





reading festival

This is an inspiring story. It's about multiculturalism, inclusion and community. It's about risk taking and thinking out of the box. On the face of it, this is the story of a badly needed refurbishment of an inner city library. But actually, and this is the inspiring bit, this story is about respect. Respect for people, their culture, their language, their diversity.

Handsworth Community Library is a 150 year old Victorian building. Kevin Duffy, Birmingham's Constituency Library Services Manager, is disarmingly frank when he tells us what the Library used to be like. 'The building was not fit for purpose. It was dark and dingy and seriously in need of repair. The roof leaked, the parquet floor bulged and it could be so uncomfortably hot in summer that someone called it a tropical paradise. What's more it seemed as though we did our best to hide our offering away, with limited access to loads of stuff and ethnic material in the furthest reaches. We had slow computers with the wrong software and a weird system to run them. The library was about as unwelcoming as it was possible to be – its only redeeming feature being the positive attitude of the staff.'

Not surprisingly, visits to the library were declining to about 45,000 annually. Today? Visits have risen nearly 300% and the numbers are growing. Beyond the mind bogglingly impressive statistics though, is a palpable buzz. When *Mix* visited, the library was busy and in full swing, with an enormous variety of ages and ethnicity. There was a mothers club meeting, teenagers downloading and studying (though not necessarily at the same time), kids listening to stories, books being read, withdrawn and returned – and some older guys reading the day's newspapers. Inspiring? And some.

It turns out that the reasons behind the unmitigated success that is Handsworth Community Library aren't all that complicated. Funding was raised and community buy-in was realised which took▶▶▶▶▶



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As Kevin Duffy and Community Librarian Joan Henderson explain, the skeleton that formed the brief is national policy. 'The national government agenda for public libraries is outlined in the DCMS document Framework for the Future, which describes the three strands of activity that libraries must engage in. These are: the promotion of reading and a love of literature, digital citizenship through access to electronic resources such as the internet and email, and activities to promote social cohesion. Some of this is the traditional stronghold of the public library. However the influence of IT and the role of the library as a meeting place for all sections of the community are of growing significance. Libraries provide neutral public spaces that are free, accessible to all and usually situated within the communities they serve – giving them a unique and pivotal role in the development of local and national government initiatives. They are places to access information, education, culture,

leisure, entertainment and a whole lot more. Libraries are increasingly developing services to get people into employment, improve their health, celebrate the cultures of their community...or just somewhere to hang out with friends.'

Once the brief was in place a number of design practices were invited to put forward their proposals. Imaginatively, one of those asked to pitch was John Hunt Associates. As John Hunt says, 'We describe ourselves as hospitality, leisure, retail and corporate designers. I'd never designed a library, or used one since who knows when – we must have been the wild card!

'The brief was surprising and unique – when I read it I thought I'd died and gone to heaven! The brief was very precise, without telling us what colours to use for example, yet at the same time there were plenty of clues. We didn't think we would win the project, so we went for broke. Our experience in the hotel sector influenced our proposal. You see, in the hotel business it's difficult to present in traditional ways because aside from the fact the clients work unsocial hours, they actually like talking and brainstorming with the designer. You get to know the personalities, the clues. And it's totally performance driven: hotels can't afford slippage and delivery means delivery. You're part of a marketing tool and it's all about the bottom line.

'So we read the brief carefully, looked for the clues and produced a brochure. It said what we felt we could contribute, not what we'd done – clients know that already – and explained the basic concepts. What we thought we could achieve and how, budgets, timescales. It gave them confidence, and they could take the brochure away, re-read it and discuss it – rather than trying to remember a haze of images from a whole load of designers. And we won!'

As we outlined earlier, after the importance of the brief a critical factor was strength of will. By this we mean a determination to go beyond ticking the boxes of a government document, a determination to do the right thing by the people of Handsworth – a community representing 43 nations, 35 languages and 14 faiths. A will to understand that there are sophisticated competitive market forces at play. A determination to demonstrate an unpatronising attitude to people who are clearly understood to be valued customers as opposed to a difficult demographic. The sheer will of the staff of the Birmingham library is to be applauded because we suspect that there were many less challenging, box ticking, options available.

Kevin Duffy sums up this determination to make a difference to the lives of the local community. 'If you give people a good facility with well trained staff and services ▶▶▶▶▶▶

case study



I mean all, internal surface finishes were specifically prepared to accommodate the lighting. It's used extensively in so many areas; to scene set the spaces, to profile the architectural detail, to create an environment full of drama, excitement, expectation and deliverance. We installed a separate and independent second layer of totally flexible manipulative suspended colour rendering lighting dedicated to profile 'the merchandise'. With 95% of all surface decoration and 70% of the shelving finished in RAL 9010, the whole library is just one big light box.

'The library is laid out in seven core groups, with well guided progressive positioning towards the furthest zone. Reception, Kidzone, Learning Zone, Community Studios, CD/Moving Image 'shop', Teenage Zone and Adult are all planned like a contemporary store. In-built flexibility offers the freedom to experiment with all manner of alternative arrangements. Spaces are quickly and easily prepared for special events which also allows the library to take advantage of lucrative opportunities. This mobility and management of space allows the library to turn around all or part of the space in less than 30 minutes – a critical design feature to support the vision of a community library.'

We started this piece by describing the project as an inspiring story. Everybody we met that was involved seemed genuinely moved by the difference the new Handsworth Community Library is making to ordinary people's lives. And that is inspiring ●

▶▶▶▶ that they can enjoy, then you are onto a winner. That's what I feel we have with the library. John Hunt Associates have brought us a long way from where we started, and have given us the confidence to take risks. We've got better at marketing ourselves, drawing down funding and moving the library service up the local political agenda because people like to be associated with success. JHA have given us a successful building that people enjoy, and it is the role of Joan, her staff and myself to make sure we treat people well when they come, develop services that they want and take a chance once in a while by trying something quirky. It's all about getting people through the door, borrowing more books, making more use of the computers and coming to more events. We are in competition with shops, bars, leisure centres, cinemas and so on.

'The most precious commodity we have is time, and it is up to us to make a visit to

the library more attractive than investing time elsewhere.'

The vision and imagination that elevates this project is evident everywhere in John Hunt's design scheme. Just as Kevin Duffy lists the retail and leisure competitors, the design delves deep into techniques used by skilful retailers and leisure operators. As John says, 'This is about marketing merchandise. It's no different from a branch of Waterstone's or Selfridges – it's got to be exciting. It's the same retail design philosophy as a department store that positions high end cosmetics as you come in the front door. Lots of libraries have the same lighting, same flooring, same shelves – and a sign telling you where you're supposed to be. We don't have signs, we use lighting to be inclusive, to ask people to come in and be welcomed. We actually spent a third of our budget on lighting.

'I think that lighting is the most important manipulative design tool. All, and

essential ingredients

Client:	• City of Birmingham Libraries
Design & Space Planning:	• John Hunt Associates 0121 454 2200
Main Contractor:	• BCC Urban Design/ Wates Partnership 0121 423 2323
Fit-Out:	• Point Eight 01384 238282
Furniture:	• Purves Contracts, Vitra, Senator International, BBI Business Interiors, Ikea Business
Flooring:	• Dalsouple, Forbo, Tarkett
Lighting:	• Luminaire UK 0121 766 1490
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