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# From Bodleian to Idea Stores: The Evolution of English Library Design

Rebecca K. Miller  
MSLS candidate  
School of Information and Library Science  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina, United States

Library Student Journal,  
January 2008

## Abstract

Library architecture, along with planning and design, is a significant consideration for librarians, architects, and city and institutional planners. Meaningful library architecture and planning has a history as old and rich as the very idea of libraries themselves, and can provide insight into the most dynamic library communities. This essay examines England's history of library architecture and what it reveals, using three specific institutions to document the evolution of library design, planning, and service within a single, national setting. Oxford University's Bodleian Library, the British Library, and the Idea Stores of London's Tower Hamlets Borough represent—respectively, the past, present, and future of library architecture and design in England. The complex tension between rich tradition and cutting-edge innovation within England's libraries and surrounding communities exposes itself through the changing nature of English library architecture, ultimately revealing the evolution of a national attitude concerning libraries and library service for the surrounding communities.

## Introduction

Meaningful library architecture and planning has a long and complex history, and has

the power to provide insight into the most dynamic library communities. There exists perhaps no better example of this phenomenon than the libraries of England; this country has a rich history of library architecture and continues to lead the way in library technology and innovation. Oxford University's Bodleian Library, the British Library, and the Idea Stores of London's Tower Hamlets Borough represent, respectively, the past, present, and future of library architecture and design in England. Through English library buildings, the complex tension between rich tradition and cutting-edge innovation of England's libraries and surrounding communities reveals itself, ultimately creating a portrait that details the evolution of a national attitude concerning libraries and library service.

## Design as a lens

A hot topic in the library world, discussion surrounding library buildings, and their designs and planning, appears everywhere. The December 2006 issue of *Library Journal* proclaims excitement about "The Year in Architecture" and includes a lengthy article on nearly 200 recent library building projects, while debates focusing on the increasingly non-physical, and electronic, nature of libraries ignite listservs and library school classrooms (Fox, p. 42). Library architecture, building, and design, it seems, all reveal much about the purpose and intent of physical library buildings and their planners. LaRue (2006) writes that "Every library is unique. Its facilities should and do reflect the specific circumstances and culture of the parent institution and community" (p. 22). Essentially, a library building represents a physical mission statement, tacitly disclosing a library's perceived or desired patronage, and its strategy for serving the needs of that community.

Indeed, a study of a library's building and design will tell the story of a particular library's role within a particular community. In this respect, the library and information profession is not unlike other groups that use architecture and building design to understand the role of an institution within its community. Church historians and other religious thinkers have long studied ecclesiastical architecture to better comprehend religious trends and the communities from which they grow. For example, White (2003) writes that evolving trends throughout the history of Roman Catholic worship expose themselves in architecture, as a new and different "image of liturgical space" replaces the "existing concepts" of liturgical architecture and worship (p. 2). Similarly, even the disinterested bystander, completely ignorant of architectural or religious knowledge, can appreciate the difference between a lavish, metropolitan Greek Orthodox sanctuary and a simple Society of Friends meeting house. This difference indicates the disparity between these two groups, their communal attitudes and traditions, the ways they worship. Colin St. John Wilson (1998), the principal architect for the new British Library building at St. Pancras in London, draws the relationship between a library building and "the cathedral" when he writes:

The cathedral ... is grounded in the sacred so that both form and pattern of use

are fused in the language of ritual. But there is one type of building which is profane yet in fulfilling its proper role touches the hem of the sacred: the great library.... The library, and what it houses embodies and protects the freedom and diversity of the human spirit in a way that borders on sacred. (p. 7)

Library buildings, then, are similar to church buildings, in that both library buildings and church buildings, philosophically, evoke a sense of vast communal knowledge that inherently transcends any one particular person or idea. However, more prosaically, library buildings are also similar to church buildings in that the structure and service design reveal nearly everything about the particular institution, as well as the surrounding community. They paint portraits of particular library communities and specific brands of librarianship. Library buildings assert the informational goals of various communities, while at the same time displaying a particular community's potential limitations or weaknesses. They simultaneously display the research and educational needs of a community and the library planners' hopes for meeting those needs. A powerful insight into communities and the role of the library within those communities, library architecture and design provides a lens through which one can view the complex relationship between library planners, library users, and the entire community. This lens of library architecture presents the perfect tool for analyzing trends, changes, and differences within, and among, communities.

Irwin (1966) writes that English libraries, particularly, "have their roots in the past, and it is these many-branched roots that ... are as important to contemporary developments as the hidden roots of a plant are to its visible blossoms" (p. 13). Indeed, this image of the English library as a blossoming entity indicates that the library communities inhabiting England represent the two-sided coin of ancient tradition and futuristic innovation. The cohabitation of these ideals suggests the complex history and current state of British libraries. However, the lens of library architecture and design essentially breaks down this complexity, making comprehensible the evolutionary track of English tradition to English innovation in libraries and their surrounding communities.

The lens of building design, then, clearly reveals the past, present, and future of English libraries' blossoming and evolution; a representative building from each of these three time segments exemplifies the incredibly revealing nature of library design within this singular national setting. Oxford University's Bodleian Library discloses the long story of library and educational tradition of England, while the British Library at St. Pancras, an ever evolving entity, provides the portrait of modern British library and research buildings. The concept behind the Idea Stores of London's Tower Hamlets Borough illuminates the way into an exciting future for the design, organization, and architecture of English public libraries. These three models of library design demystify and explain the past, present, and future of libraries and library communities within England. The evolution of English libraries mirrors

England's ever-changing information needs.

## **The Foundation: Oxford University's Bodleian Library Buildings**

England's long history of education, research, and libraries can be traced back to its two most well-known and prestigious learning institutions: the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Although both universities can claim a library collection and building by the mid-fourteenth century, Oxford University's Bodleian Library remains the classic representation of English education and English libraries. As Barber (1995) writes, the historic buildings of the Bodleian "are as well known to the tourists as the books and manuscripts inside are to the scholars who come, as do the tourists, from all over the world" (p. 1).



Inside Duke Humfrey's Library. Image copyright:  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

The Bodleian Library, as the main research library at Oxford University, includes a central site, nine other on-campus library buildings, and several off-campus storage

sites. The central site includes Duke Humfrey's Library, Old Schools Quadrangle, the Radcliffe Camera, and the Clarendon Building (Bodleian Library, 2006, 1). The other libraries at Oxford University, as Morgan (1980) describes, also “present a great variety ... antedating both the Bodleian and the invention of printing” (p. vii). However, it is the architecture and building design at this central site of the Bodleian Library, and more specifically that of Duke Humfrey's Library and the Old Bodleian, inside the Old Schools Quadrangle, that will serve as a lens for analyzing and understanding the heritage of English libraries.

In England, as in many other parts of the world, higher education and literacy closely accompany the maintenance and perpetuation of an ecclesiastical tradition. Oxford University remains part of this system, as it was “under the jurisdiction of the bishops of Lincoln in whose diocese it then was” prior to the fourteenth century (Gillam, 1988, p. 1). Indeed, the very first library, or repository, at Oxford University consisted of a large chest located within the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. It is fitting, then, that the large collection of books consisting of all types of scholarly works from the Middle Ages, donated to Oxford University in the 15th Century by Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, had a special library built for it over the University's new Divinity School.

Duke Humfrey's Library, as this room over the Divinity School has come to be known, is quite literally built on a religious foundation. Although the architecture of Duke Humfrey's Library itself remains of primary significance to a discussion revolving around the “past” of English library design, it would be neglectful to overlook the ecclesiastical foundation upon which this Library was constructed, both physically, as well as symbolically. According to Gillam (1988), funding for construction was tight, slow, and just generally hard to come by. The construction was finally completed when, in 1478, Bishop of London Thomas Kempe donated a large amount of money. Gillam likens this act to “that of Solomon with the Temple at Jerusalem” (p. 17). At any rate, this turn of events ensured that the Divinity School's interior design would include homage to various leaders of the Church of England, including Bishop Thomas Kempe, along with depictions of other prominent figures from the Bible and Christianity.

Although Duke Humfrey's Library rests atop this foundation of religious tradition, it was also affected by Thomas Kempe's involvement with the construction of the Divinity School. In the Divinity School, Kempe inserted “a fine vaulted ceiling, contemporary with that at St. George's Chapel, Windsor” (Barber, 1995, p. 5). Because of this, the floor of Duke Humfrey's Library was raised, and the windows made higher; Barber also reports that the room “drew its proportions from those of the Divinity School below ... it also had two large and light mullioned end-windows” (p. 6). Originally, the Library came equipped with eight-foot long reading desks and “true, high lecterns at which the reader stood to read” (Barber, 1995, p. 6). This description of the original design of Duke Humfrey's Library reveals the library's

heavy dependence on and influence of the Church; likewise, it discloses the nature of, purpose of, and attitude toward, books, learning, and libraries in 15th century England.



Tower of Five Orders, Old Bodleian Library.  
Image copyright: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

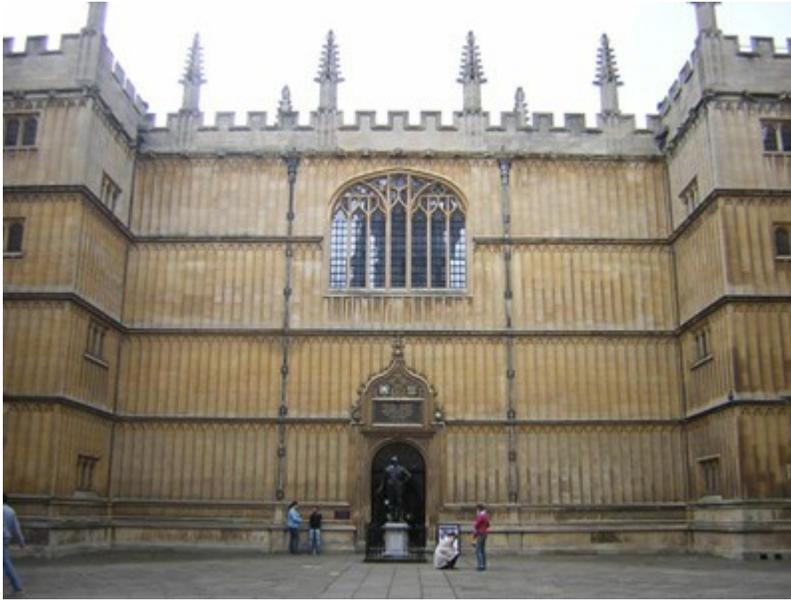
The large lecterns and desks indicate the cumbersome physique of the medieval book—with their parchment pages and stiff binding—and the identities of those who would be expected to read such books. Barber (1995) suggests that the Library and its books, although open to nearly anyone who could walk in, were being used at this time mainly by “bibliophiles and scholars,” who were, of course, men (p. 7). The books were chained such that a single student could keep “three or four others away on account of the books being chained so closely together” (Barber, p. 6). This portrait of the original Duke Humfrey’s Library building, and its design, suggests that early English libraries, and particularly those at Oxford University, had a very closely tie to the Church and Government, and that their users were, in actuality, a select few.

Although the 15th century Duke Humfrey's Library appears closed off and not very welcoming, Philip (1983) adds a different perspective of the early, traditional English library with a description of the Old Bodleian from the early eighteenth century:

The Bodleian was one of the very few ... libraries in Europe to which the wandering scholar or connoisseur could get access.... [It would] certainly have compared favourably with anything the wandering scholar might have seen in the course of his travels in northern Europe." (p. 70)

Philip finds this appraisal of the Old Bodleian and its accessibility from a 1710 letter written by a German scholar, Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach. The letter, reproduced in Philip's book, reveals that the library user must ask for a pass to see anything "except what the assistant librarians choose to show for an honorarium" (p. 70). This collection consisted of a wide variety of scholarly works and literature, including Latin, Greek, French, and Italian books, spanning every subject from medicine to philosophy. The letter continues, expressing von Uffenbach's surprise that "every moment brings fresh spectators ... amongst them, peasants and womenfolk, who gaze at the library as a cow might gaze at a new gate" (p.70).

These spectators were for some reason drawn to the Old Bodleian Library, constructed within the Old Schools Quadrangle in 1619. Since many were described as peasants, female, and either disinterested in or completely ignorant of the academic significance of the Library, something else had to be drawing such attention. It was, of course, the building itself and the statement of importance that it made, not just to readers, but to the entire surrounding community. With its Tower of the Five Orders of Architecture, representing Doric, Ionic, Tuscan, Corinthian, and Composite classical styles, the Quadrangle surrounding the Bodleian remains an impressive sight. D. R. Howlett (2002) describes it poetically: "The stones of the Bodleian Library ... have no voice, yet speak" (p.55).



Inside Old School's Quadrangle, Old Bodleian Library. Photo courtesy of Margaret Keller

This library and its surrounding Quadrangle speak through the Library's stone edifice—the large, symmetrical windows surrounding the Quadrangle, the imposing archways, and the Latin etchings above the doorways. The statue of James I, giving copies of his writings to representations of Fame and the University, contributes to this overall feeling of great academic importance and intimidation. The large, cold structure inspires a feeling of awe, wonderment, and, possibly, trepidation. In his writings on the new British Library building, Wilson (1998) theorizes that library buildings should participate in the classical idea “of a ‘showing forth’ of the inner significance of a place of an institution” (p. 28); the outer, stone rendering of the Bodleian Library certainly accomplishes this showing forth.

Philip (1983) explains that the books inside the Old Bodleian had to be specially ordered by users, and “were not, like the chained folio books in Duke Humfrey's Library ... immediately available to readers” (p. 71). Although the books at Duke Humfrey's Library were “immediately available,” the architecture, interior layout, and furnishings of this Library seems to have discouraged use, though it provided an impressive and attractive visual sight. Likewise, the Old Bodleian building, in its striking design and decoration, drew so many spectators that it had to winnow out the chaff of curious onlookers from its preferred users: male scholars from the top tier of society.

This tension between architectural design, accessibility, and use becomes noticeable with these two examples of early English libraries. Grand cathedral-like designs seem to have been the trend, revealing a certain attitude about early English libraries: they hold great knowledge, and are available to the deserving and discerning reader,

researcher, or scholar. However, it is clear that these libraries do not welcome everyone and serve as indicators of major class distinction; that persons of the lower classes, and women, are described as cow-like in their interest in the Old Bodleian Library supports this idea.

This early presence of English libraries, and their highly exclusive nature, evolved throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, opening itself to new users and new concepts of information. Although many libraries and their buildings followed this evolutionary track, the example of the new British Library at St. Pancras, and its conscious and thoughtful design, epitomizes the arrival of the English library at a new period in its evolution and growth.

## **Building up: Modernity and The British Library at St. Pancras**

The British Library at St. Pancras appears to be the very epitome of modernity, in its sleek outward appearance and adornments of modern artwork. Its collection is a result of its function as a bridge between the past and present—it houses, for example, the only surviving manuscript copy of Beowulf alongside original recordings from The Beatles. It is, however, the physical housing of the collection, the building that surrounds this widely varied collection, that places the British Library at St. Pancras at the present point along England's evolutionary track of libraries.

When Parliament passed The British Library Act in 1972, it set into motion a process that saw the completion of the new British Library building in 1999. As a national library, this new library combined several, previously independent, libraries. These libraries include: the library departments from the British Museum, the National Central Library, the National Lending Library for Science and Technology, the British National Bibliography, and the Office for Scientific and Technical Information, along with several others added later. This combination of libraries under the auspices of one, national library makes the British Library an impressive example of how the Government, as well as the people it represents, views the nation's information needs and desires. The British Library building itself, is a powerful and modern symbol of a nation's knowledge and information resources, yet still remains grounded in its proud British and, more specifically, English, heritage.



The British Library. Photo courtesy of Sarah Albright

“We live in a time of fleeting immediacies,” writes Richard MacCormac, “the latest images are soon relegated to the past” (cited in Stonehouse & Stromberg, 2004, p. xii). He asks, “How does the British Library engage our attention...in such a volatile environment?” (p. xii). This notion of wrestling with the tension between current trend and enduring significance applies not just to the British Library building, but to everything that it represents—a culmination of national identity and heritage through a centralization of a nation’s information resources.

For Stonehouse and Stromberg (2004), the British Library building meets its architectural and symbolic potential by being “rooted in a tradition of architectural research into the building type and in a belief in architecture as a practical art grounded in use” (p. xv). The library building, then, represents an outward, physical analysis of what is going on inside the library: wonderful, national treasures made accessible for the people of England and the United Kingdom. As Lang notes, “a national library is central to any country’s awareness of itself ... it can be regarded as the memory of the nation” (cited in Stonehouse & Stromberg, 2004, p. xxi). Because of this responsibility to aid in its country’s current understanding of itself, it remains essential to the mission and purpose of the Library that the building appears open and

accessible to the people.

In this sense, the British Library's architectural design signifies more than just a façade of symbolism; the library is actually designed to welcome visitors, researchers, and readers, and encourage them to make use of the material within the library. The first indication of this intent came with the decision of where the new British Library was to be constructed. Bloomsbury Square, near the British Museum, was initially selected as the site; however, after twelve years of planning and researching, city and library leaders determined that this area would not work for a library of this magnitude.

The site at St. Pancras, the next and eventually successful site for the British Library, offered advantages over the original site. The relocation to the new site was approved in 1978, allowing room for the building to grow past the first stage of construction, something the original site could not do. Additionally, Wilson (1998) notes that "if the current intention to site the Channel Tunnel Terminal at St. Pancras were to be carried out ... then the Library would be the first building to greet the visitor and the Piazza ... [would] become the threshold to and from Europe" (p. 14). This international terminal has become a reality, and is due to open for passenger service on November 14, 2007 (Transport projects in London, 2007, p 1).



The British Library. Photo courtesy of Sarah Albright

Before the building was even constructed it was already being conceived as a symbol of national heritage and as a vessel of knowledge concerning that national heritage. The actual construction of the British Library building served to increase this attitude

and perception among designers and users; Wilson (1998) reports that the Library was designed using architectural principles from the 19th century English Free School, which was “generated in response to the need for public buildings of increasing complexity for every type” and “lay in the freedom of Gothic form” (p. 15–16). Wilson suggests that the use of English Free School design principles was especially appropriate for the British Library project, as the School represents “the first time a major architectural innovation of international impact was generated from Britain” (p. 16). Just as the Duke Humfrey’s Library at Oxford’s Bodleian central site, in its cathedral-like design, pays architectural homage to its ecclesiastical roots, the British Library rises Venus-like out of a sea of inherently British ideas and national heritage.

To be sure, Wilson (1998) and his architects expanded upon this tradition by adding “a repertoire of sensuous materials that are particularly responsive to human presence and touch—leather, marble, wood, and bronze,” making concrete his belief that “we touch, hear, and smell a building as we see it” (p. 18). From this description it is clear that from the early stages of its inception the British Library was designed for the dual purpose of representing the people of Britain and being open to serving their needs. The large body of literature surrounding the design and creation of the new British Library emphatically purports that this dual purpose can be found in even the smallest detail of the Library; however, an analysis of merely a few, larger features will sufficiently prove this point.

One of the first, more noticeable features of the new British Library is its outward appearance. Day (1994) writes that the English reporter Marcus Binney “found the most striking exterior feature to be the colourful trim: British racing red ... and Fiat Amazon green” (p. 26). Similarly, the asymmetry of the building, and its edgy appearance of stacked and terraced buildings, avoids what Dormer calls “the dull, bureaucratic solution” of many public buildings (cited in Day, 1994, p. 27). The building itself is not imposing; neither is it staid or usual. Indeed, the building’s strikingly modern appearance, known to be steeped in architectural tradition of the English Free School, suggests immediately that this building, and whatever is on the inside, is important and not at all ordinary.



The King's Library collection and display at the British Library. Photo courtesy of Sarah Albright

Interestingly enough, journalist Peter Dormer's impression is that the entrance hall of the British Library is like a secular cathedral (cited in [Day, 1994, p. 27](#)). This comparison between libraries and cathedrals, seen in the design of the older library buildings at Oxford, is also present in Wilson's ideas about library design. He writes that "building a great library has always been (next to a cathedral!) the most haunting of ambitions" (1998, p. 7). His belief that architecture for a great library compares with that of a great cathedral is apparent in his design for the new British Library. However, this cathedral-like quality differs from that of the older libraries at Oxford; Dormer's impression includes a description of the atmosphere as both dignified and lively ([p. 27](#)). It is this latter quality that separates the British Library, and its cathedral-like entryway, from the older libraries. The vibrancy and openness of the entrance hall supplements its dignity, so that no visitor should feel overwhelmed or intimidated, but rather welcomed into a vault of knowledge.

Inside the library, the King's Library takes on what Wilson (1998) calls a true embodiment of the British Library's "symbolic role" ([p. 28](#)). The books on display here, in the main part of the Library, include a gift of King George III. Wilson (1998) remarks that part of the condition of this gift is that the books with their "beautiful leather and vellum bindings ... be on show to the general public and not just the scholars" ([p. 28](#)). Wilson argues that it is the presentation of these books, in a six-

story high glass structure, that best reveals how the symbolism of the structure remains “at one with the use” of the collection (p. 30). With this description, Wilson indicates that the exhibition acts as a work of art, but is also actively used by researchers and readers in the Rare Book Room.

This last feature, the King’s Library, again touches on the idea of “art grounded in use” (Stonehouse & Stromberg, 2004, p. xv). The structure and exhibition, like the British Library itself, is deeply symbolic, yet deeply committed to being welcoming and useful. While the older library buildings at Oxford are also deeply symbolic, they do not prioritize a commitment to use or openness. This new element of the British Library signifies not only a new facet of architectural evolution, but also change in the overall British attitude toward libraries and information. Libraries are no longer for the select few, and the library buildings proclaim this as they act as outreach tools in their aesthetic design and encouraging, welcoming qualities.

The new British Library building, although providing the perfect lens for analyzing a modern perspective on English libraries and English attitudes surrounding library use and significance, does not represent what lies at the next station on the evolutionary track of English libraries. There exists a relevant, in-progress example from the very cutting edge of English libraries that gives a hint of where libraries and information services are heading in England. This example, the brand-new Idea Stores of London’s Tower Hamlets Borough, and their building designs, reveal an entirely new understanding of information needs and library outreach in the present, and indeed in the future, of English libraries.

## **Under construction: The Idea Stores of Tower Hamlets**

Although the Bodleian Library and the British Library both reveal much about the evolution of libraries and their surrounding communities in England, it is perhaps the Idea Stores of London and their unique architectural designs that reveal the most about its community and the library’s role within that community. While the Bodleian Library and the British Library provide clear examples of the evolutionary intertwining of tradition and innovation in UK libraries, the Tower Hamlets Idea Stores and their unique building design completely re-imagine the concept of libraries and library service in response to the evolving needs of the surrounding community.

McCabe (2000), representing one voice within the larger body of current literature on library design, uses several key words to describe good public library design: contemporary, progressive, and state of the art. He writes that “the development of library building concepts should be evolutionary with new designs and features appearing as the needs of the people they serve change” (p. 3). In terms of “library building concepts,” both the Bodleian Library and the new British Library have

unique features, but are ultimately recognizable as library buildings. The Tower Hamlets Idea Stores, however, respond to McCabe's call for evolution in library buildings as a response to the community's changing needs.

The inception of the Idea Stores occurred in the London borough of Tower Hamlets; residents told the Tower Hamlets Council that "they would like to see libraries located where they can get to them more easily and do more than borrow books while they're there" (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2006, 3). This vague notion about improving library services in Tower Hamlets turned into a complete transformation of public libraries for this area, in response to the community's needs. Heather Wills (2006), former Idea Stores Program Director, reported in a presentation that for the Council to respond to the community's needs, the Council needed to discover who the community was and what it really needed.



Exterior of Idea Store Chrisp Street in Tower Hamlets Borough, London. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Brown

The borough has a population of about 200,000, with nearly one third being Bangladeshi and half of the entire Tower Hamlets community consisting of ethnic minorities. Research also showed that less than a third of the borough had access to the internet, and that 35% of the community had basic adult literacy needs (Wills, 2006). With these statistics, the Tower Hamlets Council equipped itself to create new public libraries that will serve its specific community. Their research also implied that, for public libraries to really serve this community, six key areas needed to change: library locations needs to be more convenient, barriers to learning need to be reduced, services need to be designed around contemporary lifestyle, the image of a library needs to attract new customers, library technology should be updated, and

other information and educational activities should be seamlessly integrated (Wills, 2006). The Idea Stores—of which four currently exist, with three more in planning stages—address these six areas through dynamic library design unlike anything previously seen in England’s libraries.

The Idea Stores represent a forward-thinking brand of architecture and building design that creates an outlook and future goal for public libraries, and perhaps all libraries, in England. While the Bodleian and British Libraries seem to almost straddle past and present traditions and innovations in information needs and library services, the Idea Stores propel the idea of libraries and librarianship directly into the new millennium, attempting to tap into areas of virtually unexplored potential for libraries as community resources. With their mission being “to enable everyone to fulfill their promise,” Idea Stores also enable the system of British libraries to fulfill its promise by providing information, education, and library services to communities that have been underserved by the traditional idea of a British library, whether public or institutional (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2006, 8).

Although public libraries have existed in England since the 1850 Public Libraries Act, the London Idea Stores completely renew the idea of such an institution. “Using a revolutionary approach developed through a partnership” between city government and city schools, the planning behind Idea Stores makes sure that “each [building] has a distinctive look designed to become synonymous with quality, good service, and fun” (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2006, 2). Indeed, this distinctive look is intended to ensure that “these buildings are more than just a library or a place of learning” by looking completely modern and completely unlike the traditional idea of a library building (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 3). By constructing the building to look less like a traditional library, planners behind the Idea Stores essentially make each Idea Store less intimidating, less full of preconceived notions about libraries, and therefore more accessible and ultimately more attractive to an entirely new demographic. This idea of “welcoming-ness,” also included within the planning for the British Library building, comes in an entirely different form for the Idea Store.

The buildings are made ultra-accessible through location and design. Each Idea Store is located in a shopping area, or other such area that a person would need to visit regularly. Logically following suit, the buildings themselves are attractive and, as the name would suggest, look much like retail stores. Once inside, the customer will notice traditional library services, enclosed in modern facilities that also include exhibition spaces, music performance spaces, and cafes. Certainly, this unique inward and outward design accomplishes Tower Hamlet Council’s goal of addressing accessible library location and traditional barriers to learning, designing services around the modern person’s lifestyle, and bringing in new customers, especially younger people.

Besides the look of the building and interior, each Idea Store also brings a distinctive

interior design to house its books, including everything from popular reading material to business reference and beyond, as well as other information services. The state of the art technology available at each Idea Store includes areas for free access to the internet, areas for listening to CD's and DVD's, and areas for printing, photocopying, and faxing. With these amenities, the Idea Stores really act as community hubs for all sorts of information and education related activities; indeed, the Idea Stores create a library reality where “no one needs to feel inhibited about entering ... everybody can feel they belong there” (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2006, 5).

Contributing to this overall sense of inclusion emanating from the Idea Stores, the staffing of the Idea Stores marks the final removal of any sort of impediment in the form of class, racial, or gender distinction. Wills (2006) notes that persons from within, and representative of, the community were selected for visible, customer service roles at the Idea Stores; along these lines, persons fulfilling traditional “librarian” roles took on a more behind-the-scenes role. The removal of the intimidation factor of the librarian figure, coupled with the visible presence of peers from throughout the community, represents a complete turnaround from the days of the early English library. The Bodleian Library's obvious preference for, and service to, the top echelon of society gives way to the Idea Stores' warm reception of and invitation to all community members.

With their distinctive building and service design, the Idea Stores respond directly to a specific community population, and that population's needs, in a completely new fashion. Wills reports that the impact of the Idea Stores, in the areas in which they are already functioning, is that of complete community regeneration—they stimulate the local shopping economy, promote the local culture, help community members develop employable skills, and ultimately raise the profile of the Tower Hamlets borough. This result of the Idea Stores' existence reveals the success of the Idea Store design; the Tower Hamlets Council designed a type of library building, and system of library service, that responded directly to a specific community's needs.

The distinctive building and interior design of the London Idea Stores provides the perfect lens through which one can view the latest evolutionary change and development occurring in English libraries. The Idea Store design reveals particular attention to community demographics and community needs; the design, in turn, reveals the Idea Store planners' true devotion to fulfilling the Tower Hamlets community's specific information and educational needs. Aesthetics, accessibility, and mission come together in the Idea Store design in a perfect representation of Raymond Irwin's reflection that English libraries should remain rooted in a traditional commitment to education and information, but blossom, and branch out in any way possible, to meet a contemporary community's needs.

## **Conclusion: Our world, ourselves, our place**

The three types of libraries discussed in this paper—institutional, national, and public—are wildly varied; however, each one of them represents a snapshot in time along the evolutionary track of the English idea of libraries, librarianship, and information. From the very beginning of English libraries to England's newest library creations, the evolution of library buildings in this country reveals much more than how libraries serve their particular communities: this evolution reveals a country's true devotion to reading, research, and learning. The long and complex evolution of English libraries and librarianship, spanning more than 700 years, reveals a country's very real regard of and commitment to information and education.

The past, present, and future of English libraries, analyzed through the buildings and design of Oxford's Bodleian Library, London's British Library, and Tower Hamlet's Idea Stores, presents the portrait of a country dedicated to perpetuation and improvement of libraries and library services. It seems that the country, as most countries have, has come a long way in its attitude toward information, education, and community service. The place of the library in the community, to return to the ecclesiastical metaphor, has moved from a sanctuary for the high priests of the academic world to an information refuge for all, even reaching out to lay people. Gone is the image of the "cow-like" peasant or woman standing at the gate of the imposing, dazzling library; English libraries, like the Idea Stores, use their buildings to actually include and encourage such minority populations.

Library mission and library architecture, then, are concepts that must, and ultimately do, go hand in hand. In his introduction to *The Architecture of the British Library at St. Pancras*, Stonehouse(2004) theorizes that the new British Library building "is rooted in a belief that architecture can enable us to make sense of our world and of ourselves and of our place in that world" (p. xv). Essentially, is this not also the mission of all libraries? And does this idea not also relate to Colin St. John Wilson's (1998) belief that the library "touches the hem of the sacred ... [embodying] the freedom and diversity of the human spirit" (p. 7)? Indeed, the Bodleian Library buildings, the British Library, and the Idea Stores all, in their own way, affirmatively and resoundingly answer these questions. Although the libraries' immediate purposes, and relationships to the surrounding communities, may differ, the architecture and design of each of these library buildings represents an attempt of the English library to provide just this sort of enablement. The architecture of each of these buildings is only one factor of many that reveals how the English library system, as a whole and at the cellular level, has adapted and evolved in an attempt to successfully meet this very worthy, ultimate goal of human empowerment.

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## **Author's Bio**

Rebecca Miller is completing her MSLS at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She was awarded the 2006 Baker and Taylor Scholarship to attend Libraries and Librarianship: Past, Present, and Future, a seminar offered in May 2006 at Oxford University through UNC's School of Information and Library Science. This essay is the result of her experiences in, and discovered love for, English libraries. Special thanks to Dr. Deborah Barreau for facilitating the seminar and for guidance with this paper.

[Go to Top](#)