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Is this the library of the future?

The word library is set to fade from our vocabulary - but not because we've fallen out of love with books. Today's libraries are being made over as "idea stores", complete with cafés, crèches and multi-media offerings.

In an unlovely High Street in east London comes the query "can you tell me the way to the library?"

"You mean the Idea Store - turn right at the clock, can't miss it." And indeed you can't - instead of a Victorian-era pile or a squat 60s block, the new library in Bow brings colour and light to a corner of the capital still largely untouched by the forces of gentrification.

On walking through its sliding glass doors, what first meets the eye is not shelves of books or stern librarians but a café, complete with espresso machine and banana loaf. Tables dot the spacious foyer and a cheery security guard asks a passing child not to blow up her whoopee cushion inside. He knows her - and others streaming into the building on this sunny spring afternoon - by name.

To the right are internet terminals, a space in which Bow residents young and old occupy almost every work station. To the left a "Sight and Sound" stall for DVDs, CDs and videos.

But where are the books? It is only once around the corner, en route to the children's play area, that the reader comes across the well-stocked, lime green shelves. One themed display is on holidays within the UK, another is on understanding Islam - a timely choice, and apposite in a borough where just half the population is white.

Surge in interest

"People have been very positive since we opened last May, as the numbers using it show," says ideas supervisor Zoinul Abidin (a librarian in the old jargon). "In our previous building we'd get between 250 to 300 people a day, here we average about 1,000."

While the initial spike in book issues has levelled off somewhat since the opening, both these and course enrolments are up on previous years. This, in a borough which recently had a library use rate of just 28% compared with the national average of 55%.

Rabia Puddicombe, who lives in the tower block overlooking the revamped library, says she is now a frequent visitor. "Whenever I'm looking after my granddaughter, I bring her here to play with the other children. And for me it's a lovely place to sit with a cup of tea."

Siobhan Bevans, a teaching assistant and mother of three, says her boys now clamour to come to the library. "They like using the internet; and the pupils from my school come here for the afternoon homework club."

New image, new users

For this is the new direction for the UK's libraries, 150 years young in 2000, an example singled out by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in its blueprint for the future published last month. It will no doubt be praised again in the Social Market Foundation's lecture on rejuvenating libraries this Wednesday.

The borough of Tower Hamlets plans to open six more idea stores within the next five years, including its flagship building in Whitechapel due to open in 2004. While construction work on this glass-encased emporium of learning has yet to get underway, its arrival will prompt a much-needed facelift for the market stalls which set up daily on the High Street's litter-strewn pavements.

But such projects do not come cheap, and the borough - one of the UK's most deprived - is funding its brave leap forward through a combination of national and European grants, proceeds from building sales, and sponsorship from the likes of Sainsbury's and Lloyds.

What of its old libraries, still used and still loved? While these will no longer be filled with books, buildings such as Bethnal Green's rather lovely - albeit somewhat imposing - public library will remain open for community use. It's just up to the council to decide in what capacity.

Meanwhile, the staff here and at other library services around the UK do what they can to attract people. Space once given over to bookshelves has been cleared to make way for extra computer terminals and racks of CDs. As in Bow a mile or so away, folk songs and popular operatic arias vie for space with the soundtracks to Bollywood hits.

Yet still, its ornate wood panelling and hushed whispers provide an altogether different experience than slouching on a comfy armchair in the bright and buzzy Bow Idea Store. Almost like stepping back in time... or into a place where reading comes first.