Hub in a knowledge hungry world
A strategic planner's view on the evolution of libraries
Geert Kooistra, Planosfeer. February 2013

The way it is

We're living in a rapidly changing world. Our economic system is showing signs of obsolescence. Meanwhile, private empowerment takes a leap through internet and social media. People can contact and find each other and information is widely available. Almost for free. The adaptation of investors and policy makers to a new, demand driven reality, doesn't keep pace with the transition the public is going through. In my point of view, that's where the new library comes in.

Libraries will need to make strategic choices now to secure a timely transformation and remain (or become increasingly) relevant. While their traditional function of safeguarding knowledge and cultural capital is becoming somewhat outdated, digitalization brings great new opportunities. The avalanche of available information is getting increasingly harder to 'make sense' of and solidify it into useful knowledge.

At the moment, national governments focus mainly on issues at macro-economic level, trying to solve global effects of economic instability. Meanwhile treasuries are (almost) empty and public spending is being cut across the board. This has direct consequences for the viability of public amenities, also for libraries. On a micro-scale, economy and welfare are gradually left more to communities to take care of themselves. This makes the public a relevant new stakeholder, with its own demands, interest, solutions and means. As such, communities can be valuable partners in development.

There is urgency for libraries to re-position themselves. It would create great opportunities if they did so strategically, by broadening their focus. Information is arguably a religion and the library could be its church. Libraries should, like churches, be involved in societies at community level and give direction and guidance toward (cultural) education, and emancipation. The library then will have to transform into an institution that informs the public on its interests and ventilates public opinion, translating it to usable input for investment initiative and (local) government policy.

The community as a partner

The effects of economic instability are very evident in our field of expertise, urban planning and spatial development. The deadlock that classical partners are in has everything to do with the shift from a supply to a demand driven market. This is being forced into existence by the growing awareness among the public, thereby changing the rules of the game to be played. Growing responsibility in livelihood enhancement stimulates active involvement on neighbourhood level, as well as on municipal level. This more structural and more significant type of grass root development is waiting to start living up to its full potential. Many people are, by nature, interested or involved in (physical) development on different scales; from NIMBY to long-term perspectives for their city.

Increasingly, livelihood enhancement, social structuring and function(ing) of public space, will be left to individual responsibility. This time of transition, is also one of great new opportunities, especially in green-tech. People are loaded with ideas and concepts and ready to put them into practice. They are vital to the re-ignition of urban development.

Communities can establish co-operations of all kind. New, community aimed investments from eager energy companies can serve social and livelihood purposes, as well as technically facilitate energy transition. Together with the public and their capital and insight, goals can be reached that will take industry years to achieve. The public just hasn't organized into to a fully compatible partner yet, while the traditional stakeholders in (spatial) development are still hesitant or ignorant.

The possibilities don't stop at energy. Food production and distribution is another highly potential responsibility to be (partly) brought back to communities to take care of. Current scarcity of raw materials will have its consequences for their availability. Food related logistics will become less relevant as communities grow food regionally. There are wonderful examples of city-farming, oases in cities that bring food and its production closer

to consumers, raising their awareness and sense of ownership reducing the cost of especially logistics. These are mostly examples of private initiative, many of which have a hard time getting there. If at all they do.

The system (governance and corporate interests) still lacks will, ways or means to reach out to full public participation. For public, government and private parties to effectively embrace each other, there's need for experiment. In a process of trial and error, successful examples can add to (the development of)viable alternatives. A reflective practice! That's where people need assistance and guidance. To find each other, to fine-tune their stakes, through series of decisions (many in specialized areas), through procedures and legislation, etc. They will need knowledge and know-how.

Through communities demand will be directly fed by people's interests and needs: "we need what we need only, no less... and no more". They can form co-operations of demand and negotiate deals with parties in energy or energy technology. From there on co-operations can develop into producers and even suppliers of energy. A fine example of a sustainable solution applicable on a scale of neighbourhoods, is 'waste to energy', taking care of recycling and energy production.

Making information work

While antiquated development processes are still mainstream, people need help to hear and be heard. It is now more important than ever, that interaction between bottom up and top down is facilitated or even strategically directed. If we could organize a catalyst for information, education, participation and integration between all different stakeholders, we'd create a much needed addition to (free, but without context) information exchange, mainly through internet.

We have a long way to go in making information more interactive and have public collaboration better structured. With GebouwF, the regional Centre for Architecture in my hometown, we try to bridge that gap. We collect and structure public opinion and professional input, feeding strategic policy making. We identify and stimulate private initiative, revealing strengths and weaknesses and advise policy makers on embedding of private initiative in strategy. We identify and create momentum by organizing space for experiment and actively approaching promising or problematic places and urgent matters. Our work can continuously count on sympathy, but we have very limited means, are restricted to the sector of spatial disciplines and are not structurally embedded in the system.

As professionals in spatial disciplines, we are also working on an online platform to facilitate sharing of interests and stakes between different parties, traditional and new. A marketplace of initiatives, investment interests, concepts and ideas, actualities, locations and policy. Interests can match and projects ignite online. Processes can continue online and professional assistance is broadly at hand. Professional communication, enthusing and initiation of programmes and projects increases the effect, actively taking development steps forward. From its launch it will go open source in order to evolve. The only thing missing is a physical counterpart; a place to hear and be heard.
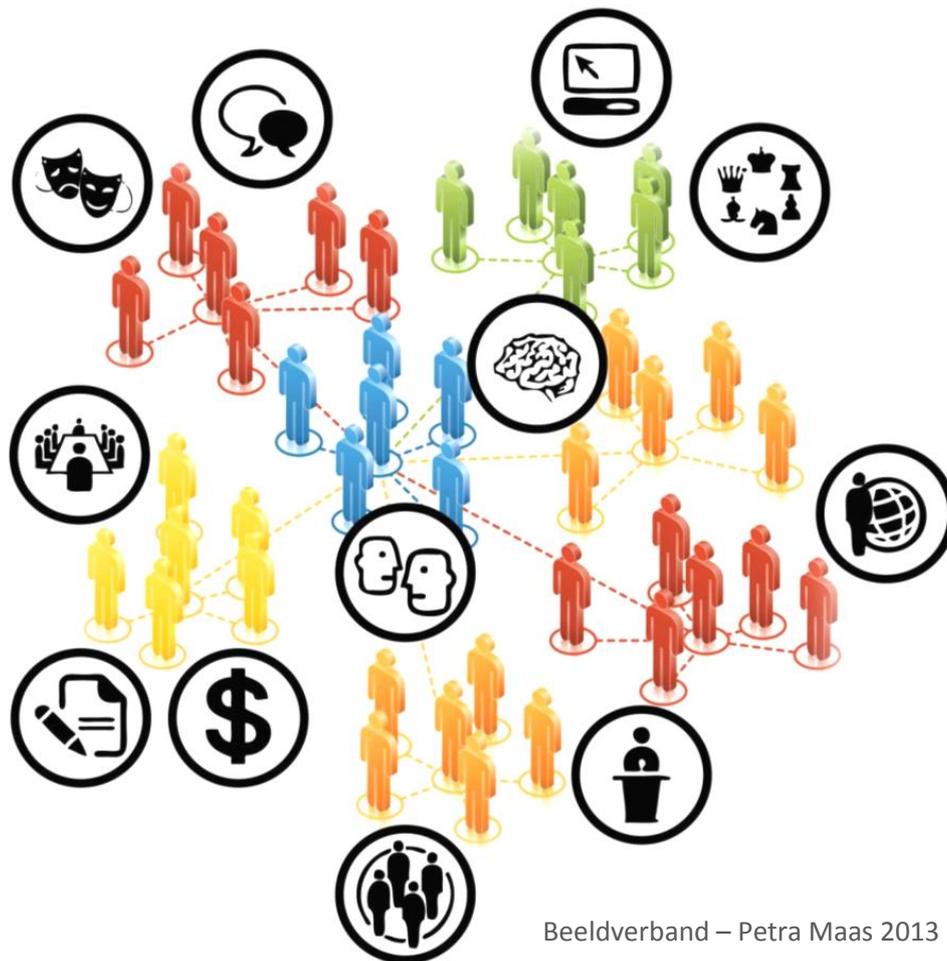
The neo library

Libraries could become just that, specializing in making available information usable and integrating information streams. That would help bridge the gap between availability of information on the one hand and public awareness and collaboration on the other. In such a role, they would stimulate and support civil empowerment and help catalyze its consequences towards meaningful and effective cooperation.

The library could be the place to turn to for (local) governments and other stakeholders (e.g. housing corporations and real estate developers) when seeking interaction with the community. They will maintain their function as guardians of cultural capital and knowledge. But beside that they could become active hubs of information and knowledge exchange, involved in education, awareness and public collaboration programmes.

With solid knowledge of (technological) opportunities and innovations, libraries can actively inform communities on sustainability and energy transition, livelihood issues and ways to organize and act. On Aruba, transitioning to full energy sustainability, the library has already positioned itself accordingly.

Libraries could be centres of communication and channel information to and from everywhere Transmitters of information can do so through the library, while information receivers have a reliable place to turn to. Libraries have always been forefront in accessibility of information, why not do so now? Become the embodiment of the internet!

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The cultural background of libraries should be secured in prominent physical presence within communities. These buildings should be(come) hives of cultural education and information exchange. Besides reading, all libraries should stimulate and facilitate life enriching activities such as music, art, drama, writing and philosophy. Moreover, other creative industries, such as digital design, photography, film and architecture, could be incorporated. Furthermore, if libraries turn to seeking partnerships with educational institutions, cultural and social institutes and local governments to interact with the public through them, they could become profitable. This would require a different, more (CSR) commercial attitude of them.

They could generate income by renting out (flexible) office space, (temporary) ateliers and client desks to independent, highly specialized professionals who can have office hours at the library. A guild for crafts that need to come back to the public, such as architecture, urban- and neighbourhood planning, etc. would become part of a centre for information, education and co-operation. Also food- and energy based know-how could find its place within those hubs. They'd be trade centres for information, knowledge, advice and cultural riches. It would greatly enhance the libraries' dynamics and would attract an array of new clients and visitors.

For professionals, the library would offer a space to work, meet, hold workshops and brainstorm sessions. The library could be part in the organization and execution of expert meetings and conventions on relevant and/or urgent topics. There is an actual organization called 'the Hub', that offers this aspect of the proposal. It is originated in the USA, but is also physically present in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Libraries could become their host or play their part. Same could go for GebouwF or its equivalent.

Finally

I focus on spatial development, because I am a physical planner, but this has a broader purpose. The spatial disciplines are very suitable for policy integration and visualisation (of their consequences). What happens in people's back yard is their direct stake, so they care. Most, if not all, policy choices have some kind of impact on physical space. Laying out strategies for spatial development can serve as a common base for all kinds of policy sectors. Therefore spatial development would be a good initial focus for the transition of libraries.

Our paradigm, legacy of the industrial age, needs to shift. That can only be done through awareness and care. Haven't libraries always brought literature and arts to people? Lets feed them knowledge and know-how, so they can all actively help building a better, sustainable world.

A meaningful task lies ahead.
Ready to go?

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