

# Everyman's Culture – the Ability to Give Access to All

Tuula Haavisto

*Values! Both citizens and professionals keep considering and discussing them now more than ever. The document "Library for Citizens. An Essential Part of the Finnish Know-how: The Way Forward for Public Libraries 2016–2020" was produced by the Council of Public Libraries, a voluntary co-operation body of Finnish public libraries. Overall, the new strategy of Finnish Public Libraries reflects the ongoing changes in society by turning the challenges into opportunities in library practices, such as the new interest in reading, support for social integration, promoting innovation and providing a learning environment and a public working room. Openness is about the ability to provide access to all, in other words everyman's culture.*

**E**quality, Responsibility, a Sense of community, Courage and Freedom of Speech - Finnish public libraries constructed their brand new strategy around these values. Such professional discussions can enter deep into the basis of our existence, and the *IFLA Trend Report* (2012) was important in analyzing the big waves of change

which are affecting libraries.

The strategy for Finnish libraries first analyses the phenomena challenging us. Some of the challenges are typical to Finland, some are met by public libraries in most countries. Many of them are known to research and academic libraries as well.

- *Changes in legislation –library law is currently being rewritten*
- *Population and services are centralized in cities*
- *Decreasing number of municipalities*
- *Locally provided services*
- *Majority of use on-line*
- *A widening gap in skillsets*
- *Loneliness increases*
- *Immigration and multiculturalism increases*
- *English as a preferred language in media*
- *Understanding of text and literacy deteriorate*
- *Things are shared in the form of photos, film and visualizations*
- *Only some citizens are interested in longer texts*
- *Schools are teaching multiple reading skills*
- *Wider use of digital technology*
- *In addition to specific information, we need an understanding of phenomena*
- *Mass media and publishing have become centralized and international*
- *Information can be found on-line, search services have become international*
- *People are more often willing to pay for culture and information*
- *The concept of privacy changes*
- *The self-evident nature of data protection is breaking down*
- *International agreements limit access to free information*
- *Citizens meet on-line and face-to-face*
- *An increasing number of people work remotely or as entrepreneurs*
- *Citizens participate in developing social services*
- *Citizens can publish material themselves*
- *Searching and sharing on-line is becoming more popular*

Taking into account these challenges and finding a way forward to support citizens, culture, education and civilization, we have enlarged the scope of our services. We also lean more than before on citizen participation, where some Finnish public libraries have been among the pioneers. This orientation is encouraged by the on-going renovation of the *Library Act*, where supporting democracy will be added to the tasks of public libraries.

Traditionally, the tasks have been ‘to promote equal opportunities for citizens to pursue personal cultivation, literary and cultural interests, continuous development of knowledge, personal skills and civic skills, internationalization, and lifelong learning’. In 1998 a very modern task was added to the Act, namely ‘promoting the development of virtual and interactive network services and their educational and cultural contents’ (Library Act 904/1998).



Photo: Tampere City Library, Anni Aalto

*The cabinets of the Urban Office in the Lielahhti branch library in Tampere.*



Photo: Kallio Library

*Combine the joy of listening to being reading aloud to and making handicrafts, that's Novellikoukku!*

## Reading Redefined

Literacy and reading are undergoing a renaissance in Finnish public libraries, as in many Western European countries. For some years this new development was overshadowed by such new tasks as web services and events organizing. Now the general anxiety about a decline in literacy skills has alerted public libraries to refresh their earlier favourite line of action.

In addition to book talk, fairytale telling and other well-proven activities, there are new ways to promote reading. A simple idea called *Novellikoukku* (“Hooked on Stories”) has quickly spread throughout Finland: participants in a cozy knitting session organized at the library listen to someone reading aloud a short story. Participants

<sup>1</sup> May be found on the net by referring to the document title.



Photo: Hämeenlinna City Library

*Hämeenlinna City Library has large networks. Here some children are taking part in the event 'Dancing among books' (Tanssii kirjojen keskellä). In many cities and municipalities, the library's children's events might be the only free events offered.*

can knit their own projects, knit for charity or just sit and sip a cup of tea and enjoy the stories.

Another new idea is fact-book reading clubs for those interested in discussing various research and societal themes. I myself lead one such club, and it is a great joy to share opinions and considerations based on quality books. The themes are often difficult and complicated, and the book club discussions really help to understand the world better. This idea has also been adopted at the *Helsinki University Library*.

### **Social Integration and Immigrants**

In Finland with its suddenly growing numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers, all forms of social integration are important. Public libraries are often the first place where newcomers really feel equal and welcomed. This is due to the splendid characteristics of our libraries: they are non-commercial, open public spaces offering a mul-

titude of resources and possibilities to anybody who walks in. Finns are used to meeting in libraries all kinds of people from different social and ethnic groups. A silent agreement exists in this country to meet on an equal basis in any library.

For newcomers to the country public libraries offer help in learning Finnish, provide some material in their native languages, and space where wi-fi and other free resources can be used. In the age of smartphones, the demand for libraries to disseminate up-to-date news from the country of origin has disappeared.

The news can be read on mobile phones, and for children public libraries provide resources to do homework and storytelling in their own language. It is also important to present the cultures of newcomers and to make them more visible and more understandable to Finns. Many multicultural events and festivals therefore find their place in libraries.

## Support for Innovation

Important new openings in the strategy document are different forms of support for innovations and skills. We have noticed that libraries can be important for innovations at a very early stage, when the future innovators do not even know fully the nature of their own projects. For very young innovators like schoolchildren, public libraries provide problem-solving clubs in maths, ICT, robotics and so on.

For adults, the library space nowadays is also a public working room. We have for some time been used to students reading in our premises, but it took a while before we began to react to micro entrepreneurs and freelancers who like to come to libraries to work. The Aalto University carried out a study on distant workers, and it became clear that freelancers like to work in libraries, whereas people having a distant day away from large companies prefer cafes.<sup>2</sup> We have now offered *Urban Offices* for a couple of years.

## Makerspaces

In addition, some Finnish public libraries maintain makerspaces/workshops, where users can prove e.g. 3D printers, vinyl cutters, and so on. The success of this development has surprised even us. The number of contacts and networks created in these makerspaces between emerging entrepreneurs and freelancers is high.

There is also a fablab/makerspace at the *Aalto University*. However, we think that a makerspace in a public library has the lowest possible threshold for anyone living in a city. No academic degree is needed, or alternatively no courage to step over academic thresholds is required.

Further solutions in public libraries are e.g. cooperation with health services, which is common in sparsely populated areas. Distances in Finland

are great, thus there is a point in combining public services especially services on wheels. Some basic health control sessions can either be brought into public libraries or they can drive around with mobile libraries. Combined services might also be organized for such things as passport services and other official actions.

## Everyman's Culture

Public libraries are also gaining ground as societal actors. Libraries assist citizens in e.g. copyright matters and in reminding all citizens that they should get at least basic training in ICT etc.

In the beginning of the internet era a feeling of confusion affected many public libraries and led to an identity crisis. 15-20 years later we know better. We still have both on the grass roots level and in political discussions a lot to do to support and defend everyman's cultural, educational and democratic possibilities and rights.

I would like to conclude by sharing another set of values – as I mentioned, values really have been centre stage in recent Finnish library discussions. The up-dated values of my own library, the *Helsinki City Library*<sup>3</sup> are nearly the same as those of the *Public Library Council*: User orientation, Freedom of Speech, Education (in German *Bildung*), Responsibility and Equality. But then there is one more, a very important word which will be the last word of this article: Joy! 📖

## Information on the Author



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<sup>2</sup> A research project CityWorkLife by Aalto University, University of California, Santa Barbara and Santa Clara University, USA. <https://cityworklife.wordpress.com/about/> Contact persons in Finland, Kimmo Lapintie and Mina di Marino at the Aalto University.

<sup>3</sup> The whole strategy can be found under the name Library's outlook for 2015-2018, Helsinki City Library