

Shaping the future of public libraries

Mikk Sander Lemberg

Estonian Academy of Arts
Interaction Design, Faculty of Design
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Mentor: Jana Kukk, PhD
Supervisors: Tanel Kärp, MA and Nesli Hazal Akbulut, MA

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Abstract

Public libraries in Estonia are facing a lack of funding and resources caused by a lack of shared understanding of what is expected of library services in the 21st century. Despite the existential crisis in the context of digitisation and urbanisation, public libraries provide unique value to the surrounding communities.

Therefore, this study aims to discover the design approach to transform public libraries into inspiring service providers.

Based on a literature review of public libraries and social capital theories, as well as expert interviews, a framework for thinking about public libraries was developed. The framework enables creating alignment between all expectations of public libraries and the guiding values and principles of public libraries.

In the next phase, the developed framework helped conduct workshops on library services expectations in Estonia. With the results of the workshops, a possible future scenario is formed into a concept. The final design enables an assessment of the public library of tomorrow and the one likely scenario.

Ultimately, the work argues that public libraries need to be community-led, person-centred and aspirational; they need to emphasise content creation and offer conversational programming to be fit for the 21st century.

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Introduction

Many public institutions and organisations that we take for granted today were created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To prepare public institutions for the challenges of the 21st century, it is necessary to view their role through a different lens than the one they inherited from the Industrial Age.

Among these public institutions are public libraries, which emerged in a pre-electronic information age. The hegemonic nature of public services (including public libraries) leads us to ignore the fact that they were designed. Somebody has imagined, created them, and put them in the position they are in today (Colligan 2011).

After a year like no other, and in the face of permanent disruptions to natural rhythms and rituals, organisations worldwide are struggling to figure out how to navigate an uncertain post-covid, climate-dictated future. Recent events have shown that the more difficult life becomes, the greater the importance of libraries.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries in Estonia and elsewhere closed their buildings. However, the services and facilities were put to other uses, such as food distribution points or emergency computer labs for low-income families.

Librarians responded quickly, offering reading sessions or assisting students with learning via Zoom call. After closures, public libraries functioned as ideal meeting places for individuals and groups, offering an alternative to working from home.

Nevertheless, there is a general understanding that public libraries have not restructured themselves to meet technological changes and people's new habits and needs. On the other hand, the role of a public library in the 21st century is not clear.

Personal motivation

In recent years, cities have built new - and headline-grabbing - libraries. The iconic public libraries in Helsinki, Seattle, Amsterdam, Birmingham, Aarhus, or the Salt Lake City Public Library are just a few examples. [See Appendix 1](#)

However, I'm not convinced that transforming libraries or library services should always mean building new libraries. Once something is built, it's there for decades. Moreover, the mismatch between the relative invisibility of libraries and the active network of 500 public libraries across Estonia is a fascinating puzzle to me.

My enthusiasm for public libraries stems from the same mentioned famous libraries. I am interested in understanding the Scandinavian libraries' approach to promoting a just society and opening up debate about local or national politics to all. Why are public libraries best suited for this task?

I also find that public libraries are among the last public buildings where people are not expected to buy or consume anything. This non-commercial public space is unique in today's society. So, I'm particularly interested in understanding the benefits of this type of space and how to maximise those benefits in the future.

Last but not least, I'm concerned about the challenges that lie ahead. Challenges like climate disasters, growing inequality, increasing regional disparities, or loneliness. These are problems that the public sector alone cannot solve, and the private sector is not always motivated to do so. That is why I believe that we need to create opportunities for communities and individuals to improve their situation and meet the challenges ahead.

In choosing the direction of this thesis, I was particularly drawn to exploring strategic design and systems thinking. Systems thinking is known as an ability to understand complex systems. Strategic design is about crafting decision-making (Helsinki Design Lab n.d.).

Strategic design applies some of the principles of traditional design and redefines how problems are approached, identifies courses of action, and helps deliver more complete and resilient solutions.

Before answering or visualising the role of the future public library, I need to frame this question and consider what tools I can best use to think strategically about the future of public libraries.

I hope that this project evokes the conversation and helps rethink the role of public libraries in Estonia as the Ministry of Culture is updating the Public Libraries Act and the National Library of Estonia begins a significant renovation.

Project objective

With public libraries as the subject and Estonia as the context, this research asked two main questions:

- What are the expectations of a modern public library service?
- How can public libraries meet expectations now and be adaptable for future needs?

The first research question explores the role of the public library, while also analysing the uniqueness of libraries that add value to the surrounding community. The second research question explores the transformation of libraries as they continually adapt to the needs of their communities.

The value of public libraries is not inherent; it is what we can do in them that makes them valuable. But what we can do in public libraries is often limited by our understanding of their role and our willingness to invest in them.

Ultimately, the main research goal is to discover the design approach to transform public libraries into inspiring service providers that "support lifelong learning and ensure access to information, knowledge, and culture."

The design approach to become an inspiring place is my interpretation of the future, which is still unknown. The functions of the public library come from the Public Libraries Act (1998), which regulates the Estonian public library network.

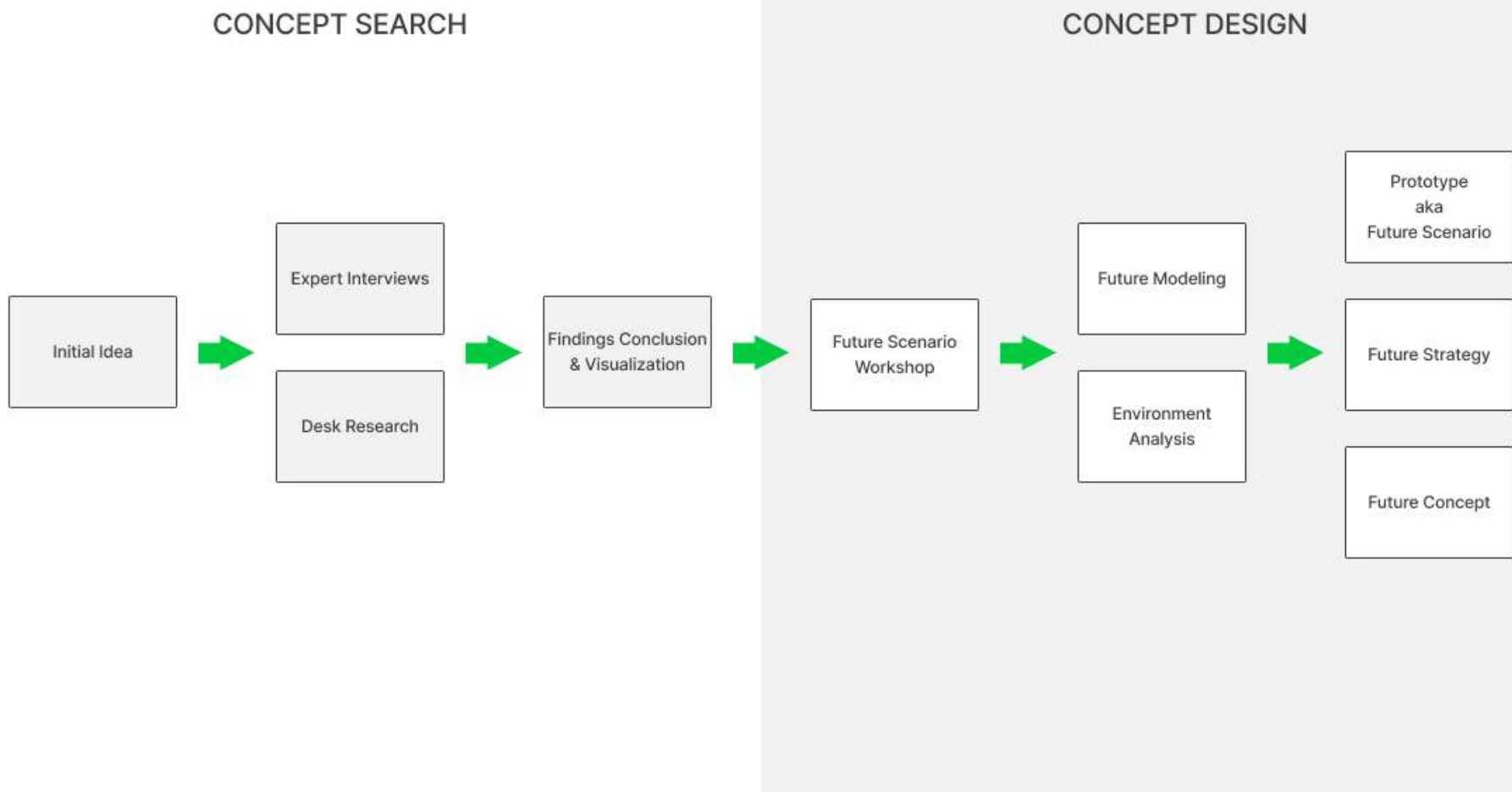


Fig. 1 - Thesis project overview

Estonian Public Library network & Estonian National Library

The Estonian Library Network includes public, school, research, and professional libraries, as well as the National Library of Estonia. Public libraries are local state institutions whose activities are coordinated by the Ministry of Culture.

According to the Public Libraries Act (1998), there must be a county library in each county. A county library is a public library that coordinates library service in the county. If there are multiple public libraries in a rural community or town, there may be a central library that coordinates library service.

In 2020, there were 521 public libraries in Estonia. The latest statistics from 2018 show that more than half of Estonians aged 15+ have visited a library in the last 12 months (Sihtasutus Emor 2018).

Since 2015, the Ministry of Culture has transferred responsibility for overseeing the public library network to National Library of Estonia. This includes overseeing the budget for the development of the public library network (Rahvaraamatukogu Seaduse Muutmise... 2020).

The National Library of Estonia is also a partner in my project to help with expert knowledge and contacts and steer me in the right direction.

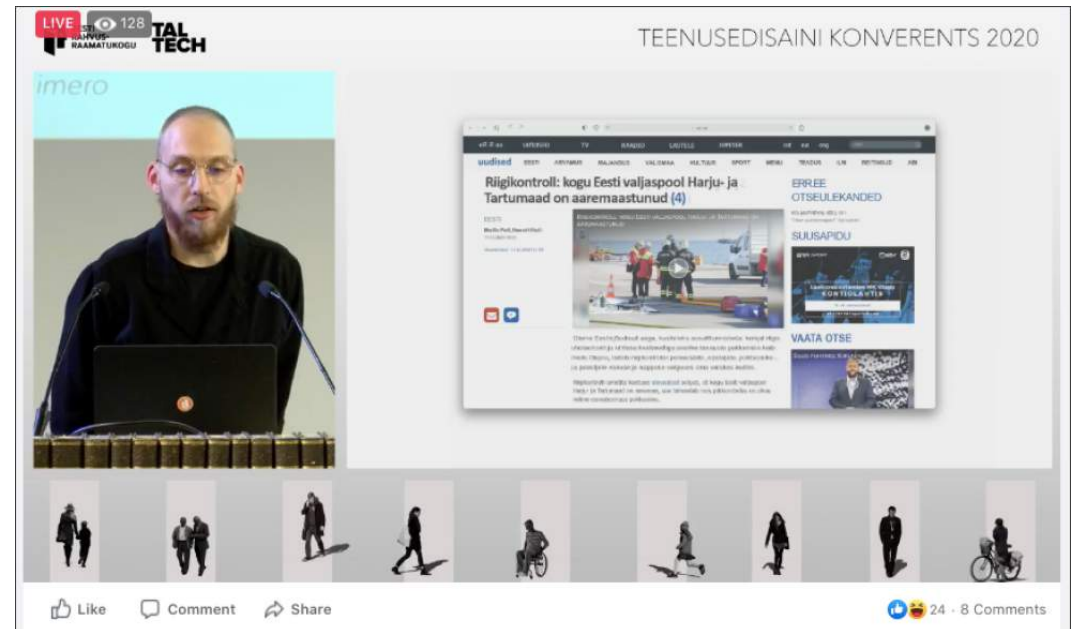


Fig. 2 - Me presenting at "Teenusedisaini konverents 2020", organised by National Library of Estonia

All in all, the system of Estonian Library follows the similar model as in other Nordic countries, which follows a "top-down" structure and treats public libraries as cultural institutions (Widdersheim, Koizumi, and Larsen 2021).

The Ministry of Culture and Public Libraries Act sets the general policy guidelines for public libraries. The funding and management of each public library is locally derived. This means that public libraries are funded and managed by the municipalities.

The National Library of Estonia is also an influential actor. It has the overall responsibility for documentation and library development for public libraries in the country.

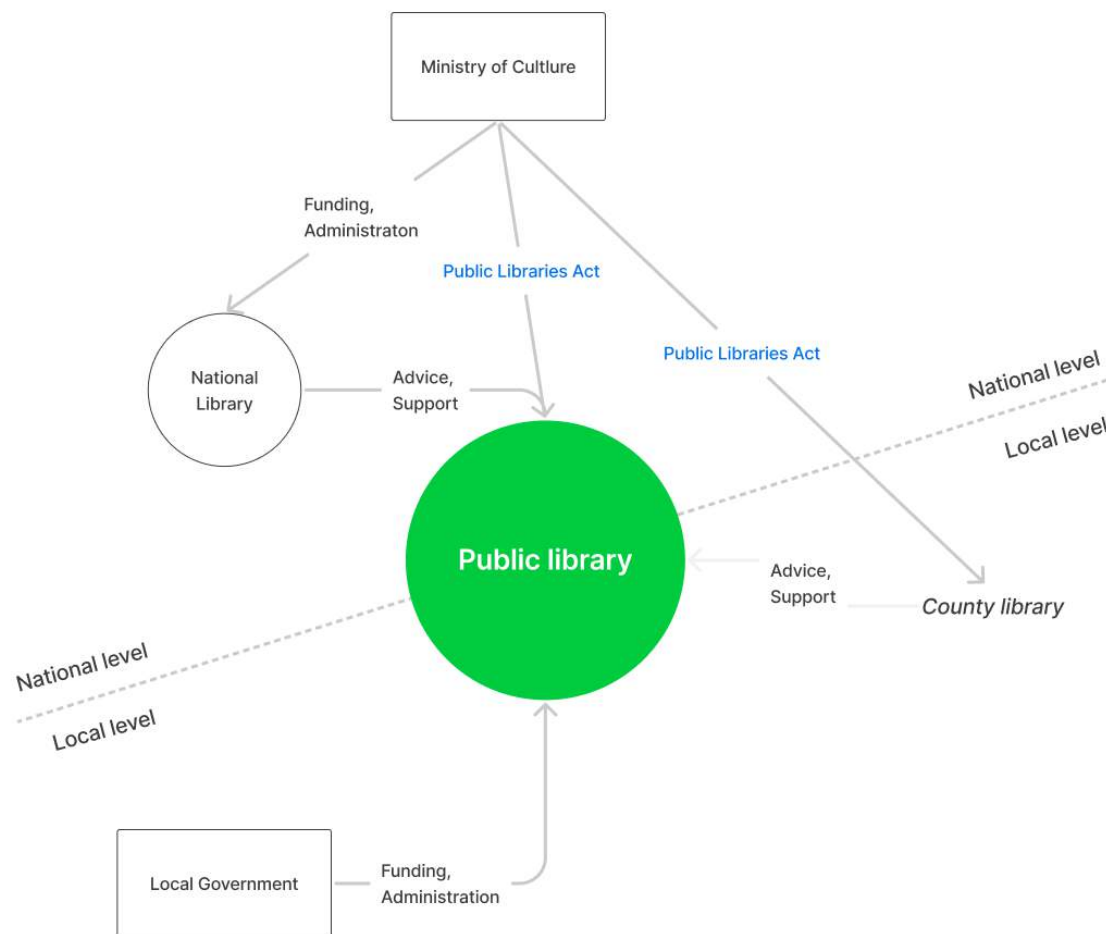


Fig. 3 - Governance of public libraries in Estonia inspired by Widdersheim, Koizumi, and Larsen (2021)

Background study

In the first phase, I was interested in understanding the role of public libraries today. As a designer, I like to find out the essence of any subject. So, I set out to learn what makes public libraries unique and how they have evolved into what we consider public libraries today.

From closed and private to a public institution

By reviewing the history of public libraries, I want to understand the types of services public libraries provide.

The history of libraries dates to ancient times. Ancient libraries had the function of storing and collecting documents. According to modern terminology, they belonged to the category of archives (Volodin 2005). This is a function that is understandable to all of us, and we all imagine rows of books when we think of libraries.

In ancient times, the beginning of the specialisation of the sciences led to the formation of centres of study and research. This meant that libraries, in addition to their previous function of collecting and preserving, also began to disseminate knowledge (Kikas and Teetlaus 2011). From then on, libraries became independent institutions that fulfilled the task of archiving and disseminating knowledge (Volodin 2005).

However, the ordinary citizen did not have access to libraries until the 15th century. The invention of printing led to a steady increase in the popularity and number of books, to widespread literacy (Praust 1997). This development of public libraries shaped the position of the library as the keeper of the world's cultural heritage (Volodin 2005).

As scholars have noted, it took centuries for libraries to evolve from closed institutions to public institutions. In the 20th century, libraries became the public institutions "serving society at all levels, from scientific research to specialised information to public education" (Kikas and Teetlaus 2011, 111).

One of the most prominent proponents of public libraries in the early 20th century was the US philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. He opened over a hundred public libraries throughout the United States because he recognised the value of the library to the community, stating, "a library outranks any other thing a community can do to benefit its people."¹

This was not so visible, as the library was primarily a place to lend books. But from the early 20th century, public libraries functioned as places where people could expand their worldview and learn about new authors or experience new cultures.

Even though it is visible how the library has changed over the centuries, it is difficult to explain why libraries have changed. Denise Troll (2002) has concluded that in order to explain why libraries have changed, research needs contextual information that we do not have.

Having understood the main functions of public libraries - the collection, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge - and the essential value of openness to all, I will next examine recent changes in library service due to digitisation.

Library 2.0

Over the past twenty years, public libraries have changed dramatically in response to a changing technological environment (Reid and Howard 2016). Libraries have compensated for technological change by redefining their mission to provide access to new technologies. The threat of obsolescence caused libraries to take proactive steps to remain relevant in a digital world.

One of the visions for libraries in response to technological change is the concept of Library 2.0, which is derived from Web 2.0. The Library 2.0 model is based on Web 2.0 principles and focuses on the technological application and use of social media in the library (Nguyen 2015).

The problem with Library 2.0 concepts was that they were not developed with key stakeholders (users) in mind, but were based on Web 2.0 principles, researcher's personal understanding, and relevant literature review (Ibid.).

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/420907-a-library-outranks-any-other-one-thing-a-community-can>

The transformation of services that public libraries have undergone hints at the possibilities of what they could be. Public libraries no longer resemble the silent reading rooms of the past. Although books are central to the library brand, the value of the library to society goes far beyond simply being a place to borrow books (Reid and Howard 2016).

Value of the public libraries

In the previous chapter, we learned how libraries have evolved from closed and even private institutions to public institutions open to society. The open-for-all aspect of public libraries is something unique in today's world. It is a place where anyone can go and mind their own business without the pressure to behave a certain way or buy something.

In this chapter, I will analyse the impact of this kind of space – both on an individual and a societal level.

One way to look at public libraries is as a third place besides home and work. The increased use of the term 'third place' stems from the research of urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg and his book "A great good place" (1999):

"Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. Social wellbeing and psychological health depend upon the community."

Söderholm and Nolin (2015) link libraries as places with potential for community building and as generators of social capital in a response to digitization. Digitization creates a need for physical spaces that open up for human interaction and community.

Several scholars have noted the interest in the public library as a meeting place (Castells and Castells 2000). And an institution with the potential to build community and citizenship in a society becoming more complex and fragmented caused by the growth of multiculturalism and digitization (Castells and Castells 2000; Wood and Landry 2008).

We need meeting places that promote Söderholm and Nolin's (2015) "third wave of engagement" focused on community hubs, open social spaces, and diversity. Inspired by the concept of community hubs and open social spaces, I want to understand the unique characteristics that make public libraries a great place to build community.

Social Capital, Community & Public Libraries

Most studies on public libraries and social capital are inspired by Robert D. Putnam (Svendson 2013). Putnam defines social capital as "an accumulated stock of networks, norms, and trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1993, 35-36).

One of the reasons public libraries are best suited to foster social capital is that they are safe places. Libraries are safe, comfortable, "neutral places" (Johnson 2010) with the unique ability to provide services for all.

All people are welcome to meet in a relaxed and informal atmosphere and for many individual and social purposes. Rules and norms of behaviour are transparent and at the same time flexible and sometimes even negotiable (Aabø and Audunson 2012).

Uncorrupted public institutions generate trust within and between social groups (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005, 2010). It creates trust in the same public institutions when everyone receives the same level of services. And this trust spills over into trust in people. Perhaps this is why public libraries are among the most trusted government services and public institutions (Vårheim 2014).

A trusted, safe place creates the possibility that the public library becomes a public sphere. It is a place where people live out their role as citizens (Aabø, Audunson, and Vårheim 2010). Libraries serve as institutions that underpin a sustainable public sphere by being (Audunson et al. 2019):

- providers of knowledge and cultural expression,
- agents that foster an enlightened and informed citizenry, are
- arenas for public debate.

As individual benefits (education and knowledge) are widely recognised, I am interested in the benefits of social capital and how it is created with and/or for the community. Especially in the context of public debate and public sphere.

Communities

Social capital is the glue that holds communities together and essentially makes them communities (Putnam 2001, 2007). Svendsen (2013) analysed Danish branch libraries and their services to make intangible social capital understandable through library services.

He concluded in his study that the main contribution to social capital is the cultural events and meeting functions. The main purpose of these two types of activities is socialisation. Such activities can lead to collective goods because they benefit both the individual and the whole community and ultimately the whole society (Ibid.).

This is due to their ability to foster networks and, as a by-product, build trust and shared norms, which helps to strengthen social cohesion within the local community, the integration of minority groups, 'civic' communication and behaviour, and crime prevention.

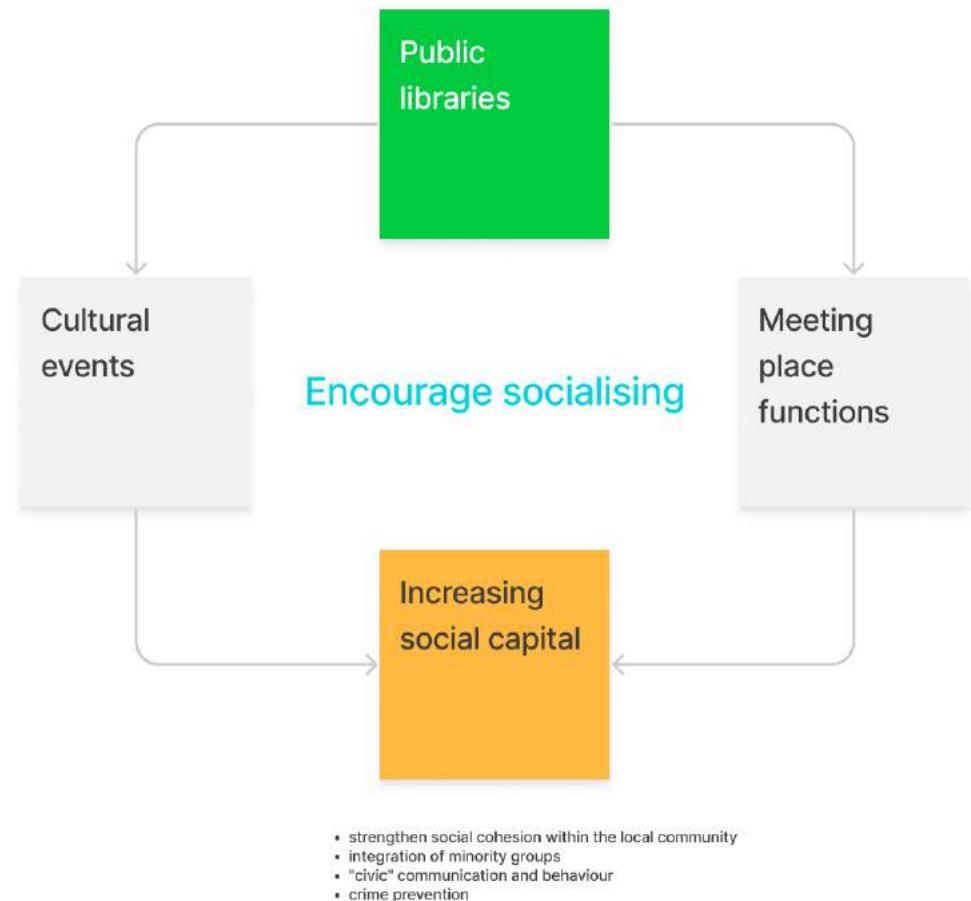


Fig. 4 - How public libraries create social capital (Svendsen 2013)

Ragnar Audunson (2005, 435–436) comes to a similar conclusion, stating:

"A viable local community needs arenas that can provide a minimum community in values, meeting places where people can meet, communicate and be active together across generations and social and ethnic belongings as well as arenas for debate and discussion on social and political issues."

With the recognition that social well-being and mental health are dependent on the health of a community, I must point out that there are economic reasons why higher social capital is good for society.

Economies with high social capital are top performers in social and economic indicators such as health, social inclusion, national prosperity, democracy, and trust in government institutions (Vårheim 2016). All individuals can benefit from living in a community or country with high social capital, as the previously mentioned economic indicators are something that all democratic countries want to improve.

Community engagement and involvement

The realization that library buildings themselves do not create social capital per se should come as no surprise. Besides, without people, the library is just a warehouse of books and gadgets.

Instead, this truth highlights an opportunity for libraries to design for and engage communities to maximize the benefits found in the previous chapter.

Public libraries cannot provide social capital as an isolated institution (Cart 2002). They need effective partnerships in the local community. Because libraries are trusted and neutral institutions, they are best suited among public institutions for community involvement (Kranich 2012).

There are several reasons to focus on active engagement. First, community engagement ensures that the services provided are tailored to the specific needs of the community and empowers stakeholders by fostering trust and providing skills (Roger and Robinson 2004).

Furthermore, public libraries that are responsive to community needs offer many benefits in a complex and rapidly changing world. Through participation, community members can take ownership of ideas; therefore, implementation is faster.² In addition, a library service tailored to the community helps get resources (especially financial resources) to where they are needed.

Therefore, community involvement is essential and even more of a priority in a rural area with a scattered population. There is always the question of how resources can be used most efficiently and effectively (Somers and Williment 2011). Libraries should not be left alone in providing access to resources within the community. Working with government agencies, health centres, and non-profit organizations allows the library to do more with fewer resources (Scott 2011).

Libraries that do an excellent job of building strong communities: are attuned to their members and the characteristics of their communities, are connected to other organizations that serve those users, and are flexible in their program and service delivery, adapting to changing needs (Ibid.).

Being a good community partner fosters a cycle in which people become more engaged with the library and the community, which helps communities grow and stay strong. By actively engaging and encouraging participation, the services offered can make public libraries the heart of the community.

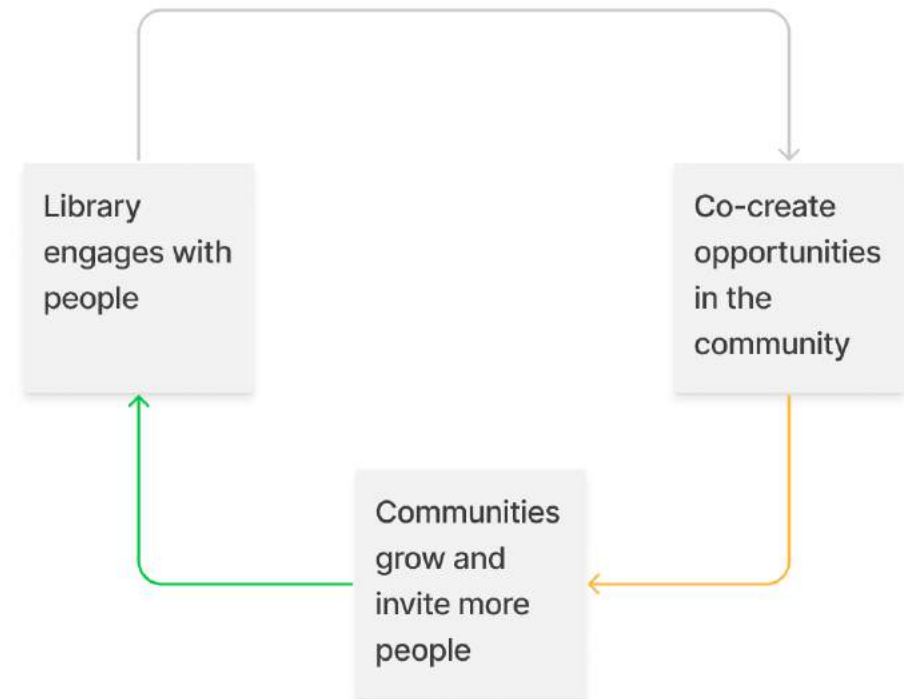


Fig. 5 - The value of public library in placemaking

² <https://www.FastCompany.com/90593014/how-to-transform-your-street-into-a-1-minute-city>

Designing for communities

When designing initiatives for communities it is essential to understand how people interact with the community and feel about themselves joining a community. A helpful framework for that is McMillan & Chavis's (1986) "sense of community". McMillan & Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as a feeling

- that members have of belonging,
- that members matter to one another and the group,
- and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to being together.

There are four elements of a "sense of community" according to the theory:

- Membership
- Influence works both ways: members need to feel that they have some influence in the group, and some impact by the group on its members is required for group cohesion
- Integration and fulfilment of needs: Members feel rewarded in some way for their participation in the community
- Shared emotional connection

Critical thing for me to consider when designing and approaching communities is that members are more attracted to a community in which they feel influential. Furthermore, a strong community can fit people together to meet others' needs while meeting their own.

Framing of the project

This chapter describes the process and findings of the two main research activities carried out in the first phase of the project, which aimed to understand the role and influence of public libraries in society.

In addition to the desktop research, I conducted nine expert interviews. All nine interviews were about an hour long semi-structured interviews. The expert interviews aimed to understand what people who work with libraries think about the role of the library and how they see the future of libraries.

I had three expert interviews from Estonia. Knowing that the Estonian public library system is similar to the Nordic countries, I wanted to learn from their experiences. I organised expert interviews with Finnish (4 interviews), Danish (1 interview) library staff, and a group interview with an international research group that supports the transformation of the library system in Europe.

³ <http://designthinkingforlibraries.com>

The main findings from the expert interviews

I have been fortunate enough to talk to people involved in the creation of two of the most famous examples of a modern library - Oodi and Aarhus.

Even without the participants knowing who I would be talking to, it was clear that the human-centred approach to libraries in the Nordic countries was contagious - starting with Aarhus in Denmark with their partnership with IDEO³. Then it spread across Denmark and into Finland, culminating in 2018 with Oodi. And these ideas and methods are spreading in Estonia as well.

Each interviewee had a different experience of why libraries are changing. I spoke to textbook examples of good libraries, but the changes all started from internal problems:

- a mandate that did not allow hiring new staff, which meant that librarians' work had to be reorganized
- a mandate to rethink the role of the library in the lives of younger people
- the realization that hierarchical organizations are not suited to a modern world.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, articulating the value of libraries is not easy. This makes it complicated to see the return on investment from the perspective of decision makers.

An optimistic undertone from one of the interviews leads to the realization that "the money will follow if we can articulate the value of libraries to decision-makers today".

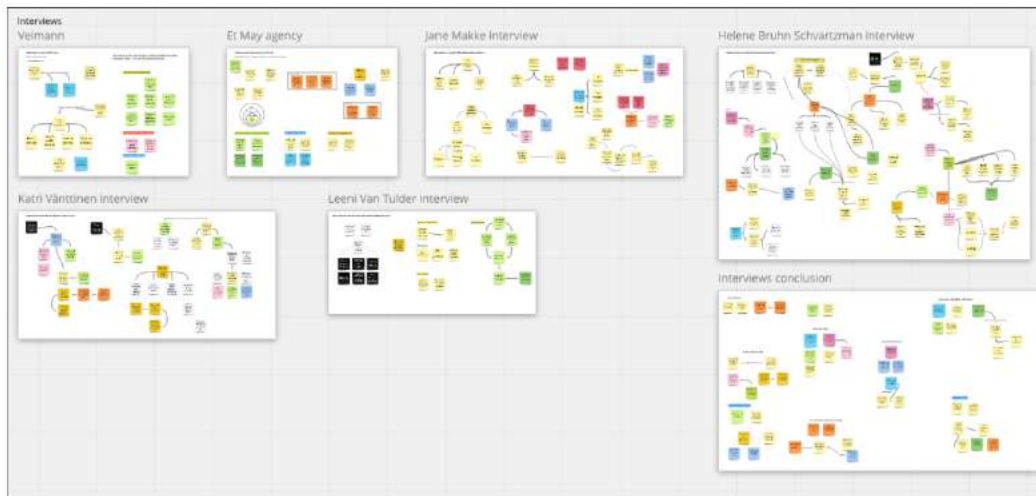


Fig. 6 - Analyzing expert interviews

From the Estonian perspective, the value of libraries is not perceived until the discussion about closing a library begins. The act of closing a library is the final milestone in the slow decline of rural communities.

While discussing the role of the library and the need to reinvent its services, I was introduced to a conundrum that clearly shows the problem of lack of vision.

On the one hand, libraries try their best to invite people to visit. This includes organizing book clubs, debates, art exhibitions, or providing tangible opportunities to learn new knowledge. At the same time, libraries are under pressure (and rightly so) to improve their online services and introduce book lending at home or close to home.

Both activities are important for libraries to improve their services. Yet, they are counterintuitive unless we have a clear understanding of the role of the library. Unless we have established the goals of libraries, we cannot evaluate their efforts.

*"We are stuck with the noun library. Shouldn't the citizen be able to sew in the library? Shouldn't the citizen be able to play music in the library?" —
Expert interview participant*

From my interviews and research, it is clear that there is also a gap between the vision of legislators and funders and librarians, communities, and researchers.

Using the Aarhus library as an example, local people want space to experiment, come together, and share knowledge through active participation in hobby classes. But hovering over the libraries is the vision of a high-tech library. However, it is never clear how technology will enhance the library experience for the community in this vision.

Then, in the discussion of the future of libraries, "library as platform" was mentioned several times. It's an opaque term that leaves room for interpretation for any reader. But the underlying theme was that the library is a platform to build personal skills and knowledge and a way to create knowledge collaboratively. The library becomes a place for the shared learning experience.

*"We need to think of the library as a verb. The book is a tool to build and share knowledge, but the mud and the trees and the compost worms and whatever else might be the same tool." —
Expert interview participant*

Collaborative knowledge building is consistent with the idea that a librarian is the guardian of the community. Someone who is "immersed in a local community" builds a connection between people and creates library programs (content) together.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtCrwMtrJaU>

The library can also become a platform for circling all kinds of resources. Initially it is about using the resources that libraries currently have, but it is also about finding out what resources the community has (through engagement, partnerships) and letting them flow freely to create new knowledge and experiences.

A good example is the ground floor of Oodi. It has been designed as an environment⁴ where other services can engage with visitors and offer their services.

Mapping out the problems of public libraries in Estonia

Before diving into the problems, I've identified with public libraries in Estonia, I want to make a few remarks that help to grasp the issues at hand.

I won't consider the problems related to outdated technical platforms or other internal tools for providing library services. In my understanding, solving these problems (even if necessary) does not transform public libraries into 21st-century libraries.

Second, these problems were also introduced during my expert interviews, but I introduce the problems through official documents that have thoroughly analysed the library network in Estonia.

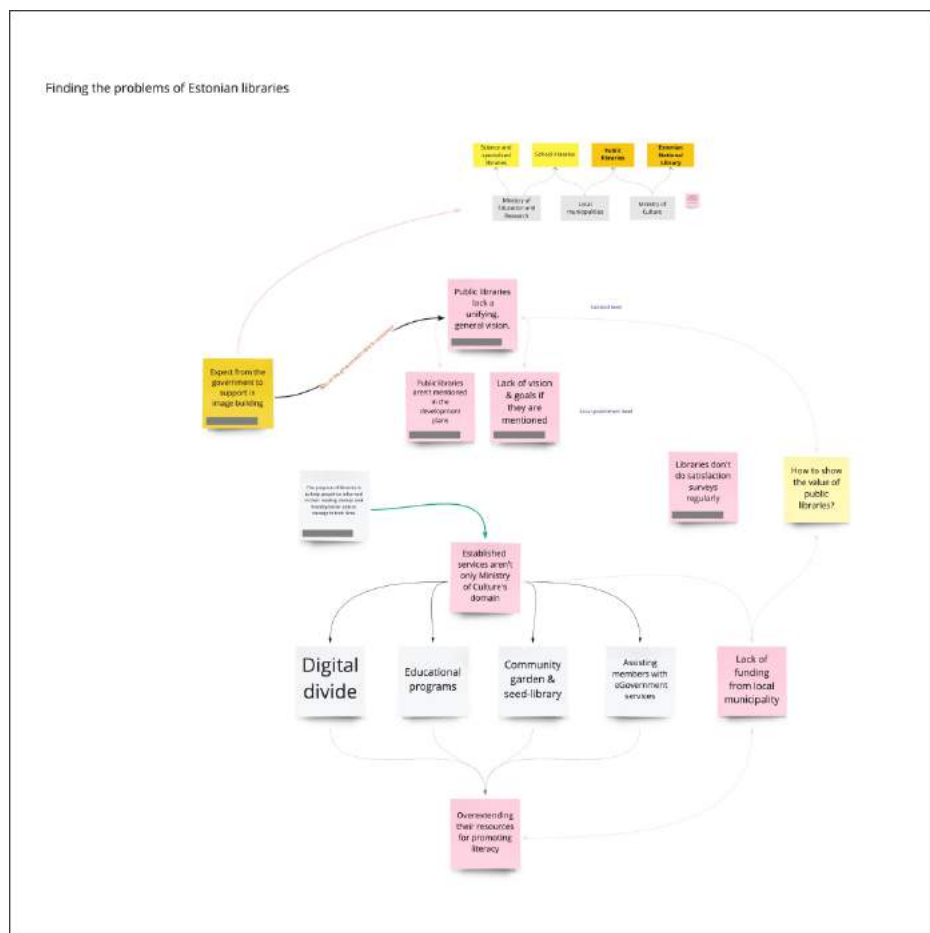


Fig. 7 - Mapping the problems of public libraries

Public libraries lack a unified, general vision

The 21st Century Library vision document (2016) states that one of the problems is the lack of an overarching vision for public libraries in Estonia. As a result, public libraries are not mentioned in the development plans and strategic documents of local governments.

The Public Library Quality Assessment (Raamatukogude kvaliteedihindamise tulemused 2020) report found that mentions are generally a passive description of library services and ongoing support for the provision of library services to citizens. However, support is rarely defined, which I also noticed in the Public Libraries Amendment Bill (Rahvaraamatukogu Seaduse Muutmise... 2020).

Lack of funding

Another problem that is pointed out is the lack of funding. As public libraries are local government facilities, the budget available is tied to the local revenue base. In 2011, there were discussions to consider the management of library services at the local level as a national obligation. However, these discussions did not manifest in a legislative change (Ibid.).

For me, the lack of funding falls back on the previous problem - the lack of an inspiring and unifying vision. Since the value of a public library is abstract and not easily expressed in numbers, it is understandable that local decision-makers would rather fund a local social service or education than a public library.

Expanding services

One of growing problems I have encountered is that public libraries perform different functions and overstretch their resources. R. David Lankes (2016) has said that the core role of the librarian is different from the library as an institution.

Librarians promote literacy, which is about knowledge and getting by. As technology changes, the personalised approach to each visitor means that services might not be associated with literature or culture.

A great example of librarians responding quickly to a growing problem in communities is the digital divide. On the one hand, much information is now available online. Therefore, it is understandable why librarians are expected to teach basic digital skills, and libraries provide access to computers and the Internet.

At the same time, more and more communication with government is moving to the "Web." In the absence of adequate support for citizens trying to understand or use these services, librarians have adapted to helping their members access online services. However, libraries are not exactly "funded" to do this work.

To refer again to R. David Lankes (2016), the doomsday vision for public libraries is not obsolescence but overexpansion: doing far too many things far too badly.

Expansion of services without a corresponding increase in resources (budget, staff, authority, training) is a recipe for disaster. The most trusted public institutions instead become the latest examples of government failure.

My take on the lack of modernisation of libraries

As important as libraries are, many are underutilised and have limited budgets and resources.

Some libraries and librarians want to do more and are actively trying to engage the public, modernise services, and support learning and knowledge sharing among community members. However, as these activities become more widespread, libraries currently have to be resourceful to fulfil their ambitions.

One of the ways to do this is with volunteers. Tallinn Central Library is an excellent example of this. Out of the volunteer initiative, many programmes and activities have been supported by the institution Tallinn Central Library. However, these are not services per se that they need to develop.

For example, out of the desire of the local community and the help of volunteers, the community garden with a seed library was born at Laagna tee in Lasnamäe. But relying only on the enthusiasm and sense of mission of librarians or volunteers is not sustainable.

I frame the underlying problem as a lack of vision for public libraries and what kinds of services they need to provide. Furthermore, as a designer, I am interested in how these services should be developed and delivered.

Creating the concept for public libraries

What I've learned so far:

1. public libraries have become disseminators of social capital in our society by hosting events and creating spaces to meet with people;
2. public libraries are among the most trusted institutions in our society because they are open to all and provide the same quality of services to all;
3. despite the potential positive impact, public libraries have limited resources to provide a modern service and are therefore underused;
4. because local governments govern public libraries, their success depends on local politicians and coalitions, which can change from year to year or with each election cycle;
5. there is a lack of vision and direction for public libraries nationally that would allow us to evaluate their efforts.

In this chapter, I walk through the process of creating a model for public libraries. I want to help the discussion of their role, their goals, and how services are delivered among different stakeholders and decision makers who have different experiences with libraries.

The beginning

I set out to explore the possibilities of transforming public libraries for the 21st century before literature review and expert interviews. I hypothesised that public libraries are underutilised but can be important players in their communities. To begin, I had three components to work with:

- Public libraries
- The Community
- The Future (still 21st century)

Desktop research helped me understand the importance of public libraries and their potential impact. It also became clear that strong communities are the critical safety net. The strength of the safety net depends on the political and economic environment, but communities play an essential role.

Therefore, in my project, the unknown is the future. There are many frameworks and tools to think about the future. And based on the future outlined, I could suggest how public libraries need to change. Or what needs to change.

However, I was not convinced that imagining a possible future and suggesting what public libraries need to do is the best way to solve this puzzle.

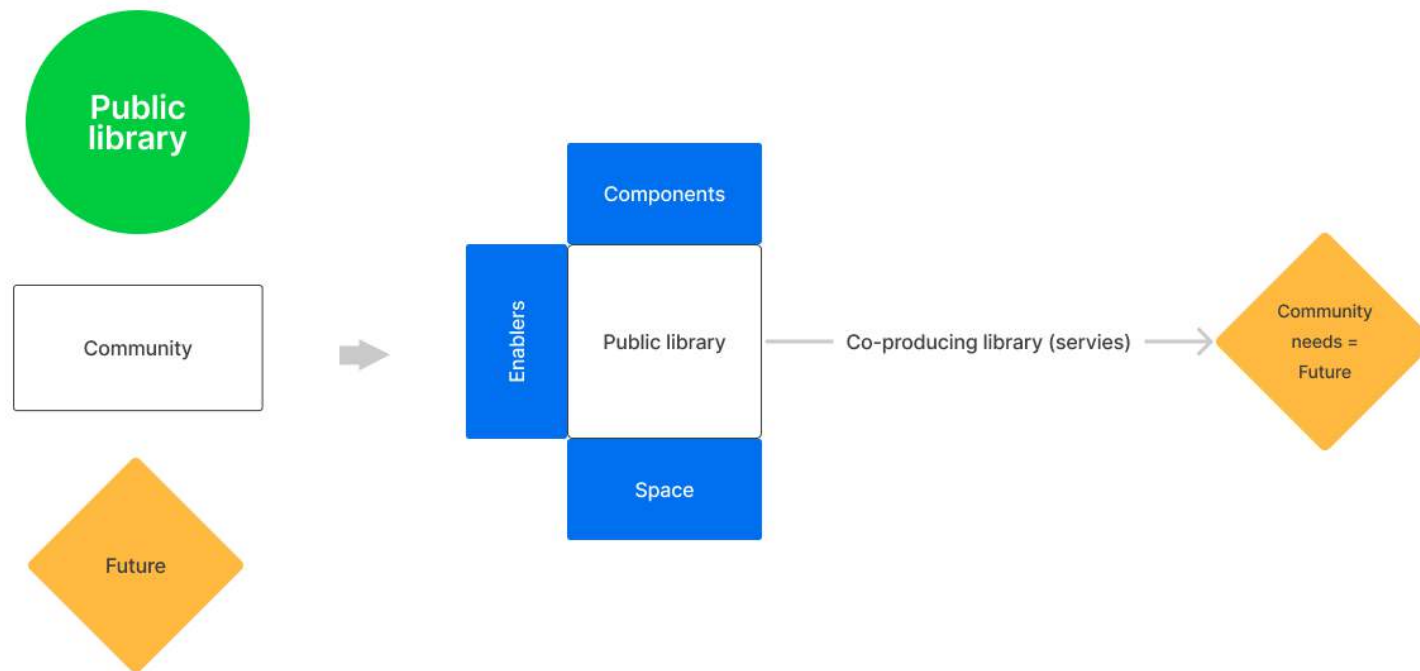
Another option was to follow the best examples of other public libraries. Dozens of excellent public libraries have been built and renovated in the last 10-15 years. Any one of them could be a perfect blueprint to follow.

As I looked more closely at each example, I found that behind each library is a specific problem they are addressing. [See Appendix 1](#)

Even though the problems are universal and Estonia, like other places, faces these challenges, the potential implementation is context specific.

The simplest constraint is available resources. But there are also cultural differences, traditions, and even different understandings of the value and role of public libraries.

Therefore, inspired by Ezio Manzini⁵, Dan Hill⁶ and Helsinki Design Lab⁷ co-producing approach, I define "the future" in my work as the current needs of the community. This means accepting that people know best what services they need and how.



⁵ (Manzini 2015)

⁶ (Hill 2012)

⁷ (Boyer et al. 2011)

Fig. 8 - Initial concept to think about the future of public libraries

Public libraries provide a physical space. Public libraries have various services, programmes, and activities as components that bring the customer experience to life. And they have enablers who provide those services. Enablers like the librarians, collections, technology, and special equipment that is made accessible.

All in all, the library becomes a platform for individuals and communities to access a variety of tools and resources to solve their problems.

The transformation

As I sat on my concept, I understood the limitations of it. The main problem was that the model was not providing perspective on changing needs. More than that, it did not answer the main question I was trying to figure out - what is the role of the public library, and what should its goals be?

I continued to work on the concept, which

- double downs on communities, since every community is different,
- helps to convey the role of the public library,
- and considers the changing environment (politics, future trends, etc.)

The simple idea that one plus one does not always equal two sparked me to approach it as a mathematical challenge.

Starting with public libraries with all the facets I described in the previous chapter. Then we have the services and the strategy of public libraries. These two correspond to the outcomes - the goals we set for public libraries.

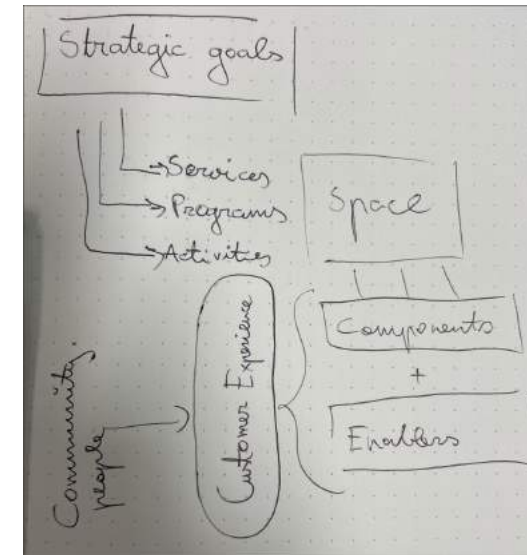


Fig. 9 - Sketching a better concept

Also, a key factor is the community, which influences how and what services are provided. And I want to make sure that we look at the community as an enabler, which means that each community has its own resources that can be used to improve library services and therefore the community.

Furthermore, I cannot forget the external interventions. I'm thinking of local policy changing strategy.

Finally, if this equation is to describe real life and the transformation of public libraries, it must consider current conditions and the drivers of change.

By combining each element described, I get a model that focuses clearly and succinctly on the many aspects of the public library. On one side, we have the outcomes that answer what we want to accomplish with new types of public libraries. On the other side of the equation, each public library can think about how to achieve these goals in their community by understanding the resources available, the current conditions, and the external stakeholders that influence service.

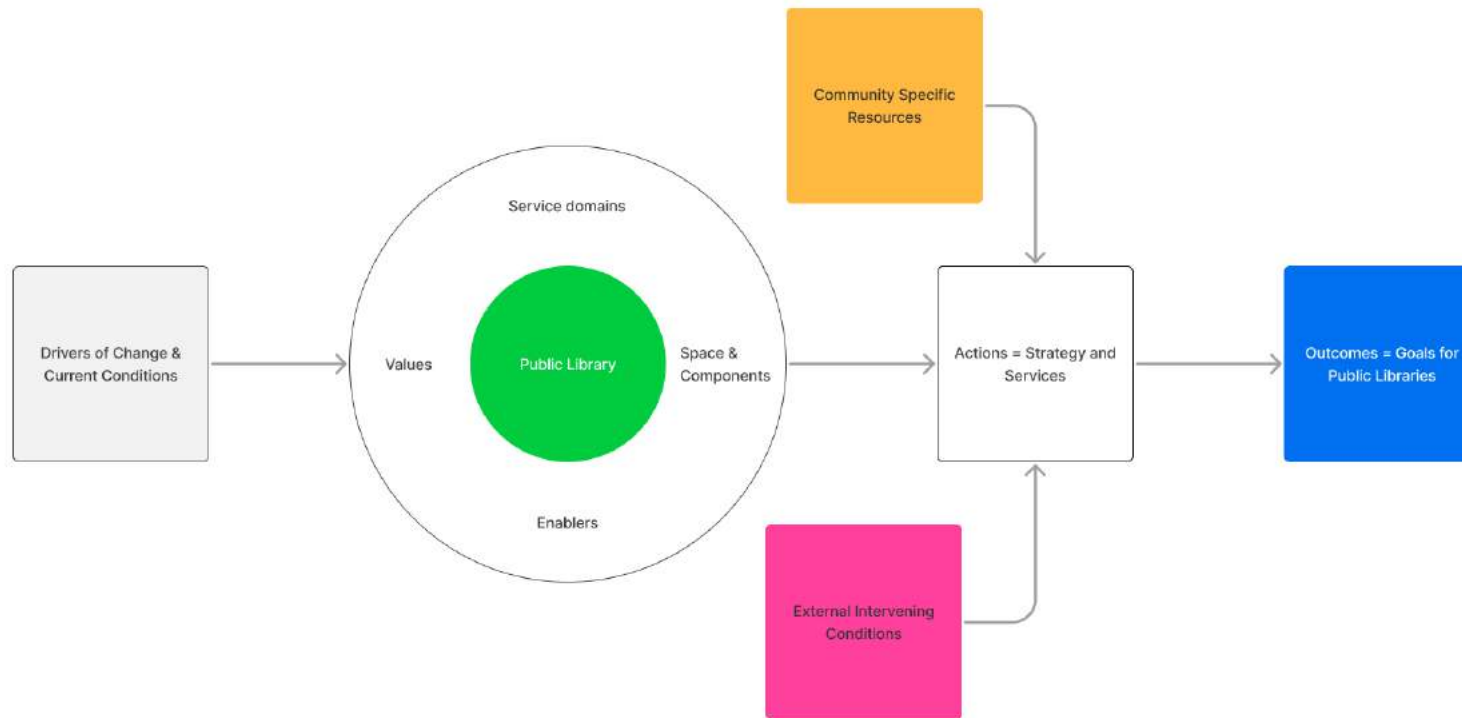


Fig. 10 - Model to assist discussing the future of public libraries

Putting the model into practice

Now that I had a model to think about public library service, I was eager to learn about people's expectations for outcomes.

I decided to hold workshops with various stakeholders. The main goal of my workshops was to understand the different perspectives on the possible outcomes of public libraries. If we agree on the outcomes or goals that public libraries should meet, we can design library services accordingly.

The second goal of the workshops was to see if my understanding of the problem was valid. Since the problem is multi-faceted, I could not go to people to ask them if this was right or not. Instead, I planned one of the activities in the workshop to describe the current conditions. That way, by analysing the results, I can see if the same signals of the problem are showing up in the playground. I am aware of confirmation bias here.

The structure of the workshop

Excluding the warm-up exercise, my workshop consisted of three activities that were inputs to different parts of my model concept.

The first activity was "Expected Outcomes." I formulated the question to the participants, "What outcomes would you like to see in public libraries in 2035?".

I chose the year 2035 because it is far away, but not as abstract as when you think about a future library. I also used 2035 in the very last exercise.

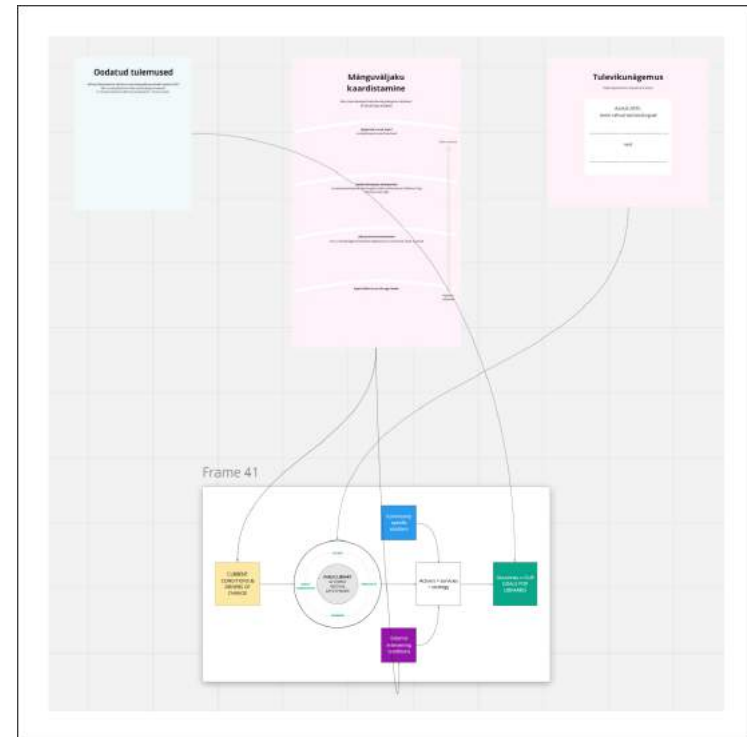


Fig. 11 - Connecting workshop activities with my model

The second activity in my workshop is the playground mapping exercise. It comes from Nordkapp's toolkit Actionable Futures⁸. Redesigning public libraries is a complex project; therefore, it is crucial to understand the different aspects of the environment. This exercise helps to understand what ideas, initiatives, technologies and who dominates now and in the future.

The final exercise is crafting the vision statement. The goal was for each participant to think about the optimal future and what it looks like. The constraint of filling in the blanks makes the description of the future tangible and concrete.

And then, together, to create a statement as a result of the workshop.

[See the Appendix 2](#) for the worksheets.

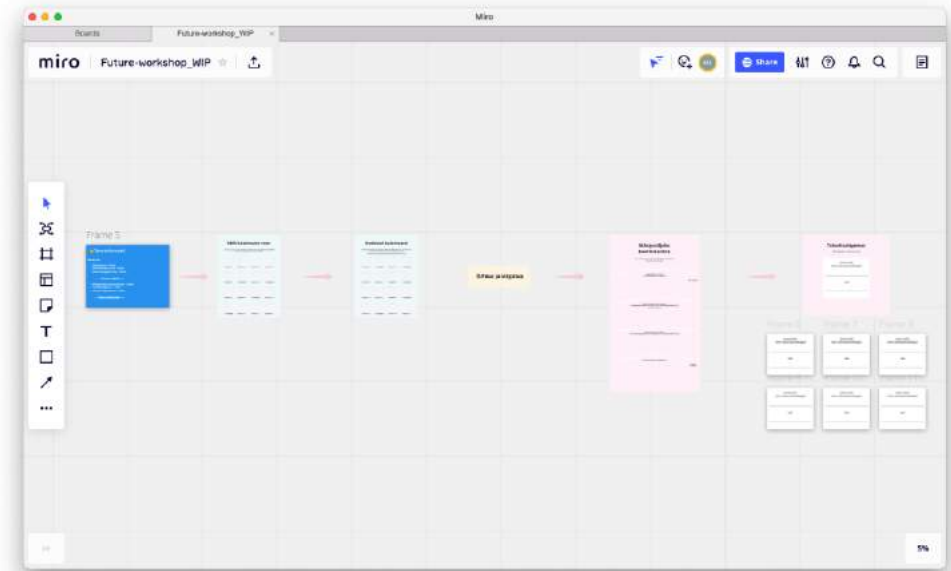


Fig. 12 - Empty workshop waiting for participants

⁸ <https://futures.nordkapp.fi/>

Linking public libraries with my concept

The goal of the future scenario workshop was to hear different perspectives on the current state of public libraries and expectations for future public libraries. I conducted three two-hour workshops with 5-7 participants each.

The first workshop was a trial workshop with the staff of National Library of Estonia. The main goal was to see how people would react to my approach and whether the prompts would stimulate a fruitful discussion.

The second workshop was with a variety of stakeholders. My goal was to recruit as diverse a list as possible from both sides - libraries (service providers), community leaders. In the end, I had participants from the

- Ministry of Culture,
- Estonia Librarians Association,
- a representative from Estonian Cooperation Assembly,
- a volunteer leader from a local youth community, and
- a student from the Estonian Student Union.

I did not expect the participants to represent an official view of their organisation. However, I felt that their background, along with their personal beliefs, offered me more significant insights while covering a broader spectrum of the topic.

The third workshop was with librarians from all over Estonia. In total there were five people from smaller and larger public libraries.

Since the first workshop went better than expected, I will include the results in my analysis. Overall, I can say that the workshops went well despite my fears about them being online and most people using Miro for the first time.

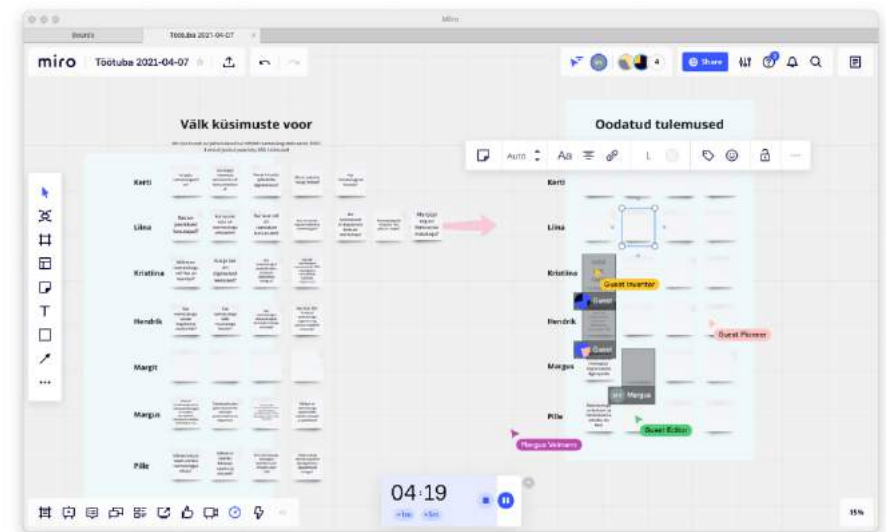


Fig. 13 - Ongoing workshop

There was a lot of excitement among the participants about the future of public libraries. Even if they had not thought about libraries before, after a bit of a warm-up, we were able to discuss exciting concepts and visions for libraries. I think the workshops achieved the goals I had set.

I also learned a lot about facilitating online workshops. Since my participants were not yet familiar with Miro, there was a slight hesitation and shyness to participate and use it. I responded by taking on the role of a secretary, creating post-it notes on behalf of the participants, helping to move the post-its around, and trying to be helpful. The goal was to discuss, and I understood that Miro should not get in the way of that. In the end, Miro was valuable to me in documenting the process.

I collected them in a worksheet to summarise the results of the workshop, where I grouped similar ideas and notes. In the end, I had a description that consisted of a vision description and a corresponding portfolio of services.

The Playground exercise allowed me to analyse the current state and outline the problem description according to my participants. And inspired by the book "How to Future" (Scott and Ashby 2020), the same exercise allowed me to create a Future Trends Timeline that I used to build future scenarios by connecting trends, signals, and drivers of change on the timeline.

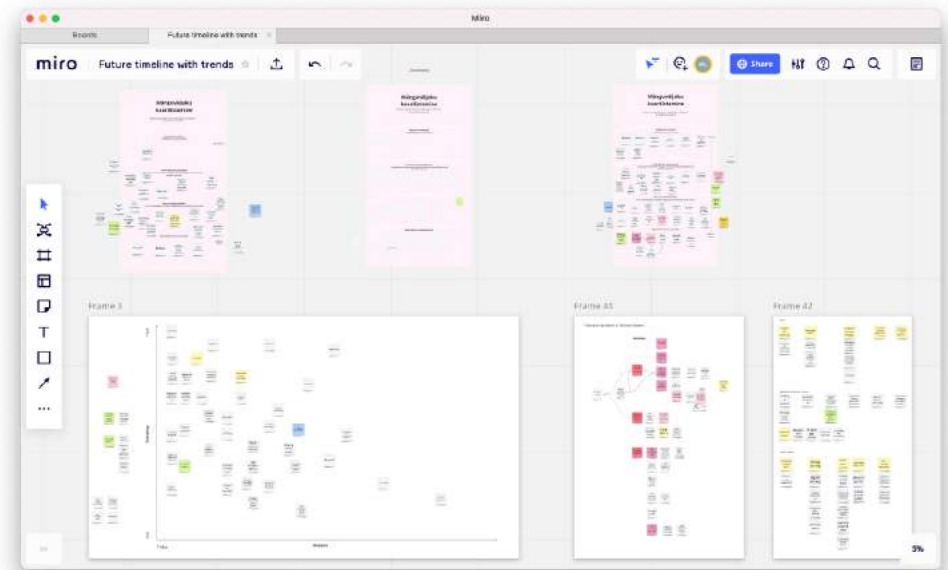


Fig. 14 - Analysing the workshop results

Introducing the vision and values

There were four prominent roles for public libraries. One of the most exciting and talked about roles was the library as a place that shows the possibilities of the world, that is, it is a place to dream by showing the latest technologies, possibilities, and knowledge of the world.

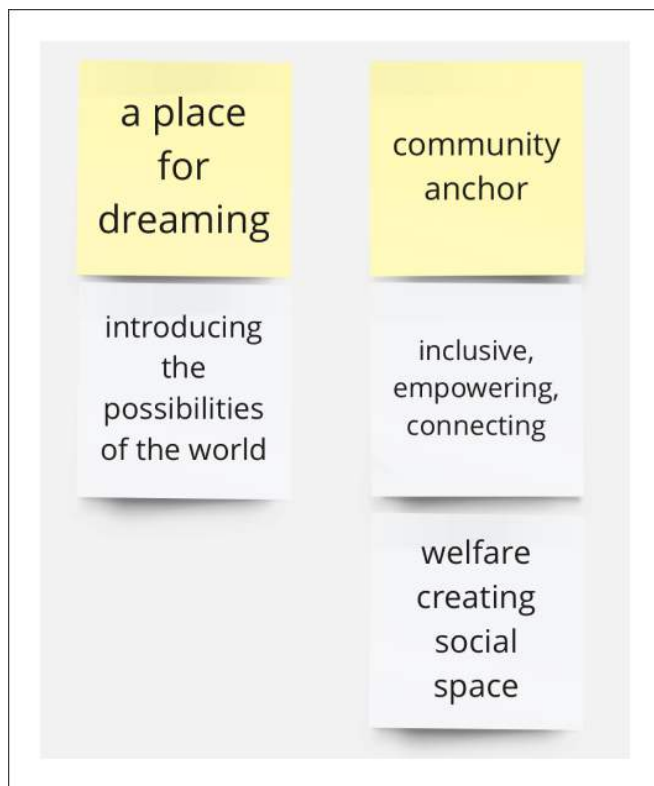


Fig. 15 - Outcome of the workshops I

The other important aspect was locality and being for the local community. From one side we concluded that libraries should focus even more on creating social wellbeing and cohesion in communities. Linked to these social issues is the expectation that libraries will become agents of necessary social change.

The major challenge of the future is climate change. The appropriate social change would be to promote sharing and the circular economy in communities - helping people to lead more sustainable lifestyles by sharing knowledge with practical workshops. In summary, the higher mission for public libraries would be to accelerate positive change by supporting grassroots initiatives.

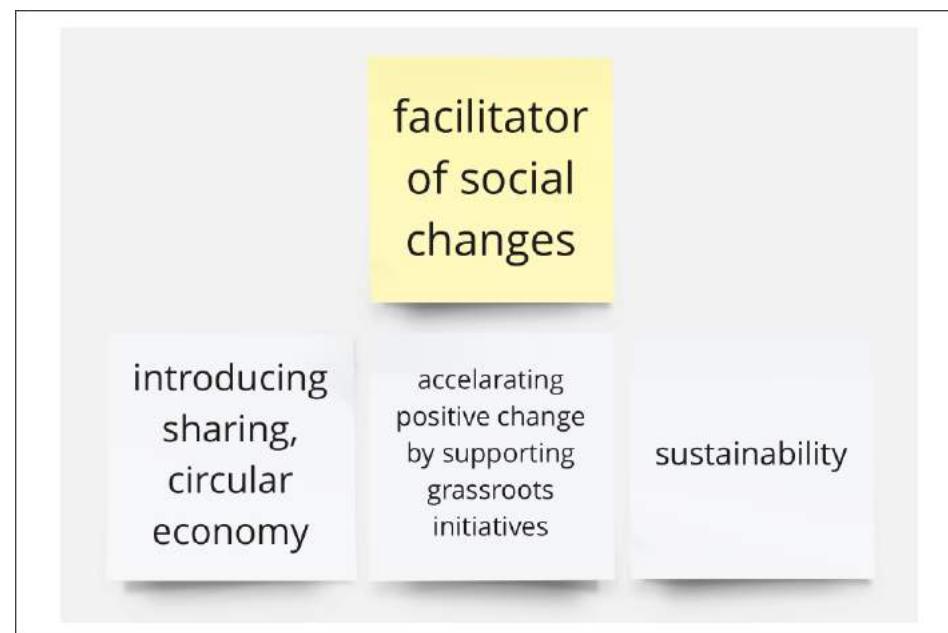


Fig. 16 - Outcome of the workshops II

At the same time, people expect public libraries to play an even more significant role in supporting traditional education by encouraging and supporting lifelong learning. The intriguing word here is the local mecca of knowledge. Part of that mecca should be collecting and archiving local culture and stories, including digital culture. Here, the mission can be summarised as follows: Public Libraries should guide people to move from being mere consumers of digital content and culture to producers of the same culture and knowledge.

Finally, it addresses the digital divide in a world where more and more public services are delivered digitally. With fewer physical touchpoints with government due to digital services, the library could connect government and its citizens.

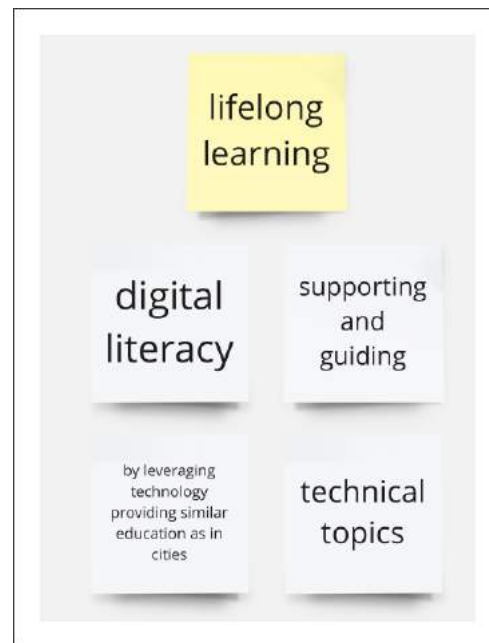


Fig. 17 - Outcome of the workshops I

An interesting aspect of public libraries is the general view or opinion of library service. I will discuss the current state of public libraries in the following chapters. However, as a positive change, my workshop participants would like to see public libraries become places where people go to solve their problems. Not limited to books or literature, but to overcome any lack of knowledge one might have.

Introducing the service portfolio

Four types of services emerged from the workshops that public libraries must provide to fulfil the aforementioned visions.

We can not get around the reading habit. But based on the workshops, it's not just about books; it's about every type of content that people consume. The crucial task would be to help people find a healthy consumption habit that consists of trustworthy sources. Children were mentioned in every workshop as the age of entry for content consumption is decreasing.

Related to this are services that support lifelong learning, including digital literacy and technical topics in the increasingly digital world. The role of a public library would be to guide and support people's interest in new technologies and topics, as we cannot expect librarians to be experts in every field. However, a concrete service could provide access to learning activities and conferences through technologies throughout Estonia, not just in a few cities. The social aspect of learning together in a shared space was mentioned as necessary.

Then the library space itself can become a service. On the one hand, the space can be more inviting for local people to discuss exciting things. On the other hand, the library can become a place where other organizations can connect with the community. This ties into one of the visions of the library being a touchpoint between the citizen and the government.

Ultimately, the purpose of public libraries in communities should be to be a platform for creatives to share and perform their work. Part of that would be the act of performing. But the other part is collecting the stories and memories of the community. I see it as an extension of the collections that librarians work with. It used to be the information of many physical formats. But now it would expand to anything relevant to the local community.

Introduce the current state (problem description)

The current state of public libraries varies widely. In some libraries there are positive initiatives to modernise services to encourage more people to visit and use the library. The problem is that these initiatives depend on a few enthusiastic leaders who want to improve their library.

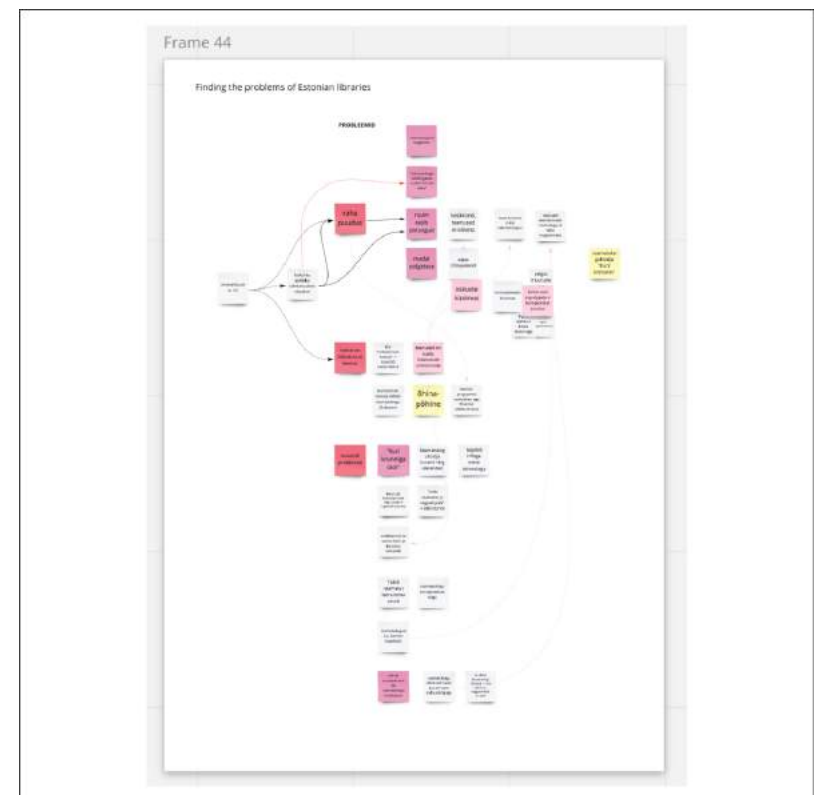


Fig. 18 - Identifying underlying problems from workshops

During the workshop, I learned about many problems from everyday stories and examples. But most of them are symptoms or side effects of the few basic problems outlined in the previous chapters.

It was important to recognise that the problems described are the consequences of deeper forces that have created uncertainty and confusion around the role of public libraries. Connecting to my previous findings, the main sources of the problems are:

- the lack of a unified understanding of the role of the public library in society (including goals),
- the lack of resources to transform the service (money is of paramount importance, but so is space and staff)
- the negative reputation associated with books, reading and the importance of the library.

Future of public libraries

Next, I will present my vision for the future of public libraries in Estonia. A supporting guideline is a concept I outlined in the previous chapter.

Since the main problem is the lack of a vision, my first goal is to create a coherent and inspiring vision that also addresses the second level problems arising from the lack of vision and available resources.

Before proposing a preferable future, I want to compare the present (the current Public Libraries Act (1998)) and the expectation.

The present vs. the future

As a thought experiment, I compared the results of the workshops to the Public Libraries Act. The Act states that the mission of public libraries is to

- support lifelong learning,
- provide free access to information and knowledge, and
- shape people's reading habits.

Compared to the results of my workshop, there are few new expectations for libraries. But considering the types of services and programs public libraries offer in Estonia, the leap is not that drastic.

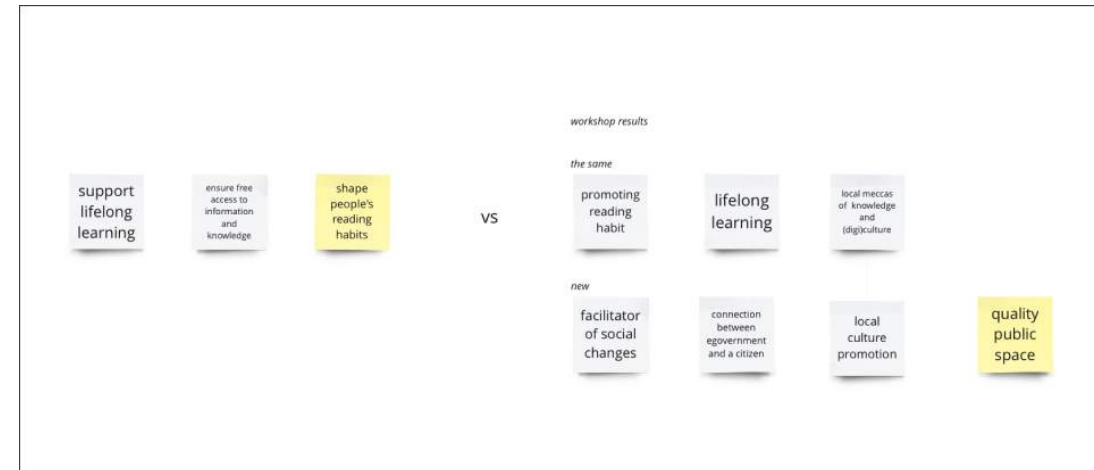


Fig. 19 - Comparing the expectations versus Public Libraries Act

The new roles that emerged from the workshops are to facilitate social change through grassroots activities. This has to do with lifelong learning and knowledge. Then public libraries are to act as a link between government and citizens. Librarians already help people use digital services, but with additional resources, storytelling, and targeted efforts, the effort could have a greater impact, and that's not a huge leap from the current situation.

Public libraries should promote local culture. This is the most significant change, as libraries are expected to become a platform for various cultural events. To be successful in this new cultural role, public libraries need to be a welcoming and attractive public space. I consider this a bonus, but let's not forget that although many services can be provided remotely and online, libraries still need to be welcoming and enjoyable places to meet to truly create connections between people in the community.

Since there is not much difference in expectations of outcomes, it is how the service is delivered that matters. And what the library looks like. In the next chapter I will look at the guiding values and principles that help to achieve the outcomes I mentioned earlier.

The guiding values of public library service

As I mentioned in the previous chapters, I do not believe in a one-size-fits-all solution for public libraries. There cannot be one perfect library.

Instead, my vision for tomorrow's libraries is based on five guiding values. The values are the result of workshops and my desktop research on how to maximize the benefits of public libraries.

The five values are:

- community-led
- person-centred and aspirational
- creation-first
- conversational programming
- Dialog-based learning

Community-led-public-library

Every community is dynamic and unique. Therefore, we cannot predict what is needed for community members to succeed. The community-led public library is a community partner that fosters a cycle in which people become more engaged in the community and in the library, resulting in a stronger community.

Person-centred and aspirational

People are not interested in engaging with the library. They are trying to achieve a specific goal. Therefore, the public library needs to help them make progress toward their goal.

Creation-first public library

The creation-first public library focuses on the physical space where things can be put together, where new things are made while meeting new people and sharing the common experience. In a digitized world where vast amounts of content are available, people strive for hands-on experiences.

Conversational programming

Through conversational programming, public libraries provide both a space for people to come together and share ideas and a way to facilitate those conversations. "Public neighbourhood spaces" contribute to inclusion and integration along multiple dimensions of integration - economic integration, social integration, and integration as citizens (Johnston 2016, 2019; Johnston and Audunson 2019).

Dialog-based learning

Public library services support curiosity and self-development by considering people's own experiences and their desire to define their own learning needs.

Designing for future public libraries

I set two goals for my design deliverable. First, I wanted to bring the theoretical background of my concept of the future into a familiar, everyday setting. Second, I wanted the result to stimulate discussion about the values and expectations of public libraries.

I decided to create a website for a future library. We all visit websites daily. It is a medium we are accustomed to using to learn about services we plan or desire to use.

Since my alignment building tool and workshop output are invisible building blocks of library service and I don't have a specific community to work with, I've been looking for other guides to help me design the visible services of the future library.

I use the framework of Jochumsen et al.'s (2012) four-space model as a guide for designing the services. The four-space model helps to develop the physical space and services in the library.

The four spaces should not be seen as concrete "rooms" in the physical sense, but as possibilities that can be fulfilled in both the physical and digital library. In a perfect library, these four spaces will support each other and further the goals of the library.

The updated description of the four spaces is (Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen, and Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2017):

- The **Learning Space** aims to discover and explore the world, thereby expanding members' competencies and opportunities through free and unrestricted access to information and knowledge
- The **Performative Space** aims to publish and disseminate the work and products of community members, providing them with a stage for their activities
- The **Meeting Space** sees the library as a place to hang out, but also characterized by active participation, public debate, and informal meetings
- The **Inspiration Space** emphasizes space design, exhibitions, and artistic experiences. Nevertheless, members' needs for entertainment and interests in general are also addressed

Related to the Inspiration Space is creative placemaking, which aims to strengthen relationships between and among people, and between people and place (Bedoya 2013).

Creative placemaking builds on distinctive local character and history. It creates social justice and meaningful lives for residents through a long-term partnership strategy, while providing an exciting experience for visitors and a more substantial economic base for the area (Ibid.).

The goal is to inspire communities to see themselves through a more hopeful lens.

Design deliverable

I created the website to stimulate discussion about my vision of values and expectations through a familiar medium. Because websites provide ample space to tell stories, I emphasize key elements to introduce the values and expected outcomes through everyday activities and services.

So far, I've learned that tomorrow's library must

- accelerate positive change within the community,
- introduce the new possibilities of the world,
- help people become creators of culture and knowledge, and
- be a link between government and citizens.

The guiding values that must be reflected in the library are:

- community-led
- person-centred and aspirational
- creation-first
- conversational programming
- dialogue-based learning

Using the results of the future scenario workshops, I conducted a few rounds of the impact wheel exercise to clarify a story. The impact wheel provides a simple way to explore possible paths of change (Smith and Ashby 2020). Starting with a central change, the wheel unpacks itself by imagining the first and second order impacts of likely changes.

The questions I asked were:

- What happens if the updated Public Library Act incorporates the positive vision and values?
- What happens when book lending becomes more automated and self-service based through various stations and kiosks?
- What happens when more work goes digital?
- How does climate change affect local communities?

[Go to Appendix 3](#) to see the legible and full size of impacts wheel exercise outcomes.



Fig. 20 - Unpacking impacts with impact wheel exercise

Next, I focused on the action block of my library concept to think through existing service descriptions. To guide my thinking, I began to link different services and ideas to the four-space model and proposed values and outcomes.

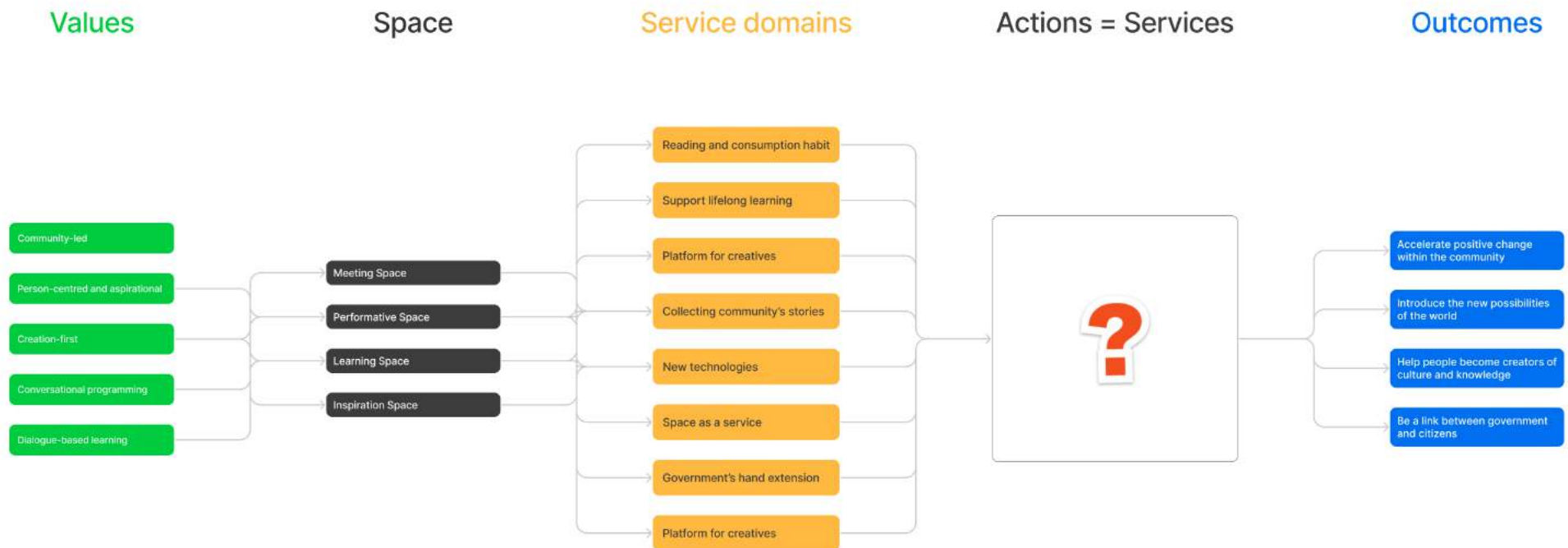


Fig. 21 - Connecting the dots to ideate on future services

I ended up with a story-rich website that includes a home page with primary information about the library. With more detailed events, facilities, services, and history of the library.

[The prototype can be accessed here.](#)

Looking back at the prototype

My concept for a future library revolves around place and the specific concerns of the community. So it was a challenge to fantasize about the issues and develop services with wow factor.

My goal was to turn on of many possible (my idea) concepts of a public library into reality. The detailed description of the services helps to understand how these values and principles are applied in real life.

In my opinion, there are two ways to proceed in the transformation of public libraries in Estonia.

1. Either one public library at a time within a community.
2. Or we create a blueprint on a national level that can be followed by public libraries in the context of their community.

In either case, a big part of success would be building design capacity in libraries and a willingness to engage with community members who don't yet visit libraries regularly. This is where the concept I developed as an alignment building tool comes into play.

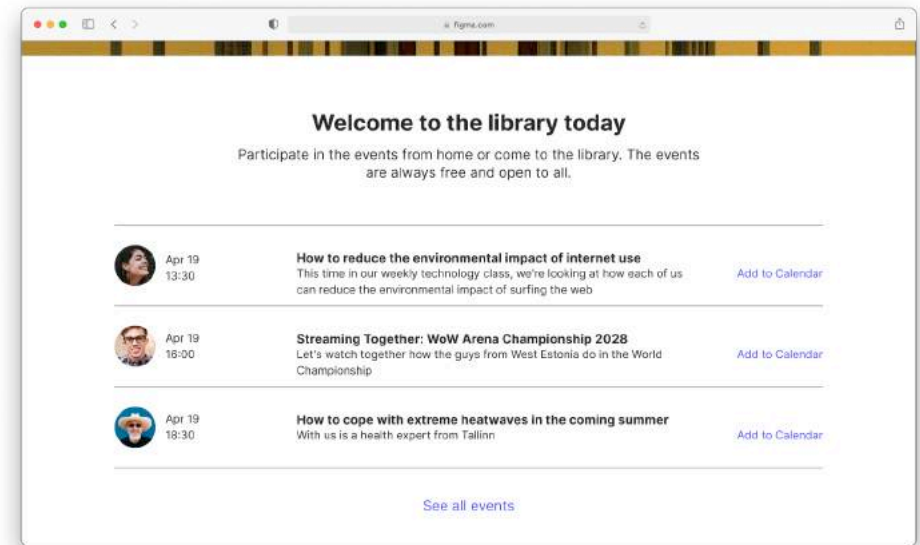


Fig. 22 - Screenshot of the design deliverable I

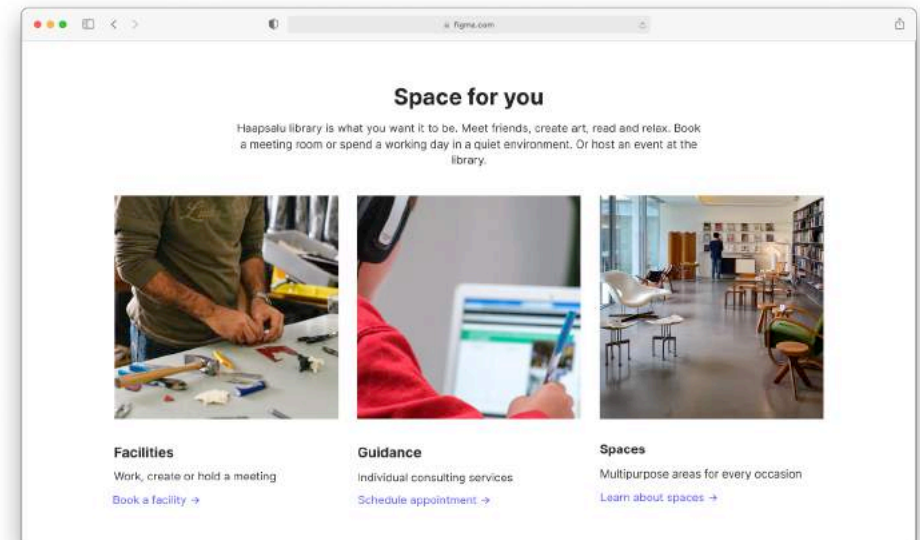


Fig. 23 - Screenshot of the design deliverable II

Reflection

This project grew out of my belief that public libraries can be an essential factor in creating a fairer society. Yet, they remain undervalued and therefore underfunded to enable the benefits unless we can articulate the role and value of public libraries.

While I am not claiming that public libraries hold all the solutions, I argue that public libraries can help solve significant problems, enable creativity, and transform the lives of community members if used properly.

It is not tempting to predict the future, but it is important to understand many possible futures. It is up to us to make choices today that will lead us to the preferred futures of tomorrow.

At the very least, I was able to find a critical intervention point to begin the process toward a preferred future. Even if the path I propose is not the right one.

The challenge for me was to shift from the researcher's mindset to the mindset of the implementer. The systemic nature of the issue at hand required a lot of research, so it was difficult for me to imagine new services or solutions for public libraries.

Therefore, there is much for other designers and researchers to explore regarding the same topic. A few interesting ones to continue the transformation process:

- How to manage and finance the network of public libraries, since more services are not only about culture?
- How to transform the physical space of public libraries to be welcoming and flexible for different occasions?
- What kind of digital services do people expect from public libraries?
- How can the design capabilities of public libraries as organisations be developed and improved?

Abstract in Estonian

Eesti rahvaraamatukogud seisavad silmitsi rahaliste vahendite ja ressursside vähesusega. See on suuresti tingitud ühtse arusaama puudumisest, mida raamatukoguteenustest 21. sajandil oodatakse. Vaatamata eksistentsiaalse kriisile, ning kasvava digitaliseerimise, linnastumise ja ebavõrdsuse tingimustes ühiskonnas, pakuvad rahvaraamatukogud kogukondadele ainulaadset väärtust.

Selle uurimistöõ eesmärgiks on leida disainilahendus rahvaraamatukogude muutmiseks inspireerivateks teenusepakkujateks.

Raamatukogude ja sotsiaalteaduste teaduskirjanduse ning ekspertintervjuude põhjal loodi raamistik, mis aitab tekitada ühtset arusaama ning juhtida arutelu rahvaraamatukogude rollist praegu ja tulevikus. Loodud tööriist võimaldab ühtsustada arusaama ootuste ning raamatukogusid juhinduvates väärtuste ja põhimõtete vahel.

Järgmises faasis aitas väljatöötatud raamistik viia läbi raamatukoguteenuste ootuste teadasaamiseks töötubasid. Töötubade tulemustest moodustub üks võimalik ja inspireeriv tervikkontseptsioon. Seejärel loodud lõplik disainitulemus võimaldab tutvuda ning hinnata võimaliku rahvaraamatukogu visiooni tulevikus.

Lõppkokkuvõttes väidab uurimistöõ, et rahvaraamatukogud peavad olema kogukonnaga koosloomud, inimkesksed ja inspireerivad; peavad rõhutama teadmiste ja kogemuste koosloomist ja pakkuma vestlus-põhiseid teenused.

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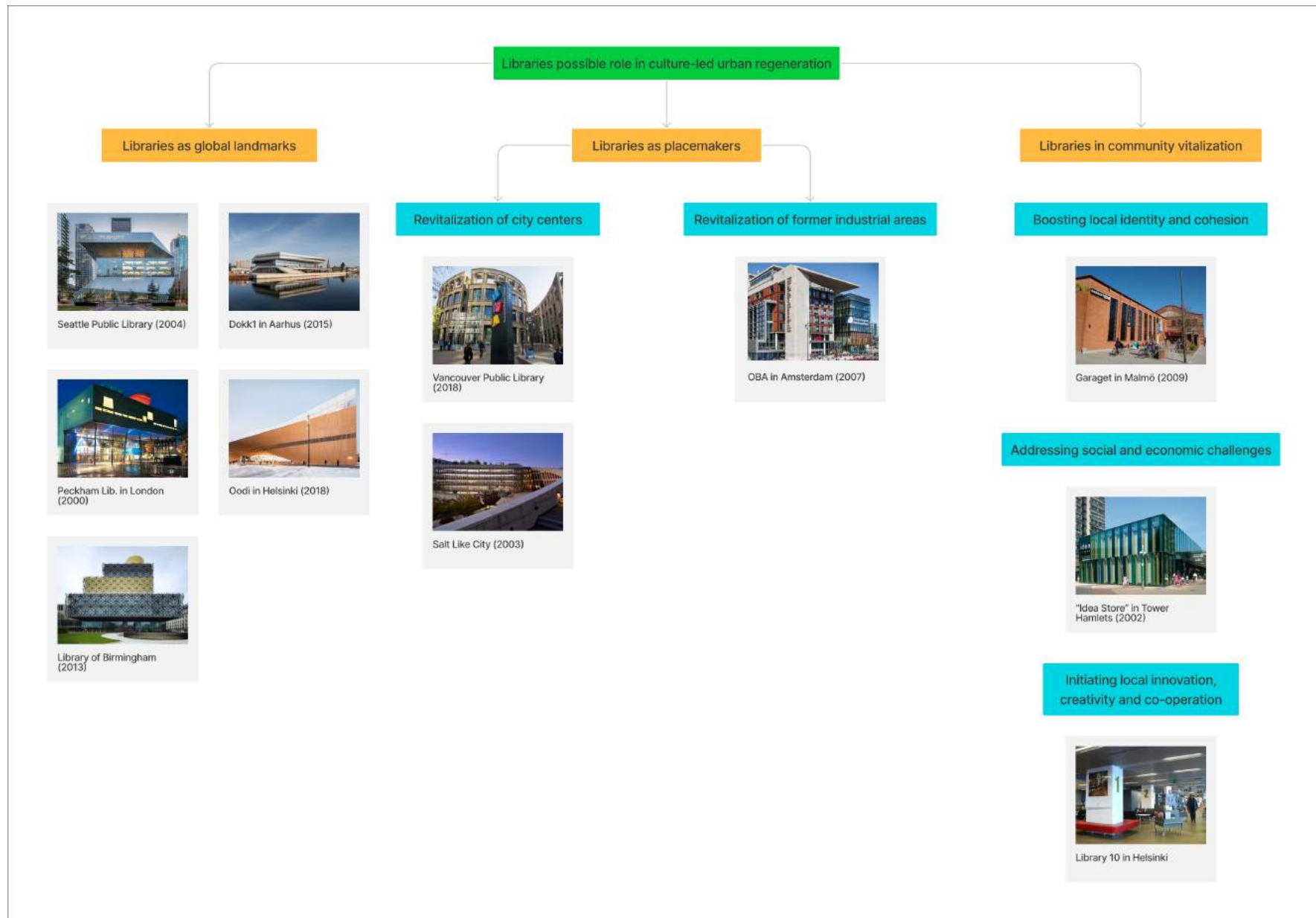
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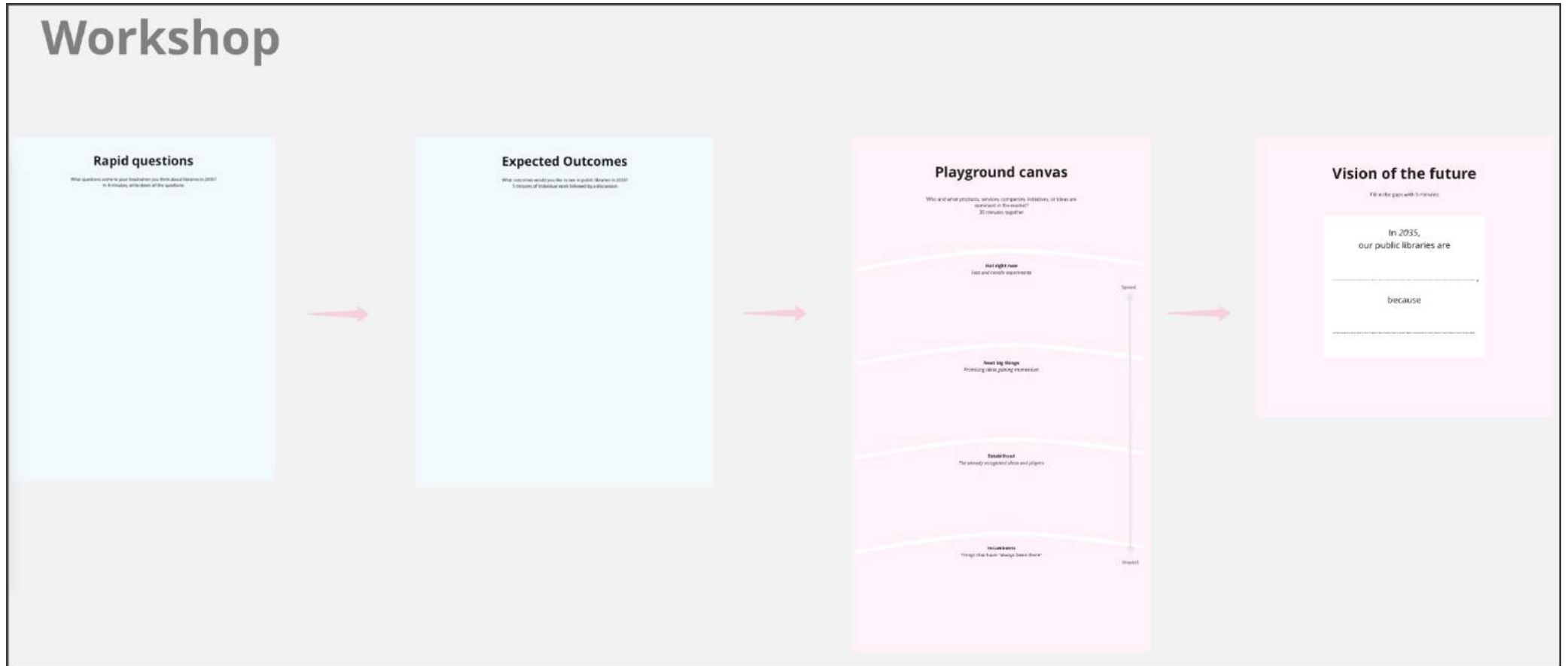
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Appendix 1



Appendix 2



Future scenario workshop

Appendix 3

