Regenerating, Revitalising and Transforming Cities with Libraries

Overcoming disadvantage at the level of communities is a key means of delivering on wider development goals, as well as delivering on individuals' rights. Libraries have the potential to contribute strongly to regeneration and revitalisation efforts, in particular from the point of view of promoting meaningful inclusion, as illustrated by the available literature. However, they are arguably under-used in this respect, and could be better integrated into planning and delivery (including spending). In this way, they can come closer to making the strongest possible contribution.

The theme of this year's World Urban Forum – the 11th in the series and held in Katowice on 26-30 June – is Transforming our cities for a better urban future.

This picks up firstly on the language often currently used in discourse around the Sustainable Development Goals[1], indicating a need for transformation in order to achieve success, but also on the much older issue of how to address the challenges faced by urban areas that are struggling.

This matters. Cities already are homes to 56% of the world population, and are likely to absorb almost all future population growth. They are therefore the places where people work, learn, socialise, and live their lives. They can tend to concentrate problems, but at the same time be hubs and catalysts for innovations and improvements[2].

In turn, public libraries in particular are arguably the quintessential civic institution – a generalist, collective service offered by local governments and/or communities, with the intention of helping to improve lives. They are a product of people living together, rather than apart, and often have a special place in the communities that they serve. They have also proven their ability to evolve in order to meet community needs[3].

This task of improving lives is clearly one that aligns with broader efforts to transform cities for the better, and in particular, those focused on communities which are suffering from economic and social breakdown. This is sadly not a rare phenomenon, linked to a range of situations, such as industrial decline, insecurity, poor infrastructure connectivity and beyond. COVID-19 has simply added to the mix, creating a further imperative to find solutions.

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[1] https://sdgs.un.int
[2] UN Habitat (2022)
[3] Houpert (2021)

Of course, within the library field, there is already a lot of reflection on how libraries can support regeneration and wider community-building, in struggling areas. There is a particularly good overview of this work on the website of the State Library of New South Wales, Australia, which underlines that: 'A library's ability to provide cohesion and identity to a community, and a democratic environment capable of welcoming the full cross section of society, has been identified as a critical factor in regenerating/developing urban and regional spaces'[4].

Further, the Library underlines positive spill-over effects of libraries on surrounding areas, contribution to a sense of identify, space for community activities, hubs for local memory, provision of direct services with particular benefits for people on lower incomes, and simply showing communities that they are cared for. Crucially, 'Public libraries are often a catalyst for social and economic regeneration. They provide resources for skills development, literacy and digital literacy, training and lifelong learning. For many communities, the public library building is often the only civic building in the area that is publicly accessible to everyone and typically generates significant pride. It is strongly valued by the community and this is reflected in its high levels of visitation and usage'.

This article, based on literature primarily from outside of the library field, will look at the evidence of this happening – how libraries can regenerate, revitalise and transform communities, and so contribute to sustainable urbanisation. It draws on freely available resources online, identified using a variety of search terms, and so does not claim to be exhaustive. At the same time, it also comes from a similar perspective to that of many local governments in terms of the scope of what more academic resources are readily available to support decision-making.

In substantive terms, the article focuses both on more collective impacts – the more intangible sense of giving identity to places that are otherwise forgotten, and the creation of community spaces – and on where libraries are helping individuals overcome the challenges associated with living in disadvantaged areas. Finally, it will conclude by looking at some of the underlying issues raise in the literature as considerations when making libraries more central to regeneration efforts.

From nowhere to somewhere: libraries building a sense of place

Libraries, alongside institutions such as theatres and museums, have a recognised potential to serve as cultural anchors, building the sense that an area is one that is attractive for living, working and visiting[5].

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[4] State Library of New South Wales (2022)
[5] Skot-Hansen et al (2012)

A strong example comes from the town of Rumia in northern Poland, previously seen as a declining suburb of the Tri-City area around Gdansk, where the railway station was transformed into a library[6]. This has been particularly interesting given the small scale of the work, demonstrating a potential to make a difference also in small-to-medium sized cities. Through a combination of imaginative and elegant design, the library became a draw both for locals and others around Poland and internationally, effectively putting the place on the map.

Another one, which will be mentioned a number of times below, is Medellin, Colombia, where the creation of library parks has had, as one impact, to give the city as a whole – and run-down areas in particular – a sense of identity[7]. There is also the civic role of libraries, mentioned above – the fact of having a library can indicate that a place is a place, with an identity, and not just a forgotten extension of somewhere else[8]. A new (or renewed) library can also represent a signal of rejuvenation, as has been argued for Norwich, a city at risk of otherwise being seen as a backwater in the United Kingdom[9].

A particular role of libraries in community building is their work with local heritage. Falanga and Nunes note that the library in Marvila, a more deprived area of Lisbon, hosted an interpretive centre where people could perceive and remember their own heritage, building sense of rootedness[10]. This can be a powerful driver of social cohesion and self-confidence, especially for areas which may lack this.

Of course, one criticism of efforts to build identity is that these can tend to work to the benefit of some segments of the population rather than others, simply displacing rather than addressing the challenges the latter face. Moreover, they can also risk being more about city branding than about actually making a real difference[11].

While there will be more discussion of the way in which libraries do serve as truly inclusive, democratic players in regeneration efforts below, it is worth underlining that the tendency towards creating icons is perhaps weaker among public libraries than among other public institutions[12]. This may well make sense – programming at public libraries is rarely about blockbuster exhibits or events, but rather a smaller-scale, ongoing set of activities focused on meeting community needs. Furthermore, there is potential merit in the fact that having a library as an icon can have, as one consequence, to encourage reading in communities.

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[6] Środa-Murawska (2020)
[7] Volkmann (2018)
[8] Adamson (2010)
[9] Evans and Shaw (2002)
[10] Falanga and Nunes (2021)
[11] Skot-Hansen et al (2012)
[12] Ibid.

From households to community: Libraries providing a public space

Closely linked to the more purely psychological impact is the more practical role that libraries can play not just in providing a reference point for communities, but also a practical space where people can come together. This is of course another key element in building social capital as a basis for stronger development.

Skot-Hansen et al (2012) indeed argue that the more symbolic role of libraries sits alongside their function as a 'public domain' as a key characteristic of their power as place-makers[13]. While within the library field, the language of libraries 'as third places', the language of village squares[14], 'open spaces connection to an interactive social domain'[15], or low-intensive meeting places is also used[16]. In particular in relation to the latter, there is a helpful definition of why such places matter, given their role as 'arenas where we meet people with other interests and values than our own. These places can be seen as an alternative to the high-intensive meeting places, which rather create borderlines and differences'.

In such situations, it is clear that people are together not because of any particular shared interest or political viewpoint, but simply because the library provides a service that meets a wide variety of needs of people in a particular area[17]. As such, they can be 'meeting places where people can meet, communicate and be active together across generations and social and ethnic belongings as well as arenas for debate and discussion on social and political issues'[18].

Crucially, as such, libraries therefore mark themselves out from other potential meeting places, or at least as adding a valuable element of urban diversity, for example in shopping centres or town centres that otherwise risk emptying of life[19].

Of course, there are different ways in which libraries can organise the space they have available in order to maximise this potential. Looking beyond more traditional stacks and study spaces, libraries are recognised for their ability to offer meeting spaces[20], , venues for theatre and other events[21], or simply flexible activity spaces that allow for a wide variety of activities that respond to need. The public library in Rumia, Poland[22], as well as The Garage in Malmö and the Ideas Stories created in Tower Hamlets – both

[13] Ibid.
[14] Adamson (2010)
[15] Kimm and Seo (2018)
[16] Audunson, quoted in Skot-Hansen et al (2018)
[17] Falanga and Nunes (2021)
[18] Ibid.
[19] Chicago Council (2021)
[20] Mitsios (2018)
[21] Skot-Hansen et al (2012
[22] Środa-Murawska (2020)

areas characterised by urban decline and troubles[23].. Crucial to this, also, can be the fact that library activities are often free, meaning that money does not become a barrier to engagement[24], and that people can be drawn in who might otherwise end up falling into crime or other less positive paths[25].

Inversely, libraries themselves can provide hubs around which a variety of smaller places – such as shops, cafés, and other services can emerge, thereby meeting more needs[26]. There is also an awareness that in developing new libraries, it can be powerful to incorporate outdoor spaces into library planning, given the opportunity this provides to diversity the ways in which people can use them, as seen in the example of the library parks of Medellin[27]. In this

Overall, through their work to provide true community spaces, libraries can be a way of making the bridge between creative cities and inclusion by promoting citizen participation, in particular in areas with few other opportunities[28]. Through this, opportunities are created not just to build social cohesion and capital, but also address social and economic challenges that require collective, participatory responses, as well as promoting local innovation, creativity and cooperation more broadly[29].

Delivering on the individual right to development, locally

Returning to a theme highlighted in the introduction, the reason why there is such a focus on the regeneration, revitalisation and transformation of disadvantaged areas is because this provides a powerful way of improving the lives of the people who live there. Without intervention, geographical inequalities all too easily translate into development inequalities, and worse outcomes on a human level.

As such, it is worth recognising the role of libraries not just as symbols or spaces, but as practical actors in efforts to help the people living in such areas, and so contributing to the ultimate goal of any regeneration, revitalisation or transformation strategy.

In terms of how this is done, there is of course plenty of work already done in the library field, exploring how far, and how well, libraries are addressing the types of

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[23] Skot-Hansen et al (2012)
[24] Ortiz and Broad (2007)
[25] Volkmann (2018)
[26] Idem
[27] Moore (2019)
[28] Vickers et al (2017)
[29] Skot-Hansen et al (2012)

problem that can be particularly pernicious in deprived areas, such as low levels of connectivity[30], low digital skills[31], low literacy[32], or adult learning[33].

Looking beyond what the library field is saying about itself, there is also recognition in the wider literature of the role libraries play in supporting the individuals within communities. As highlighted above, libraries are highly multifunctional institutions. They help people both in traditional ways, such as boosting literacy in a local context[34], and enabling lifelong learning and similar opportunities[35].

Yet this does not need to be all. At a basic level, libraries may provide the only public toilets available without a need to pay[36], but can go as far as offering the spaces and facilities for emerging creative professionals to establish businesses and work[37], broader business support and citizen advice/conflict resolution centres[38], a base for social workers to go out into communities[39], as a venue for concerts for children[40], and a host for discussions around citizen budgets[41].

In short, libraries are recognised as having a key role not just as symbols or spaces, but also as proactive players in creating new societies[42], and partners for regeneration and revitalisation strategies[43].

Where next?

The evidence set out above offers a glimpse of what can be done when libraries are integrated into regeneration and revitalisation strategies.

A first key conclusion then is that libraries do appear to be able to deliver on the goals that policy-makers set out. The studies cited note the positive impacts, in terms of security and civility[44], stronger social ties[45], literacy and reading[46], and beyond. There is of course the question of how long impacts last, in particular those associated with

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[30] IFLA (2021a)
[31] IFLA (2020)
[32] IFLA (2021b)
[33] IFLA (2022)
[34] The Prevention Institute (2013)
[35] UN Habitat (2013)
[36] Solomon (2013)
[37] Skot-Hansen et al (2012)
[38] Volkmann (2018)
[39] Ibid
[40] Środa-Murawska (2020)
[41] Ibid,
[42] Volkmann (2018)
[43] Falanga and Nunes (2021)
[44] Volkmann (2018)
[45] Środa-Murawska (2020)
[46] Ibid

the symbolism of a good library[47], although libraries at least tend to be long-term initiatives, as long as they are adequately funded.

A second broad conclusion emphasised by commentators is the suggestion that when a regeneration or revitalisation project includes or is built around libraries, this sends a strong signal of its commitment delivering for existing communities. Rather than just a focus on city branding or the creation of icons, investing in libraries signals that a more inclusive, rather than elitist, approach is being taken[48].

Nonetheless, it is not as if the literature in this field appears to be particularly extensive, at least as concerns what is readily available online. This may be down to a tendency still to see libraries as more passive institutions, limited to delivering on more traditional goals, such as literacy and reading, in a narrow way. Left to departments responsible for culture, education or others, they may not instinctively be seen as players in the implementation of initiatives focused on economic development. Ironically, of course, they are not always well recognised by culture strategies either, given that official statistics tend to look at libraries alongside publishing and the wider book sector[49].

A first lesson from this work is therefore that there is potentially a significant untapped potential to bring libraries into strategies for redevelopment, rather than just neglecting them and failing to offer the support needed to realise their potential[50]. Further research and evaluation work on how libraries make a difference in regeneration and revitalisation, from more countries, would also help.

A second and connected point is the theme of promoting coordination and collaboration, in both the planning and the delivery of library projects related to regeneration and revitalisation. A number of the projects referenced in the literature strongly emphasised this point.

Here, the example of Medellin's library parks is again instructive, with participatory design methods used that drew on the networks of a 'social manager' for Santo Domingo – the district served – and monthly workshops with children to imagine the park[51]. The value of involving people in planning services does not diminish as time goes on, and helps ensure the ongoing relevance and responsiveness of programming[52]. In the case of Rumia, it was popular mobilisation that made it possible raise the funds to deliver on the new library building[53]. Such approaches can both

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[47] Volkmann (2018)
[48] Skot-Hansen et al (2012)
[49] Pasikowska-Schnaass (2017)
[50] Środa-Murawska (2020)
[51] Malandrino (2017)
[52] Volkmann (2018) and Skot-Hansen et al (2012)
[53] Środa-Murawska (2020)

serve civic engagement goals, and of course ensure that libraries really do meet community needs.

In parallel with this, it can also help when cooperation with other local actors is facilitated, or even mandated. For example, library learning programmes can be effectively coordinated with the work of schools, rather than being kept apart for administrative reasons[54].

A final point, hinted at in the description of a recently launched research programme at Lund University, Sweden, is that contributing to regeneration will also need libraries and their personnel to have the support and training needed to realise their potential[55]. While the idea of community librarianship is not new, it should not be assumed that staff are equipped to deal effectively with all comers in deprived areas, or to know instinctively how to identify challenges and craft solutions. There will be better results is this is born in mind.

In sum, the evidence is there that libraries have a place in urban regeneration, revitalisation and transformation, and that this place is a unique one, at the intersection of strategies based around inclusion, culture, education and civic engagement. However, it is arguably an under-recognised role, requiring both a new awareness and consciousness of our institutions' potential, and a readiness to engage and support them in realising their potential.

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[54] Pasikowska-Schnaass (2017)
[55] Lund University (2022)

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