

Glittering new design brings a blast of cool to libraries

www.newsuk.co.uk

Evening Standard (London); p. 11

Mar 1, 2002

ROWAN MOORE

THINK of public libraries and you don't think of glamour. Think of Whitechapel Road and you might think of the Krays or Jack the Ripper. Yet this is where David Adjaye, London's coolest architect, is to build a glittering new library.

It won't even be called a library but an "idea store", and it will be the flagship of Tower Hamlets' 30 million pounds scheme to replace seven of its 12 libraries.

The plan is for centres that draw people to books as effectively as supermarkets draw people to cornflakes and baked beans. Located in shopping areas, cafes and dance studios will lure the punters in. "We have to compete with the best High Street shops," says idea stores' programme director Heather Wills.

All over London, libraries have been closing and losing visitors; only 28 per cent of Tower Hamlets residents use theirs. One woman told researchers she "wouldn't be seen dead" somewhere so drab. It is hoped idea stores will reverse this decline.

So, a few doors down from the Blind Beggar pub - where Ronnie Kray murdered rival gangster George Cornell - Adjaye has designed what he calls "the Pompidou Centre of the East End". It and a smaller idea store in Chrisp Street market, Poplar, are due to open in 2003.

Adjaye is already much-feted, having created designs for Ewan McGregor, fashion photographer Juergen Teller and artist Chris Ofili, who won the Turner Prize with paintings made of elephant dung.

The architect says he wants to design for the general public as well as the rich and famous, adding: "We aim to be the Robin Hood practice - for rich people we make places grittier, for poor people we make them glossier."

The designs for the 6.5 million pounds Whitechapel idea store, revealed today, show a sleek aluminium-and glass box rising calmly from Whitechapel Road, raising the tone of a giant car park behind it. As in Paris's Pompidou Centre, an escalator will rise behind its glass facade. The top-floor cafe will enjoy views of St Paul's. A two-storey video wall will display information.

"You will walk into it just as you would into a department store," says Adjaye. Books will be electronically marked to stop theft and the venue will close at 10pm.

The concept is open to charges of dumbing down. Consultants Bisset Adams, which developed the idea, talk of "relaxed retail atmosphere", raising the spectre of encroaching commercialism.

But it is hard to find anyone with a bad word to say. Tower Hamlets should be "congratulated", says the Library Association.

The National Literacy Trust adds: "We've got to be totally in favour of it."

www.ideastore.co.uk