped public square and the town beyond. "Glazed elevations connect the people in the building with their local surroundings and vice versa".

In Dorset, the county council converted a 19th century building, latterly used as a fire station, into a library. Behind the sensitively restored facade (a gaping hole where fire engines entered was filled in) sits a large, contemporary designed space that would not be out of place in Clerkenwell.

Tower Hamlets' leap into the future was made possible through proceeds from the sale of municipal buildings, a package of grants and EU funding, and private sponsorship, mainly J Sainsbury and Lloyds TSB.

The Whitechapel store is being built next to a Sainsbury's supermarket.

Food for thought.

www.ideastore.co.uk