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## Idea Store

### → SERGIO DOGLIANI

Dogliani moved from Italy to Great Britain in 1984. His background is in adult education, having taught in various London institutions and managed Languages, ICT and Humanities departments. His experience in learning provision and his lifelong love of books and libraries led to his appointment as Manager of the first Idea Store in 2002, and then to his current position in the Senior Management Team as Deputy Head of Idea Store. He regularly travels to conferences and seminars in the UK and abroad to talk about the Idea Store project, has written in national and international newspapers, magazines and books, and has appeared in various radio and TV programmes.

### → ABSTRACT

*This essay offers a real-life example of operative approaches to multiculturalism in the library sector. Sergio Dogliani describes how he created an innovative library experience in one of the most deprived boroughs in the UK, Tower Hamlets. Idea Stores, shaped after extensive consultation with local communities, offer both traditional library services and a wide range of adult education classes, alongside career support services, meeting areas, cafes and cultural events. Could this example of “library, learning and total community engagement” be adopted more extensively at national level, and in other European countries, not only in libraries but also in museums?*

**PREVIOUS PAGE** — Interiors at Idea Store Canary Wharf, London.

## → FACTSHEET

<b>LOCATION</b>	Tower Hamlets, one of the 32 London Boroughs.
<b>POPULATION</b>	235,000 (51% white, 49% non-white, 33% of Bangladeshi origin, the rest from Somali, Chinese, Vietnamese, African and Black Caribbean backgrounds). One of the most deprived boroughs in the UK (only 58% of the working age population is in work, compared to 71% in London and 74.4% nationally), yet 100,000 workers commute to Tower Hamlets daily, mostly to work in Canary Wharf, site of several international banks and businesses.
<b>SITES</b>	Idea Store Bow – 1,100 m <sup>2</sup> (opened 2002) Idea Store Chrisp Street – 1,100 m <sup>2</sup> (opened 2004) [Img. 01] Idea Store Whitechapel – 3,500 m <sup>2</sup> (opened 2005) [Img. 02] Idea Store Canary Wharf – 940 m <sup>2</sup> (opened 2006) Also, 3 traditional libraries, 2 learning centres and a Local History & Archives service.
<b>SERVICES</b>	Library, learning, information, free internet access, café, crèche, art gallery.
<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	Courses for adults and families, Family Fun Days, DJ mixing, arts days, Yoga, Bollywood dance, book groups, art exhibitions, cultural celebrations, golden time (50+), under 5s sessions, poetry workshops, sleepovers etc.
<b>VISITS</b>	c. 2,100,000 yearly (from 550,000 in 1998). Idea Store Whitechapel now the busiest library building in Central London, with 700,000 yearly visits, Idea Store Chrisp Street 460,000 and the others averaging 900 daily.
<b>LOANS</b>	1,000,000+ yearly
<b>ENROLMENTS</b>	9,000 yearly (6,000 learners), on 800 courses in Visual Arts, ICT, Languages, Health, Complementary Therapies, Fitness, Music, Dance, Business, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Accounting, Textile fashion and design, etc.
<b>OPEN</b>	71 hours weekly (7 days a week, 357 days a year)
<b>STAFF</b>	160 permanent (+200 teaching staff, hourly paid)
<b>BUDGET</b>	£30,000,000 (capital) / £8,500,000 (revenue)
<b>AWARDS</b>	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—Civic Trust Award 2004 [Mention] Idea Store Bow—Local Government Chronicle Innovation of the Year 2003

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**→ 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 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-



IMG. 01 — Idea Store  
Chrisp Street, London.

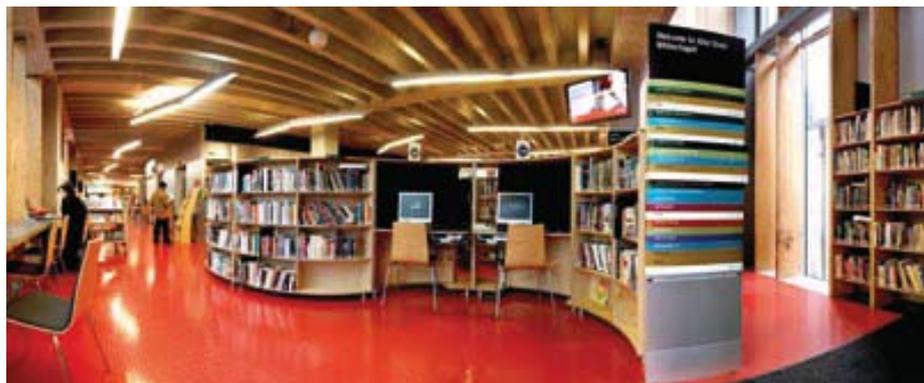


IMG. 02 — *Idea Store Whitechapel, London.*

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 [Img. 03], 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 800 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 [Img. 04], 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,

IMG. 03 — *Strategy no barriers: shelves and computer stations at Idea Store Whitechapel, London.*



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 10 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 Chrisp Street and Whitechapel, were purpose built and designed by David Adjaye. The branding was developed further through imposing and recognisable buildings with col-



IMG. 04 — Strategy no barriers: help desk at Idea Store bow, London.



IMG. 05 — Retail model entrance at Idea Store Canary Wharf, London.

oured 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. The architectural world began to take notice, and nominations and prestigious prizes followed. 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 [Img. 05]. Similarly to what happens when retail expand and replicate, the economies of scale began to pay off—this was definitely the store that was easier to accomplish.

There are many factors that make Idea Stores stand out among modern



libraries: the core services (library, learning, information) are seamlessly integrated, staff take their customers “all the way”, rather than passing them from specialist to specialist. The buildings manifest this approach too, by mixing learning and library spaces [Imgs. 06–07], so people attending a class can often find books supporting their learning immediately outside that class. Widening participation policies and liberal attitudes mean that the whole community now participates [Imgs. 08–09].

But if there is a single key factor in the success of Idea Stores, is that as much effort was put in the concept as on new buildings. We often see under-performing libraries think that the crisis can simply be resolved by a new building (usually very expensive), without thinking that behind that crisis there is much more than a building. The problem is that not only old books are loaded onto removal vans, but also the same attitude and obsolete approach that were the real cause of non-participation, so the library might look new and polished, but it smells of old. Inevitably, the initial success fades away, and where the architect created space and airiness, the librarian will stick posters and unnecessary hand written signs; where an empty space was deliberately created, chairs, tables and furniture of all types will appear, creating a visual cacophony that has nothing to do with the original vision. In defence of librarians, they are not normally involved in the creative process, and simple advice that would deliver effective and efficient solutions is ignored, at a high cost. In the case of Idea Stores this not happen—the ongoing happy marriage of creative minds, taking the best from architecture, design and service innovation, is the key. This is the springboard for the next generation of Idea Stores (now at the final planning stage), smaller but still localised and relevant, a complementary offer acting as satellite to the existing ones.

**IMG. 06** — Cooking classes at Idea Store.

**IMG. 07** — Art classes for seniors at Idea Store.

*For further details, please visit [www.ideastore.co.uk](http://www.ideastore.co.uk).*



IMG. 08 — Employability Skills Programmes at Idea Store.



IMG. 09 — Homework clubs at Idea Store.