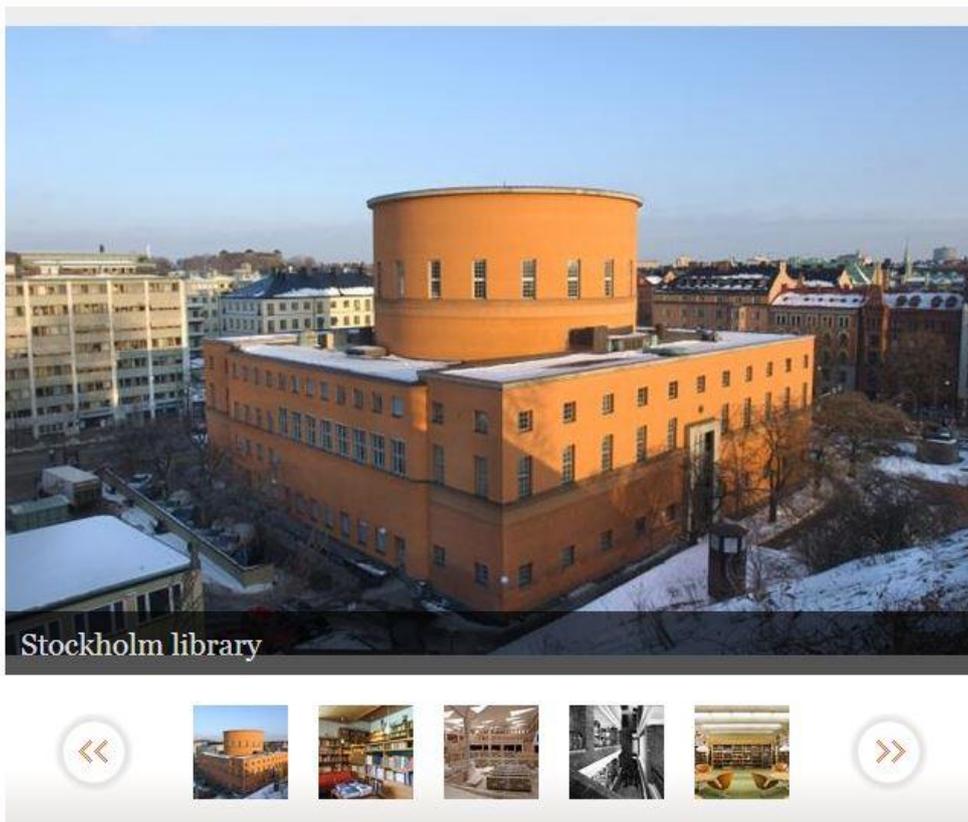


Book Club review: Improbable Libraries

20 July 2015 | By Stephen Smith



Improbable Libraries: A visual journey to the world's most unusual libraries by Alex Johnson, University of Chicago Press, 2015

A new global survey of libraries is a delightful reminder of the diversity of the building type, says Stephen Smith

For architects with a special interest in libraries, Alex Johnson's excellent new book, *Improbable Libraries*, is a timely reminder of the enduring and evolving appeal of the printed and digital word. It casts new light on possibilities for libraries that we visit to read, study in, meet and explore and shows why it is so important to retain and re-think them as a building type.

The core of this concise book is a remarkable global photographic survey of the rich and increasingly diverse types of library out there. These range from books arriving on the back

of a camel, donkey or push-bike via library boats in Nordic fjords to examples of big recent public and academic libraries.

There is also space dedicated to the diversity of the personal domestic library, both those central to the home and garden retreats. Many of the photos show communal rather than solitary study spaces. Particularly with children there is a tangible sense of the excitement of encountering, engaging and sharing new books among friends.

In tandem with examples and analysis of the status of the printed book, there is ample discussion of the influence of the e-book on libraries and the locations where it has been effectively deployed for public use: in transit, in pop-up kiosks and also in more traditional libraries. There is proof that the two media can live happily together. E-loans, for instance, are a rapidly expanding part of public libraries' offer in the UK.

Transport figures strongly in the book, either as destination – mini-libraries in airports and stations – or as mobile concept. Contrast the Bibliometro kiosks in the Madrid underground with the idea that redundant London Underground ticket offices could be rented to online retail giants as shopping collection points.

An impassioned strand within the text describes the various guises of the contemporary heroic librarian: their generosity of spirit, their love for the media they are sharing and their commitment to collect or catalogue the collection. In most cases it is the sheer endeavour and distance covered on land or by sea to share a collection that is most notable.

The latest government review of libraries – the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's independent library report (December 2014) – questions how new librarians will be recruited. It advocates a TeachFirst-style model to attract the brightest graduates to the public library sector. The vision for this role is perhaps unexpected. As well as being guardian to the books, "the librarian of the 21st century will need to be more of a community impresario with digital and commercial expertise".

In an era of public spending cuts library running costs are an easy target. Yet our librarians are involved in improving access to IT, particularly for those looking to apply for jobs or improve their language or literacy skills. Another factor is that the library is usually perceived as "neutral"; an inclusive and accessible space where anyone should feel at home.

The highlight of the book is the Not Library chapter, which reminds us that libraries have been "popping-up" in unlikely places for a long time. During the Great Depression they appeared in New York's parks for the benefit of homeless jobseekers. After the war they opened in groceries and pharmacies in the UK, not to mention prisons. More recently pubs, warehouses and churches have all successfully housed book collections.

So even in this current prolonged period of austerity, *Improbable Libraries* suggests that libraries will always find new ways to evolve and adapt.

Postscript:

Stephen Smith is a partner at Wright & Wright Architects