

**How has the function of public libraries changed,
and what is the impact on library design in Dublin today?**

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1. Introduction

In recent years I have noticed several deep renovations or library rebuilds in Dublin that suggest something more than a building rewire or modifications for accessibility. Several very large libraries have been built or are in planning, and the size of libraries seems to have grown. In addition, the atmosphere has certainly changed from a hushed space to a rather bustling environment with diverse activity. Even a cursory visit to a modern public library reveals a space which offers far more than just books and daily newspapers – the notice board advertises local arts festivals, events and community education taking place at the library. In Ireland there has been more and more investment lately, with a further €25 million announced by the Minister for Rural and Community Development in 2023 to build 12 new libraries, and several others being developed in Dublin. Will all these buildings work well for their communities? A deeper investigation and better understanding of the functionality of the modern library and its very specific design needs will provide a more practical and workable design for the community. Solid design research is essential to this process – this investigation has sharpened my design research skills for this or similar designs which may come my way. It will afford the necessary research for others in the field to provide for a more workable library design.

2. Research Aims and Objectives

My research question is: *How has the function of public libraries changed, and what is the impact on library design in Dublin today?* I do not intend to examine historical design, but rather modern library design. I have investigated what these changed functions are, what influenced these decisions, and how they have changed public library design in Dublin. I have read and evaluated some influential literature on library function and design, which has influenced today's library design, and become familiar with the overall library environment. Using my visual skills and the ability as an interior architect to assess design, I have investigated what a library needs, what works in the library space according to librarians, and what a sound library interior design is. In Ireland, there is much written from the perspective of the civil servant or the librarian on library function, but little is written on the design of their interiors. I hope that the deep understanding I have gained from my research, and the comparative nature of my case-studies, will add a layer to the literature already on offer. This dissertation argues that the library function changed because the government directed libraries to assume a role in delivering community engagement. This changed function has impacted design, especially regarding allowing for flexibility, community space, and where the building is located.

3. Literature Review

At a lecture in 2009 celebrating 125 years of a continuous public library service in Dublin, City Librarian Deirdre Ellis-King reminded the audience that the origins of the library system in Dublin “emerged not from government decision, national or local, but from the decision of Dublin’s citizens, themselves, at a particular point in time” (Ellis-King, 2009). That point in time, 1883, saw extreme poverty, low levels of education, and high rates of illiteracy. Against this backdrop, the ratepayers of Dublin agreed to fund a library service, which was mainly seen as an educational tool that would assist in economic progress. Though this function has not been lost, libraries have evolved and changed.

From the late 20th century, the Irish government became involved in library function. The current literature points to several significant changes. Peter Brophy’s *Libraries in the 21st Century* explores the evolving role of libraries in modern life and seeks to understand what a successful library should be in the Information Age. He states:

Libraries are changing. Many changes are driven by technology, but others are responses to societal opportunities and governmental pressures or are a result of deliberate attempts to reposition library services in relation to those serving similar needs. (Brophy, 2007, p. 4).

He thus identifies some of those changes as being influenced by government, and outlines among those changed functions as the establishment of cultural identity and community, the provision of social space and safe haven, and life-long learning.

The Metric Handbook is another influential text in the literature, still much used by architects. In the latest edition published in 2008, there is a chapter dedicated to library design by architect Brian Edwards, which discusses modern library function, layout, and zoning, including dedicated quiet spaces, furniture, technology, and schedule of accommodation. It states that libraries are “no longer simply familiar repositories for books” (Edwards, 2008, p. 256), and it cites that the modern space has abandoned the “sterile silent world of the typical library” (Edwards, 2008, p. 256). It acknowledges that libraries have taken on many new functions, often at the central government’s request, and have tended to get bigger over time. It sees the modern library as a space for reflection, a place for making contact and meeting others, an access point for local services, and a place to help cement a community together. *The Metric Handbook* also notes a growing interest in public cultural buildings generally, which encourage the public to see libraries as “buildings to visit in their own right rather than merely providing a desk from which to borrow a book” (Edwards, 2008, p. 258).

Both texts also discuss a new type of library that was beginning to emerge at the turn of the 21st century, now commonly called a flagship library. According to Brophy the public library is seen by both architects and the public as an exciting public space. He cites Peckham library in London is an early example which was indeed heralded in many newspaper and design magazines (Figure 2). Its brief called for a building of architectural merit which could bring prestige to the borough and engender a sense of ownership and pride for the building by local people. It won the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2000.

A literature review cannot ignore the many government documents that have also influenced modern library design. Ireland’s libraries follow the European model, and this can be seen in the references of government papers on libraries. In the 1990s, following a review highlighting the lack of clarity about the role of the modern library, the Department of the Environment, Community, and Local Government (DECLG)



Figure 1: One of Dublin’s first libraries - Thomas Street Library, 1887. Photo, Dublin Civic Trust

took a more active role in directing the library service. A series of national library strategies was published, providing a framework to modernise the public library service to agreed standards and develop it to standards typical of other European Union countries. These strategies have been embedded in subsequent local authority Library Development Plans. The strategies and plans clearly state what the changing function of the library service is, and Chapter 5 will analyse where this has changed library design. In the first government strategy for libraries published in 1998, *Branching Out, A Strategy for Public Libraries*, it can be explicitly seen that the function of public libraries is

changing: The first function is, just as it was in 1883, economic: “...Ireland’s network of public libraries will work with the government to build Ireland’s economic revival and future stability” (DECLG, 1998). To this is added two new functions: social and cultural. A whole new emphasis is put on public libraries building communities, being a meeting place for community and being agents for cultural development, cultural identity and a promotor of local and national culture. Libraries were now officially the frontline service of local authorities in leading community engagement, in line with changing policy for the councils. They were seen as having huge potential to help deliver government objectives.

Furthermore, an official benchmarking for libraries was introduced in 2015 (DECLG, 2015) which had some specific guidelines for the design of libraries, including minimum space in new branches. It emphasises that new libraries should benefit urban regeneration. It also specifies that each new library must have a multifunctional meeting, event and study space, be accessible, be centrally and prominently located and be at street level.

In the Library Development Plans published by all councils after 1998 following central government involvement, we can see the breathtaking number of programmes delivered including many public events. For example, South Dublin County Council runs the Red Line Book Festival, delivers the Creative Ireland Programme, takes part in Seachtain na Gaeilge, Engineers Week, Science Week, and its own Science Festival. It offers classes in animation, coding, photography, new technologies, crafting and creative writing. It has 3D printing workshops, a studio for recording music and podcasts, book clubs for all ages and many children’s events. All its branches have children’s zones, young adult zones, computer facilities, and parent and toddler sessions. Likewise in Dublin City Council Library Development Plans we can see a similar offering in addition to several artist residences and the UNESCO Creative City Programme which is part of an international series of events. A recent Plan specifically references the library spaces as follows:

...changing to become a multi-purpose community facility that contribute to place-making and community connection, providing a space for creativity and participation, where people come together to share ideas and create new knowledge. (Dublin City Council, 2019).

From the literature I saw a number of themes clearly emerge: library functions has changed, and that change has largely been dictated by government policy as delivered by the councils. The new functionality points to more community engagement, events, cultural activity and life-long learning. An obvious supposition might have been that this function change had led to libraries increasing in size and/or a change in the schedule of accommodation, but this was not always the case in my research. Two types of libraries are described in the Dublin area: the standard branch public library and the county or “flagship” Library. The literature also points to the modern library being a pleasing, inviting space situated prominently in its locality. The flagship library takes this a step further and is a showcase building. Both are represented in Dublin and are represented in my case studies.



Figure 2: Peckham Library, London, aLL Design 1999. A flagship library. Photo: RIBA

4. Methodology

The initial pilot research produced varied results, and the findings were more complex than expected. For this reason, a mixed methodology research approach was undertaken, as according to Denscombe (2017), this approach capitalises on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods and gives a more comprehensive understanding of the findings. Specifically, I conducted interviews and wrote case studies informed by field research. Field research was necessary as online imagery doesn’t always give the detail re-quired for a case study (Figure 3), and published photographs are often stylised. Qualitative insights from librarians currently working in Dublin public libraries gave the research a perspective from those who best understand libraries. Results were gathered using key words and presented in clear pie charts and tables. The interviews were open which encouraged the librarians to discuss their perspective on the question “How do you think the changing function of libraries has changed library design”. Collecting quantitative data through case studies and field research helped me identify patterns commonly mentioned by librarians or frequently observed during site visits. See Figure 4 for the Plan of Work Timeframe.



Figure 3: Ballyroan Library, Dublin. ArchDaily 2013. Published in ArchDaily. Photo Paul Tierney.

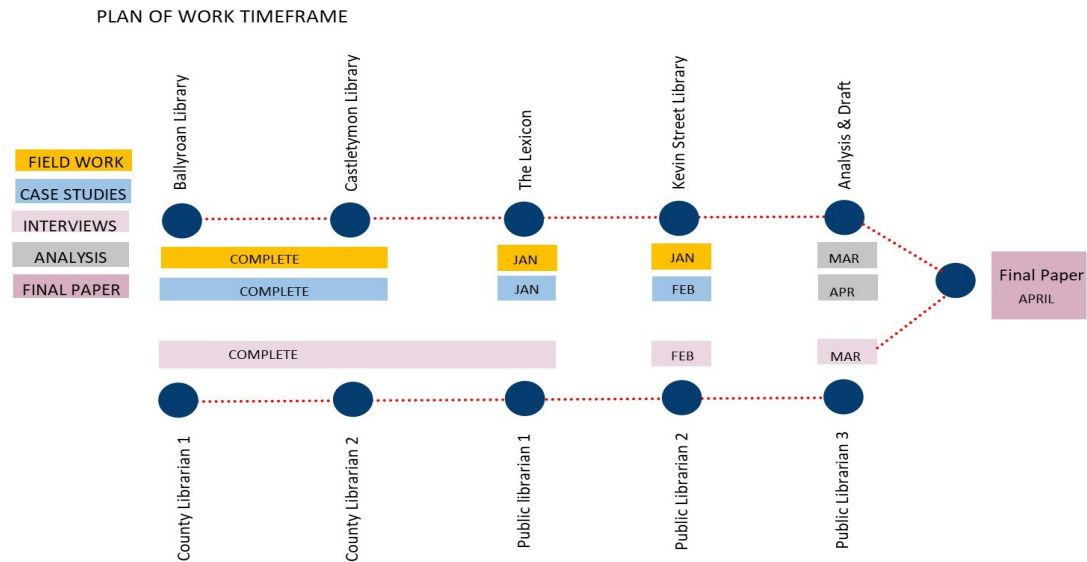


Figure 4: Plan of Work Timeframe

The following libraries are used as case studies:

	Library	Type	Council	Year Built	Size	Replacing
7.1	Castletymon Library	Small	South Dublin County Council	2021	500 sqm	1912 Carnegie Library
7.2	Ballyroan Library	Large	South Dublin County Council	2013	1500 sqm	1980s Library
7.3	dlr Lexicon	Flagship	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Council Council	2014	6326 sqm	1980s Library

Due to time constraints and word restrictions I have limited these case studies to two councils. These three libraries are a small representative selection of three different type of libraries typically found in the Dublin area: Two ordinary public libraries and one flagship library. All follow their council’s Library Development Plans and each library serves its community.

In regard to ethical considerations: librarians were sent a consent form before the interview, with the option of withdrawing consent at any time. Findings from interviews are anonymised in the research so librarians would feel they could speak freely, and permission was sought to record the interviews on Teams. Lastly, no photography taken in the libraries has identifiable people included.

5. Analysis and Communication of Findings

The primary method of research was interviewing librarians. The interviews were informal and largely unstructured. All the librarians have worked in several libraries in the Dublin area, and two are County Librarians who deliver libraries on behalf of their councils. I was interested to learn if the librarians agreed with the literature and if they could cast light on the contradictions that emerged early in the research.

Both the literature and the librarians are broadly in agreement about how and why libraries' functions have changed. The government saw an opportunity for libraries to help deliver strategies regarding community development, establishing cultural identity, and providing social space and life-long learning. Librarians hone in on "community", where **"community" = a space for people to gather to engage in events, cultural activities, meetings, or classes.** Though these interviews are subjective by nature, they added depth and nuance to the literature while revealing new insights.

Even before interviews were complete, common patterns began to emerge: All agreed library functions have changed, and the most common design change cited by librarians is not size, as had been expected, but flexibility of space. In the initial research and field work, it could be seen, for example, that most of the furnishing, including book stacks, use castors, allowing for flexible use of zones as the furniture can be moved. Some contradictory findings also emerged – for instance, not all new libraries have a dedicated event space, despite government benchmarks and the number of events on offer. The interviews helped cast a light on these contradictions and the constraints libraries have when choosing to renovate or build. It can be seen that no two libraries are treated equally, and councils deal with very different demographics from one library to another, which can change over a short period.

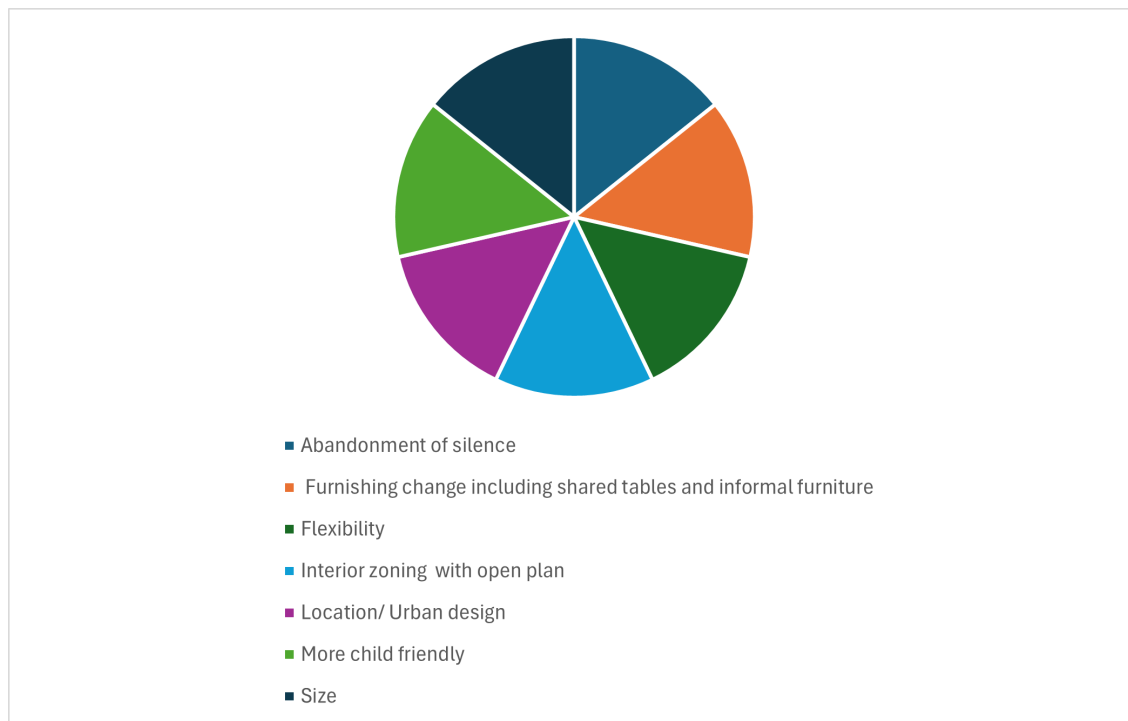


Figure 5: Impact of changed function on design, according to the literature

In Figure 5 we can see what the literature says about the impact of changed library function on design.

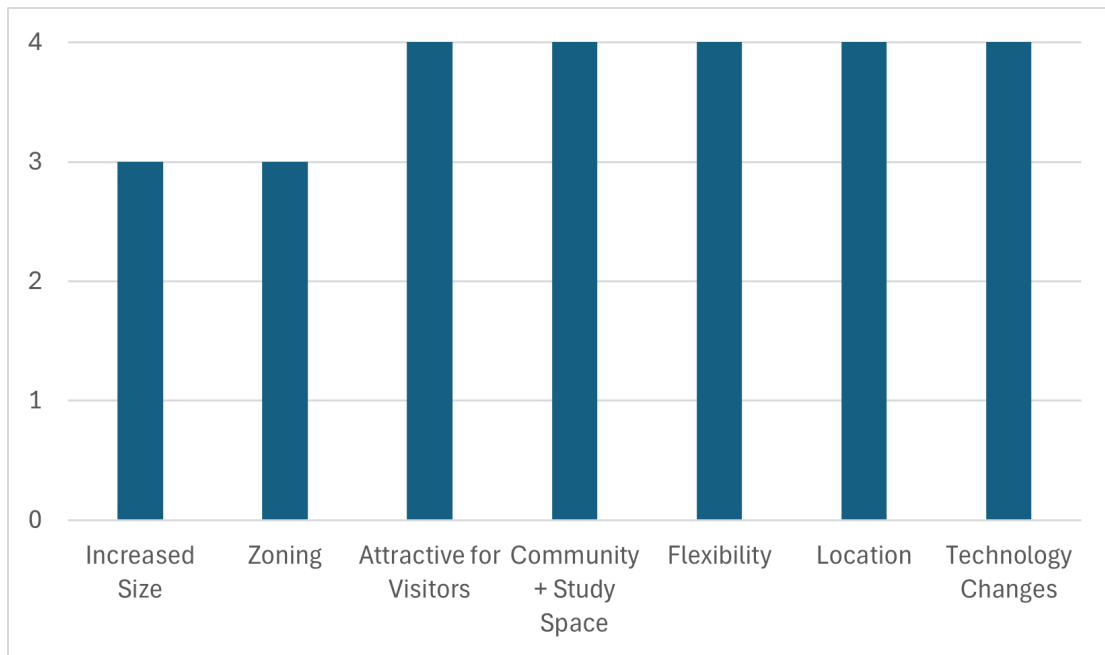


Figure 6: Impact of changed function on design, according to librarians

In Figure 6 we can see what the librarians regarded as the impact on design. In the analysis, included are criteria cited by a minimum of three librarians in the interviews.

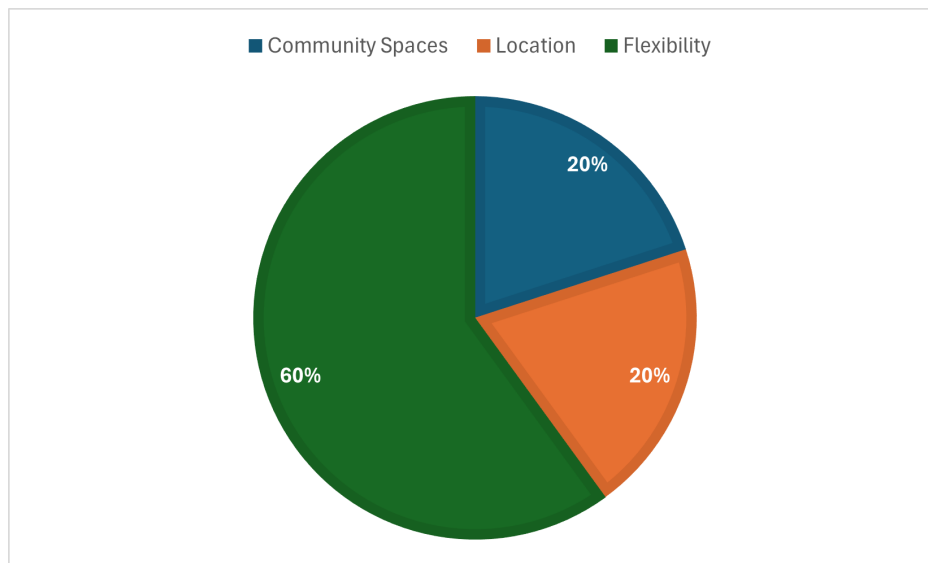


Figure 7: Where has changed library function had the greatest impact on design, According to Librarians?

I was interested in establishing a hierarchy here, as there is no hierarchy in the literature, so I asked the librarians their opinion as to what the most important impact on design is. (Figure 7). Flexibility (60%) was followed by Community Space and Location (20% each). This hierarchy is new and offers an interesting addition to the literature.

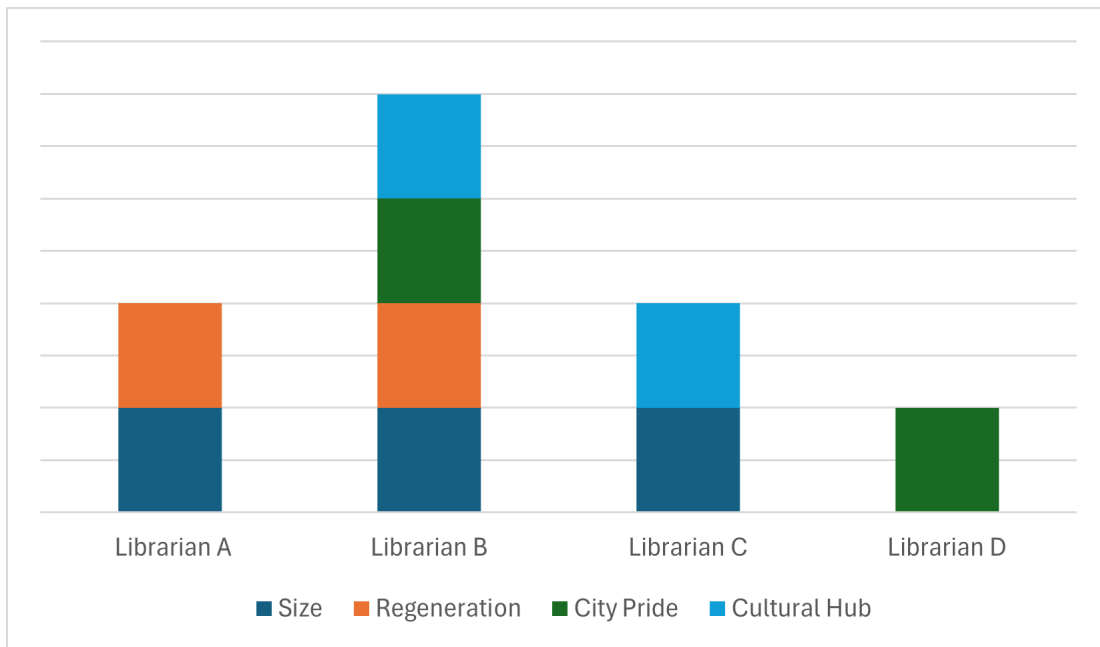


Figure 8: Characteristics of a flagship library, according to librarians

In the interviews, discussion of Flagship Libraries emerged, and I asked the librarians what they felt are the characteristics of a flagship library (Figure 8).

Further analysis of these points will take place in chapter 6.

6. Insights from Interviews

The interviews with librarians were very educational. They had a strong sense of what a library needs from design and what makes a sound library. Here are some of their insights:

Flexibility

In smaller libraries, flexibility is key, and individual areas are often required to serve multiple functions. The smaller the library, the more flexible it needs to be. Typically, most modern libraries have book stacks and other furniture mounted on casters so they can be moved to allow for event space or children's story time. Open-plan designs allow for a great level of flexibility, especially when paired with mobile furniture. The librarians interviewed strongly prefer design that is easy to change if and when the community needs it - areas that can be closed off or opened up are considered both practical and welcome.

Increasingly, flexibility is understood in terms of space, user comfort, and inclusivity. Providing a range of seating options was identified as a key element of good design, ensuring that diverse user groups are accommodated, such as older adults who may require higher chairs, or students seeking quiet study areas. Libraries may also adjust space allocations throughout the year in response to changing patterns of use; for example, during the spring, more study space may be required for students preparing for summer exams, which may necessitate temporarily winding down other activities.

Though open-plan space is innately more flexible, it can result in problems. Librarians cited noise transfer between zones, particularly from more active areas such as children's to those intended for quiet study. For this reason, librarians feel that having some study space completely closed off is preferable. Though the literature acknowledges that libraries have become more open-plan, it does not mention the practical difficulties that may arise from this approach.

Example:

Only a few years ago the need for PCs in libraries was considered paramount (as mentioned in SDCC Library Development Plan 2018). Tallaght County Library had 70 PCs and that number is now reduced to 20 as the community simply do not use publicly available computers to the same extent. The space has been given to something else with greater need.

Community Space

Libraries are inclusive civic spaces where the public can come without expecting to buy anything or engage in any prescribed activity. They function as community hubs that are open, safe, and anonymous, welcoming people of all ages and backgrounds. The focus on the library used to be on the collection of books, but it is now on the public space and designing the space to meet the needs of that community. Libraries now provide opportunities for social connection, particularly for those new to an area who may otherwise lack access to community networks. Events such as classes, film clubs, book clubs, or other cultural activities have become synonymous with a library, and importantly, these offerings are free of charge, reinforcing the library's commitment to accessibility.

In addition to their cultural and social roles, libraries serve as important interfaces between the state and the community. They act as information centres for government services and host information about public health and small business support (See figure 9).

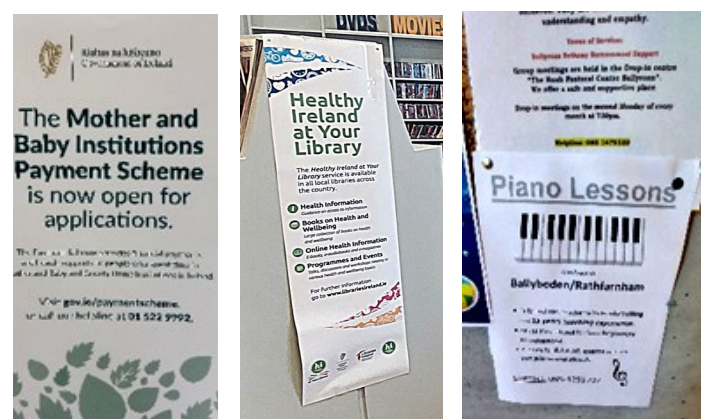


Figure 9: The community use libraries to reach out to each other; and the government also use for various public messaging. Photo credit: Author

In marginalised areas, the library can be a safe place for teenagers to meet friends. While there can be tension from time-to-time between different user groups, such as between teens and older users, this can be mitigated with good zoning. In open-plan libraries, zoning is achieved using book stacks and the positioning of study areas away from children's zones and event spaces. Such spatial strategies allow libraries to accommodate a wide range of users and activities within a single space.

Location/Community Profile, and Pragmatism in Library Planning

The interviews with librarians were particularly illuminating into the pragmatic considerations that underpin library planning, particularly in relation to location, constraints, and community profiling. According to librarians, no two county areas are the same, and no two libraries are the same. This is something that is not acknowledged in the government one-for-all benchmarks. For instance,

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown is characterised by older established suburbs with distinct villages and town centres and main streets. In contrast, South Dublin, though in the same county, is predominantly composed of newer suburbs that lack traditional centres. Although it does contain a few historical areas, such as Clondalkin Village, which retains a Carnegie Library built in 1911, the majority of its suburbs have emerged in recent decades. When this council plans a new library, the location where the community gathers is chosen, and the library is located there. This can be next to the row of shops, the church or the school. One of the county librarians cited location as trumping any other consideration in the design process, even size (though all librarians would welcome a building with adequate space, with one suggesting an ideal floor area of between 1000 and 1200 sqm). In order to make the library an important, used, community space, it is paramount to get the location right. This is situated where the community habitually gathers, so the visitor does not have to make a special effort to get there.

The initial fit-out design will reflect the community profile at the time of planning, but the profile of the community is dynamic and changes often. Some communities will have older populations and others have lots of young families and children, and then a decade later this profile can reverse. The community that attends Dublin City Central Library in the ILAC Centre for instance, currently has a largely male profile with a large percentage born outside Ireland (Figure 10). Library needs change every few years: According to one librarian, she will ask of a designer:

Please, please, please give us flexibility, because you know you will design and put in furniture for a community now and chances are in 10 years' time, 15 years' time, we're still there, but the community has grown and changed and evolved.

It can be surprising to see a library 20 or 30 years old being knocked down for a new build, or even being extensively refurbished, but these library designs were simply no longer able to serve their communities adequately.

Example:

Finglas had a 1980s library that had become inadequate to serve its community. A post sorting office became available, and though at 1000 sqm it is small in terms of the population it serves, Dublin City Council owns the site, and it has space to be further developed in the future. The two county librarians interviewed feel that developing a small or imperfect library now, when a budget is available, is better than waiting 10 or 15 years for a potentially better opportunity. This example demonstrates a pragmatic approach to library development.



Figure 10: Different Libraries cater for different needs. In the ILAC Centre library, there is greater emphasis on foreign language publications. Photo credit: Author

Benchmarking

Government benchmarking for libraries which was introduced in 2015 is considered very rigid by the two county librarians interviewed, which they feel can hinder the development of libraries. If a county wants to develop a new library and receive central funding, it must work within the benchmarks. These include a minimum size of 500 sqm, be a new build, be at street level, have a designated community space and study space (among other criteria). There is a strong feeling that the model does not work, that it does not consider differences in community profile, the possible benefit of converting an unused or derelict building in a main street, or the benefit of locating a library in a shopping centre. In Dublin, the councils are well-funded and can therefore bypass benchmarking, as they do not need to apply for funding from the Department of the Environment. The literature does not cover government benchmarking, so the insights by librarians here were particularly insightful.

Example:

A new 1,700 sqm library has recently received change of use planning permission in Citywest as part of a shopping centre built there in 2007. Citywest is a new suburb and is a good example of an area which does not have a main street or a town centre. Because there are some poor models of libraries in shopping centres, the benchmarks do not allow for it - but it does not mean it cannot work. Lucan Library is upstairs in a shopping centre and has 130,000 visitors a year. Not being at street level is not ideal, but there are other benefits for the council, such as cost, as it is cheaper to rent and to develop, and for the community, as it is convenient. Castletymon library would not have been built at all under the benchmarks as it would be considered too small for the population it serves and does not have a dedicated event space.

Technology and Evolving User Needs

Community needs for technology keep changing, and this can change aspects of the library design. One significant change noted by librarians is the decreasing need for public access to PCs in libraries. Likewise, though many libraries have a laptop tablet loan facility, this need is also becoming less popular. Printing services are still popular, and charging points for charging phones and personal laptops are still needed, and this is factored into the design. The traditional central service desk was once the hub of the library and an important design feature. The widespread introduction of self-service technologies – such as automated check-in and check-out kiosks, as well as PCs for reference searches – has reduced the reliance on staffed service points. Modern libraries are more user friendly, and visitors do not have to go to the desk at all in many cases.

Atmosphere

Creating a welcoming and pleasant atmosphere, or a "good vibe" as one librarian put it, is very important to librarians. They want visitors to feel restful and at home in a space with a warm, relaxing atmosphere, comfortable seating, and good light. This concern extends beyond the visitor experience to include library staff. A well-designed, aesthetically pleasing workplace contributes to staff morale, confidence, and a sense of pride in their professional environment. As the library is an important civic building, it should embody the values and pride of the community it serves. This emphasis on atmosphere aligns with the wider literature.

Working with Architects

An important theme that emerged from the interviews, but which is not prominently addressed in the core literature, is the sense among librarians that they would have liked to be more actively involved in the design process. Shane Doyle's PhD dissertation, *Everything's Fine: How Design and Public Library Communities Interact in South Dublin*, includes interviews with several Dublin-based librarians regarding their perspectives on how library design functions in practice. The findings of that study closely mirror those of this research, with similar concerns arising—particularly issues associated with open-plan layouts, the challenges of accommodating multiple activities within shared spaces, and a perception that the design process tends to be architect-led rather than community-led, diverging from what is often the more participatory European approach. One librarian noted that architects may design for theoretical use,

and the practicalities of some of the paraphernalia of a library aren't understood. He observed, "As soon as the architect is out the door, [the librarians] move things around because it makes sense for the functionality of the space".

Flagship Libraries

Both the literature and the librarians interviewed for this dissertation are largely in agreement as to the defining characteristics of a flagship library. Specifically, the librarians cite size, regeneration, civic pride and being cultural hubs as typical features. This type of library is the most important civic space in a town – they are grandiose in a way that celebrates the community and are a projection of the pride the citizens have in their city. As these buildings are grand in scale with features such as grand staircases and large, voided atria with significant views over the city, they are deemed to have a "wow factor" for the visitor. As one librarian said, referring to the proposed Dublin City Library at Parnell Square (currently at the tender stage):

When you go up to the top floor in the Georgian building and you look down over the vista of the city . . . [you think], we're going to give this view, this aspect of our capital city to the people of Dublin. You know, they need spaces, civic spaces, that they can just step back and say, wow, this is our city . . . and it's phenomenal. It's like just that feeling that this is a library, but that people will come in, and you know, they can walk into those rooms, look over their capital city, and say, 'Wow.' And . . . that sense of place, that sense of pride, that sense of well-being, you know, the libraries need to do all of that stuff.

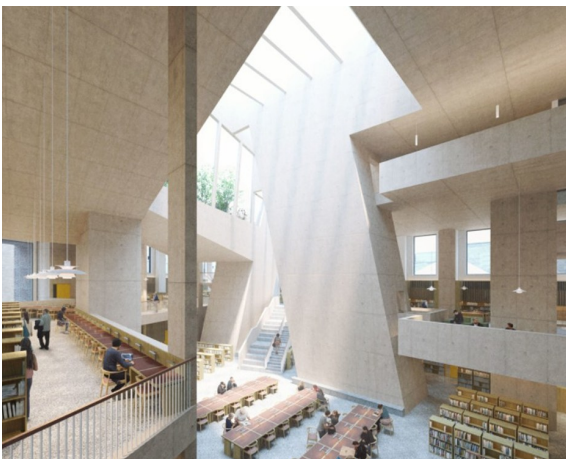


Figure 11: 3D image of proposed Dublin City Library, part of regeneration of Parnell Square area creating a new city plaza. Photo credit: Grafton Architects.



Figure 12: Lexicon: Part of regeneration of harbour area: Photo Credit: Dennis Gilbert.

Flagship libraries are often located in areas being regenerated. The Lexicon in Dún Laoghaire was the most important part of a regeneration of the dock area of the town, which had been affected by anti-social behaviour (Figure 12). Similarly, the planned Dublin City Library plans to be the anchor project of a very ambitious regeneration of Parnell Square in Dublin's north inner city. These libraries can also offer measurable economic benefits. The new library at Citywest for instance, will provide approximately 150,000 visits to the shopping centre in which it will be situated.

Flagship libraries have huge cultural output in themselves, and also tend to be co-located with other cultural institutions. Dún Laoghaire Library has a gallery and performance space and is co-located by a museum. The proposed Dublin City Library will have an exhibition area, several performance spaces, and will be co-located beside the Hugh Lane Gallery, Gate Theatre, and Poetry Ireland. Tallaght County Library, though not a flagship library as such, is set in a square with the library, the Civic Theatre, and an Arts Centre.

Further discussion of the Lexicon Library is covered in the Case Studies.

7. Case Studies

The case studies examine the key themes as highlighted by librarians: location, flexibility, and community. A visual analysis of each library has been conducted, highlighting design features, and briefly contrasting the new library to what it replaced. Also examined is their schedule of accommodation.

A variety of library types typically found in Dublin has been chosen: one representing small libraries, one larger libraries and one flagship libraries.

	Library	Type	Council	Year Built	Size	Replacing
7.1	Castletymon Library	Small	South Dublin County Council	2021	500 sqm	1912 Carnegie Library
7.2	Ballyroan Library	Large	South Dublin County Council	2013	1500 sqm	1980s Library
7.3	dlr Lexicon	Flagship	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Council Council	2014	6326 sqm	1980s Library

The field research that informed these case studies greatly helped me visualise the day-to-day use of the library, how the schedule of accommodation is arranged, and how the librarians and public use the space. The images of libraries online are often stylised and out of date. Published plans have been updated, and librarians have moved furniture around to suit community need.

All photography is by author unless otherwise stated.

7.1 Case Study 1

Castletymon Library, Tallaght

500 sqm

Henchion Reuter Architects, 2021

Awards: Winner, Cultural/Public Buildings category
2022 RIAI

Schedule of Accommodation:

Main hall

Private staff space with small offices and kitchen area.



Figure 13, 14: Castletymon Library



7.1.1 Location

This library replaced a 1000 sqm 1980s building situated close by in a shopping centre and leased by South Dublin County Council. The existing library no longer met the requirements of the community, was unattractive and uninviting, and the landlord was reluctant to invest in the building. The council owned land beside the original which had several constraints including a very small size and being triangular in shape. The location is excellent however, on a main road and co-located beside other amenities the local population use, shops and two schools.



Figure 15: Original Castletymon Library. Photo credit: South Dublin County Council

This building is very attractive space for the community which takes advantage of east, west and south facing views of the community and the river, and has lots of natural light.



Figure 16: Castletymon Library interior. Photo credit: Henchion Reuter Architects

7.1.2 Flexibility

We can see from the plan that the public part of Castletymon library is one open-plan room, with community areas mixed in with the book stacks—the space is shared. There is no designated event space, and there are book stacks in every area, including the study space. Flexibility is key in small libraries and though each of the case studies examined show flexibility in their design, the design of small libraries needs to work hardest of all for the building to fulfil its use for the community.

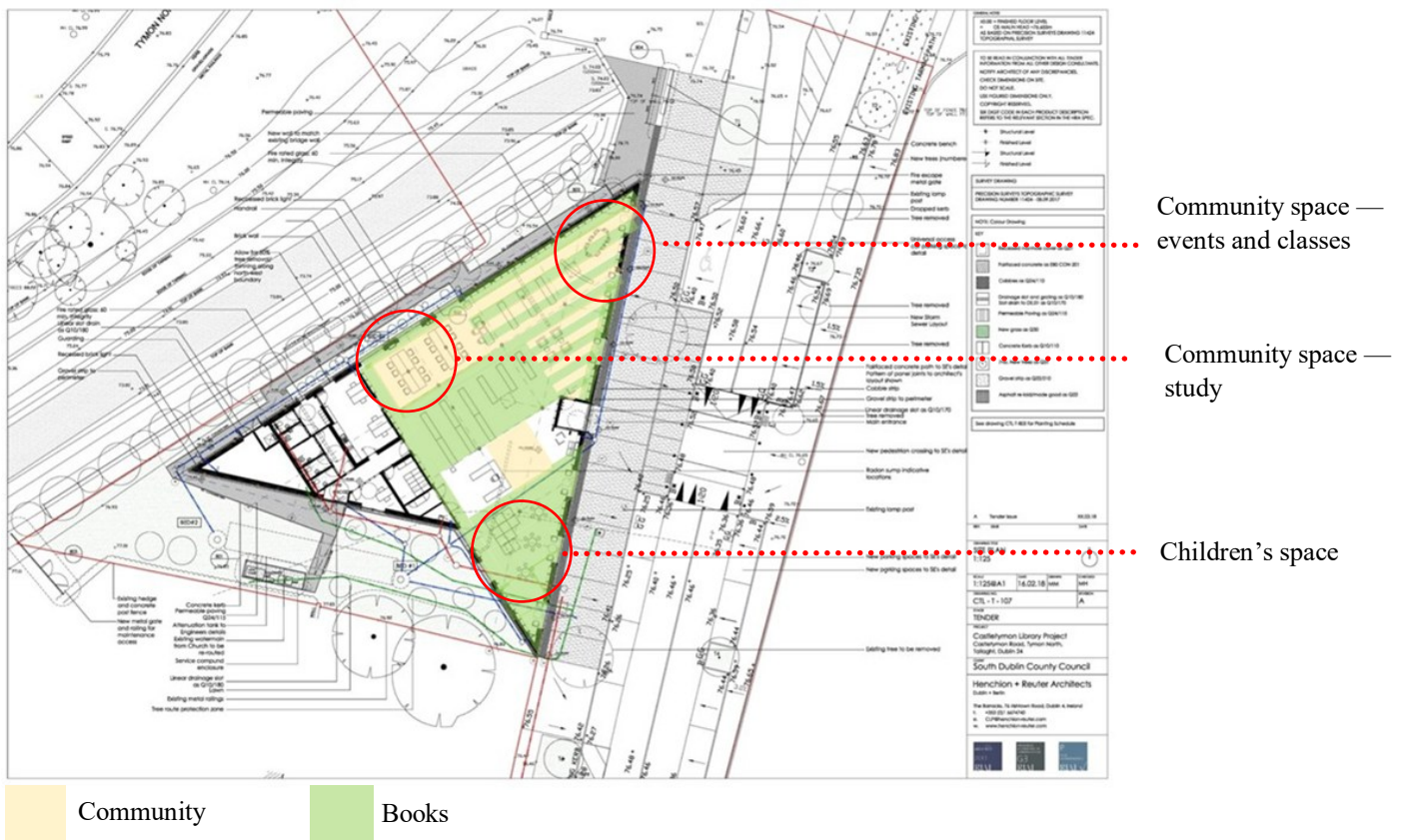


Figure 17: Analysis of Use

All of the book stacks in the centre of the hall have castors so that they can be moved to facilitate events, classes or other community activity. These activities usually take place in the far north corner – the point farthest away from the study area and the desk. We can see in Figure 20 that some stacks have been moved and barriers have been put in place to partly shield the area from the rest of the library. All of the book stacks in the centre of the hall have castors so that they can be moved to facilitate events, classes or other community activities (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Castors on book stacks



Figure 19: Modern Library design emphasises flexibility in terms of seating, allowing the visitor a variety of seating types and heights to choose from.

7.1.3 Community

Despite its small size, and having only one public space, Castletymon Library services its community well with multiple events and study space.



Figure 20: Tradfest, January 2025. Photo credit SDCC



Figure 21: Children's story time. Photo credit SDCC



Figure 22 3D Printing Machine in main area. Usually libraries built in the recent past have a designated Maker Space.



Figure 23: Study Space

7.2 Case Study 2

Ballyroan Library, Rathfarnham

1500 sqm

Box Architecture, 2013

Awards: Winner, Best Public Building 2013
RIAI

Schedule of Accommodation:

Large Reception/Community area

One main hall including children's area

Two interconnecting community spaces

Exhibition area

Closed off study area

Private staff area

WCs

7.2.2 Location

Ballyroan Library replaced a 700 sqm library on the same site. The original building became outdated and undersized for its community. A complete rebuild was deemed to be a less disruptive and economic solution to providing a better building. Part single story with sky-lights, and part two-story, the new library has two entrances and a large reading room with concrete pins separating it visually from the rest of the building.

Sitting in a 1950s suburb it is another example of situating a library where visitors are likely to be—beside shops, a community centre, and not far from the three schools in the area. It shares a circulatory route with these community spaces.



Figure 24: Ballyroan Library. Photo credit: Paul Tierney.



Figure 25: Ballyroan Library, mixed use reception/community area. Photo credit: Paul Tierney.



Figure 26: Original Ballyroan Library, 1980s. Photo credit SDCC.



7.2.2 Flexibility

The community spaces offer a lot of flexibility in the building. The event rooms in Figure 27 can be closed off into two separate rooms, or opened up into one larger space. They can also be opened out into the reception area to make a very large space for events. Likewise the exhibition area (Figure 30) is designed so that the exhibit stands can retract back towards the wall to allow for more space.

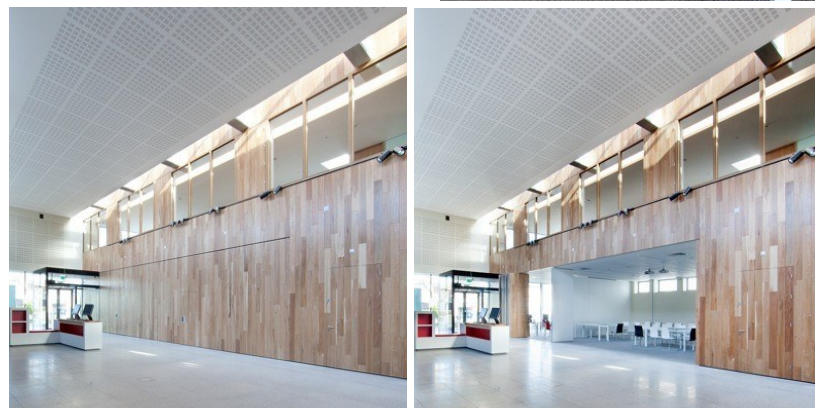
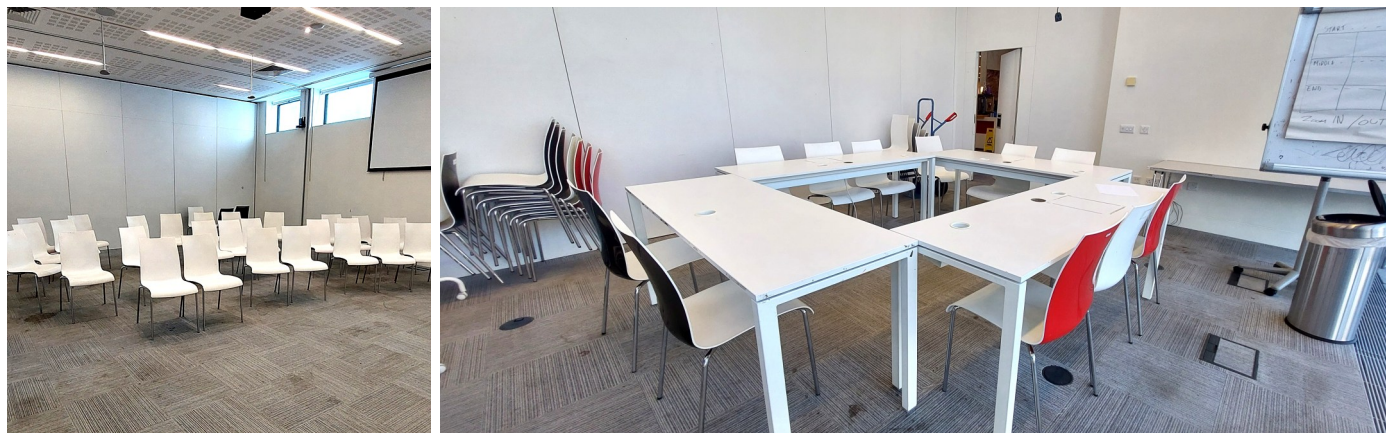


Figure 27: Community spaces are flexible. Photo credit: Paul Tierney.



Figure 28: Flexible book stacks on castors

This larger library does not need to work as hard as a small one like Castletymon Library in terms of flexibility, and it has the advantage of a designated study area, but even with all the possible permutations in terms of space, most of the books stacks are still on castors, allowing for movement in this large area too (Figure 28).

Like Castletymon, Ballyroan Library offers visitors a variety of seating types (Figure 29).



Figure 29: Flexible seating

7.2.3 Community

This library is light-filled and very community orientated. It is designed with many community-centred spaces, including two designated rooms for events/classes and community activity, and a permanent gallery and exhibition space, as well as a closed off study space. The reception area is a mixed space with the central desk, but also a spill-over area from the event spaces.



Figure 30: Exhibition space

In the Analysis of Use below, it can be seen that the traditional library area—the books—takes up only half the principle floor.



Figure 31: Study. Photo credit: Paul Tierney.

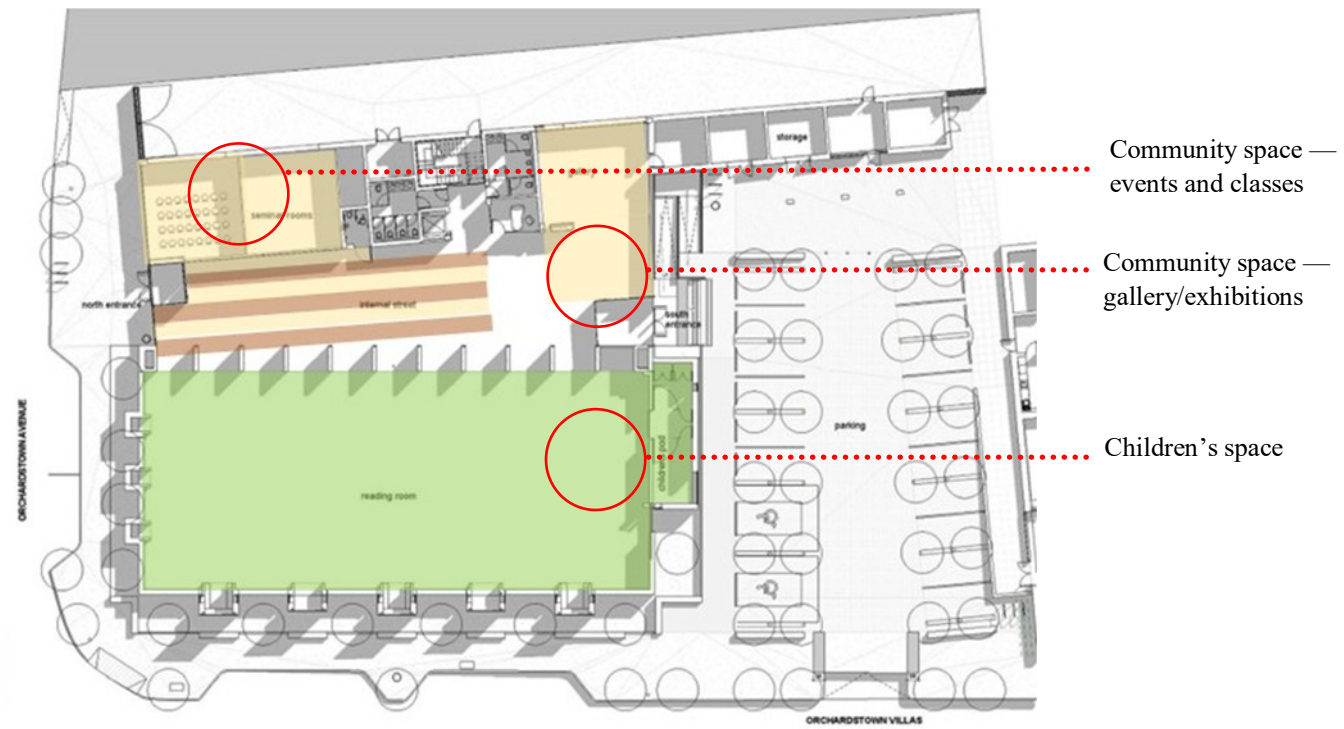


Figure 32: Ground Floor, Analysis of Use

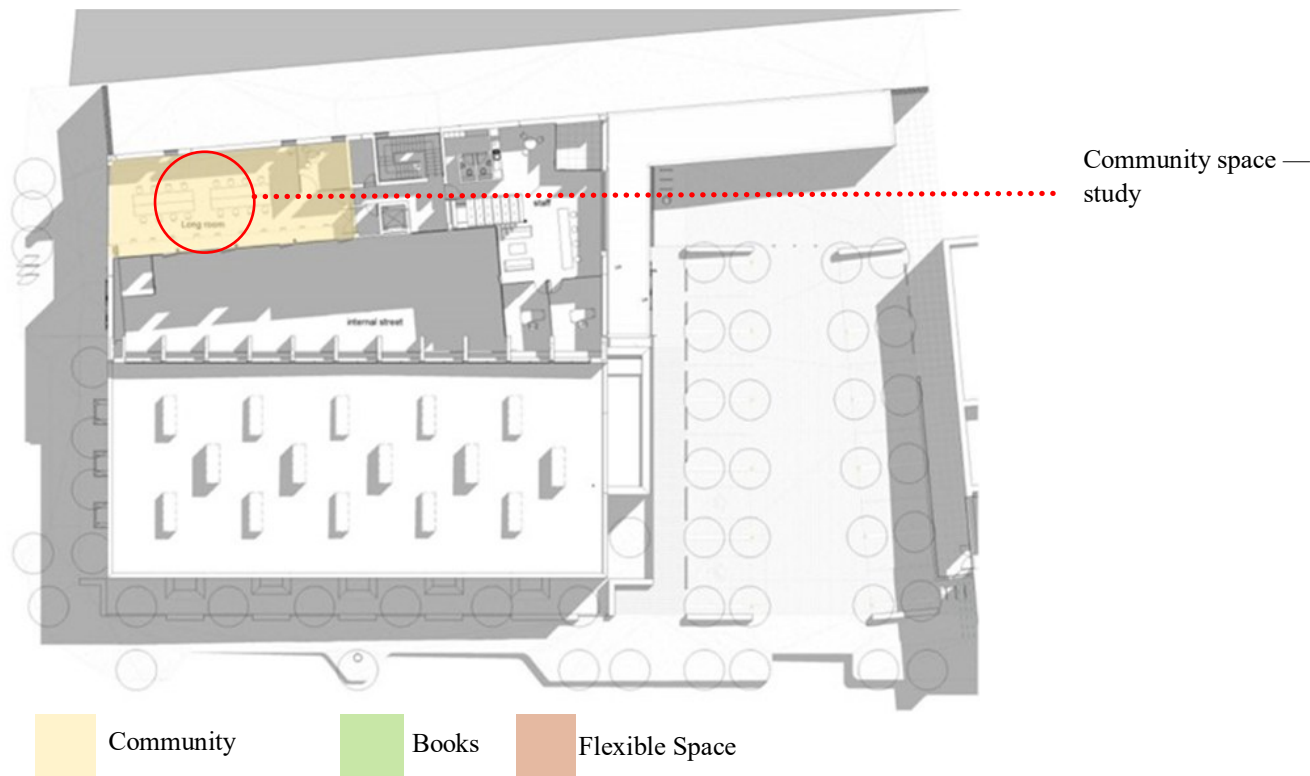


Figure 33: First Floor, Analysis of Use

7.3 Case Study 3

dlr Lexicon, Dún Laoghaire

6327 sqm

Carr Cotter & Naessens Architects, 2013

Awards: Winner, Best Public Building 2013 RIAI Awards

Winner, Award for International Excellence, 2016
RIBA Awards

Schedule of Accommodation:

Several floors of library space, including extensive local history

Computers and study spaces

Municipal Gallery

Meeting rooms

Auditorium

Art Gallery

Café

WCs



Figure 35: dlr Lexicon

The Lexicon replaced a 1912 Carnegie Library of 100 sqm (Figure 36). Very controversial when it opened in 2013 due to the over €13 million cost, The Lexicon quickly became very popular and enjoys 1,300 visits a day— It is Ireland's busiest library.

7.3.1 Location

The library is situated at a striking site between the seafront and the town and enjoys panoramic views over Dublin Bay. It has extensive glazing taking advantage of these views and allow a lot of natural light into the interior. The Lexicon is the key building in the regeneration of the dock area of the town. As part of its development it has a small civic park replacing one which had experienced anti-social behaviour. It has extensive views overlooking the dock, the pier and Dublin Bay (Figure 37).

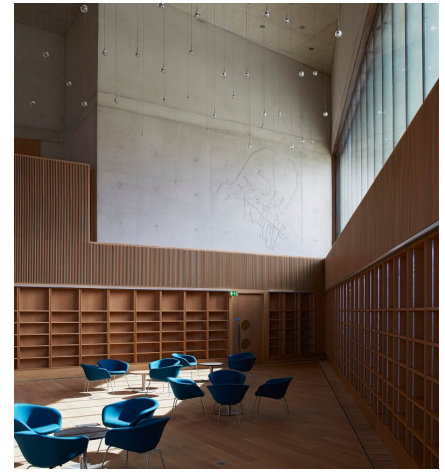


Figure 34: dlr Lexicon interior. Photo credit: Dennis Gilbert.



Figure 36: Carnegie Library building, Dún Laoghaire. Photo credit: DRCC



Figure 37: Glimpses of views from library. Photo credit: Dennis Gilbert.

7.3.2 Flexibility



Figure 38: Plans

The librarians described flagship libraries as “grandiose” and the Lexicon certainly fits this description. It offers four floors of space designed to serve its community with a large proportion of accommodation given to community activity. It has three event spaces, 120 study spaces and a café.

As so much of the building has a designated activity, of the three libraries studied, it could be said to be the least flexible, simply perhaps because it does not need to be. Only one part of the library has book stacks and other furniture on castors—the children’s area. Located at first floor level one can assume this area has been made flexible because it is quiet in the evenings and the redundant space may be given over to other community activity.

Like the other libraries, the Lexicon gives its visitors a variety of seating choices throughout the library (Figure 39).



Figure 39: Flexibility of seating

7.3.3 Community

Flagship libraries are grandiose in a way that celebrates the community. The most striking feature of the Lexicon Library, is the sheer amount of community space, and the architectural features and views over the town that project a sense of pride in community. It several large voided areas and its statement staircases is prominent in the design, typical of flagship libraries (Figures 40, 41, 42).

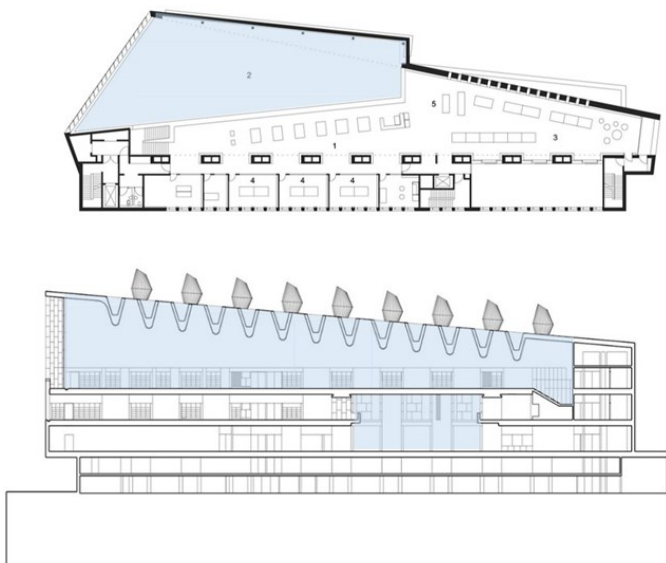


Figure 40: Voids in plan and section

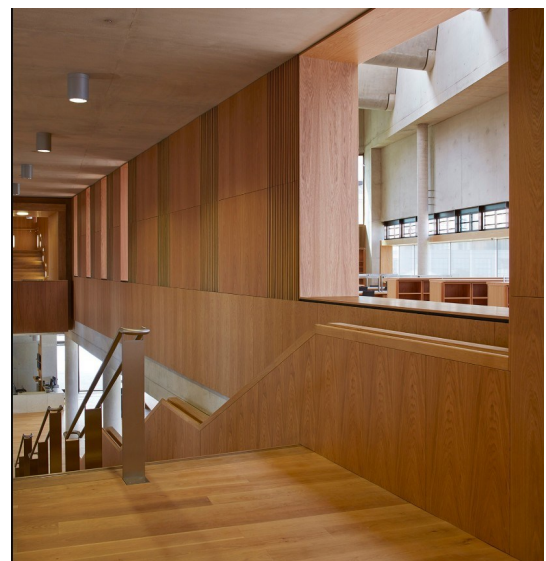


Figure 41: Staircase approaching first floor.
Photo credit: Dennis Gilbert



Figure 42: Voids in third floor

The “wow factor” is evident in the volume of the voided areas and the panoramic views depicting the town’s architectural and maritime heritage captured through the extensive glazing.



Figure 43: Glimpses of views from library. Photo credit: Dennis Gilbert.

The library also offers several cultural spaces for its community, including a performance space, an art gallery and a permanent exhibition space. It is co-located with a museum and forms part of a hub of cultural activity in Dún Laoghaire.



Figure 44: Performance Space. Photo credit: DRCC.

8. Conclusion

The question that guided this research—what is changing about Dublin libraries—turned out to be less straightforward than I first expected. While the key literature helped explain how and why the role of libraries has changed and allowed for a clearer understanding of the two main types of public libraries (branch libraries and flagship libraries), it did not address several important factors. It made no reference to government benchmarking, the problems and constraints it creates, or to the variations between communities. Nor did it reflect the different levels of influence these factors have on design decisions. In this way, the literature lacked the nuance needed to fully answer the research question.

Earlier stages of the research revealed some contradictions, but these were clarified through interviews with librarians. Their insights shed light on the typical challenges faced when planning, building, or renovating a library, many of which affect design outcomes. The mixed-methods approach used in this study proved effective, as it allowed for a more in-depth analysis by combining data, every day experience and personal views. Drawing on my own visual analysis skills also helped to bring another layer to the discussion of how library design is changing.

This study also points to a valuable area for further research: how communication between librarians and architects or interior architects could be improved. A clearer two-way exchange of ideas could benefit both professions and lead to better design outcomes. Overall, the findings of this study are positive. The librarians I spoke to were insightful, enthusiastic, and deeply engaged with their communities. Libraries in Dublin are striving – they are much used, much cherished, well designed and attractive civic spaces.

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