

How to Transform the Library into a Public Space



Sølvberget is a library and cultural centre situated in the heart of Stavanger. To succeed today a library must fulfil many different roles, and we depend on a good interaction between location, design, architecture and events/activities.

One of Sølvberget's major roles is to serve as a meeting place. In Stavanger, we collaborated with KAP Architects to transform the ground floor. Our aim was to be bold and innovative in creating a new kind of public space. This is the story of what we've done, and how the public has made use of it.

Stavanger and Sølvberget

Stavanger is Norway's fourth largest city with 132.000 inhabitants. Sølvberget Cultural Centre opened 30 years ago, and is located on a central square in the old medieval city. The centre contains a public library, a cinema, a gallery, arenas for events, cafés and newsstands. The events/activities have merged with the library into a joint organisation with one leader.

In 2011, a major transformation process began. The cinema needed to expand, and this opened new opportunities for the library as well. Although the library lost areas in the basement, we were given new areas on the ground floor so we could redesign the entire floor and make the library more visible.

How to work with change?

For us, it was external circumstances that initiated the transformation process. To our advantage, it was easy to make the employees understand that change was necessary, and that there was political will to grant funds for investment. It also meant we had to adapt fast.

One of the first things we did was to define a project called "The new Sølvberget" and allocated resources for this. As things proceeded, we started breaking the project into subprojects and creating clear milestones.

In the beginning we worked systematically to prepare the employees for change. In cooperation with Stavanger Business School we ran courses in change management for 50 % of the staff, and we had several workshops where all the employees participated.

Together we brought forth a lot of the changes, but used external advisors in two key areas: management and architecture. We worked with a private company and Norwegian Business School regarding project management. Several companies tendered for the décor/architecture, and in the end we chose KAP architects (a local company). The collaboration with KAP was crucial for the good results.

The purpose of the new ground floor

To outline what we wanted to achieve with the new ground floor, we visited other libraries for inspiration, and organised internal workshops. These were and still are the main goals:

- Make the library more visible and appealing. We wanted people to say: "When you're in the city centre, you just have to visit the library".
- Redefine the term "library" and transform the ground floor into an urban and public space where you can work, meet people, read and borrow books.
- Create a new library department with exhibitions and samples from all the floors, as well as longer opening hours than the rest of the library.
- Seek inspiration from bookstores and other commercial actors on how to push recommendations.
- Attract more visitors, and extend their visits.

What did we do?

The cultural centre has a "main street" that runs through the building. The cinema is located on the left side, while the library, café and newsstand are located on the right side. We had about 900 m² to play with in creating the new library. At the same time, there were plans for a new café at the ground floor, and we were eager to get a good interaction between the library and the café.

Together with the architect, we divided the ground floor into five different zones, where the library section only occupied 1/3. The others were social zone, self service, pulse and events.

The social zone was designed with a long table in the entrance. At the same time, there is an opening towards the café. This has become the signature of the ground floor, and a very popular meeting place.

The self-service zone is in fact a combination of the library's service point and various digital services and information screens. We wanted a service point that is easy to find. So far, we've learned that it is, perhaps, too visible, meaning that most people ask before they've tried to help themselves.

The library zone has been designed to harmonize with both the architecture of the building and the narrow streets and small wooden houses outside. The architects designed special shelves that both serve as display and seating furniture. That way, the city is also drawn into our house and makes the ground floor sort of a city room. The multifunctional shelves are called "book islands", and they are lit in both columns and shelves. This is especially effective in the evening, in that it creates a nice atmosphere.

The "book islands" have different themes that change continuously. It takes a lot of time to curate these small exhibitions, and make sure they are always up to date and appealing.

The pulse zone is a combination of urban living room, exhibitions and various activities. This is constantly changing, and when there are big events we have corresponding activities in the pulse zone. Examples include parliamentary elections, the World Cup and our own literary festival (*Kapittel*).

We have a separate zone for events on the ground floor, which is our main arena for literary events, both for children and adults. The interaction with the Pulse zone is interesting and it gives us opportunities to entice more people, and to stream the event to screens outside if the arena is packed.

How the public made use of it

We opened the new ground floor in January 2014 and the response from the public has been overwhelming. They like the design and atmosphere, as well as the openness and generosity. They're also pleased with the opening hours which are from 08:00 to 21:00 (Saturday 10:00 to 21:00 and Sunday 12:00 to 21:00). Our mayor calls it "the super library", and a local newspaper wrote that it had become a more open and friendly cultural centre.

In the first year, the library's visit increased from 740,000 to 1.2 million, and the public used the library in new ways.

Where to go from here?

The major challenge, after opening the ground floor, has been to secure the success of the other three floors, without losing all the qualities that is unique within a public library. Therefore we have redesigned the other floors, and on November the 4th this year we invite both the mayor and the public to the opening.

<p>Facts and figures 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Visits: 1,3 mill ■ Number of loans: 669.000 ■ 887 events, 133 for children ■ Average time for a library visit: 48 min ■ 39 % of the visitors take out or return books ■ 19 % of the visitors don't use any of the traditional library services. They use the library as a meeting point and public space. ■ 29 % of the visitors have minority background. ■ 11 % are young people, from 15 – 18 years

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