Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Two tales from the library: the erosion of public realm and new forms of space

• Author(s) Name:
Dr Charlie Smith

• University or Company Affiliation:
Liverpool John Moores University

• Abstract (300 words):
In 2010 a new political ideology in the UK began imposing deep cuts to public spending, which led to the closure and transfer from public provision of hundreds of libraries across the country (1). Whilst numerous concerns have been voiced over this, one aspect that is under-explored in the literature is the impact on public realm. Public libraries have been described as both an indoor public square (2), and the only sheltered public spaces where people are citizens as opposed to consumers (3). As libraries close, the community they served loses a unique and distinct part of its public realm. Even where transferred out of local authority control, as has been encouraged to prevent closures, libraries lose their status as a truly public space. The value of high quality public realm is unequivocal, yet the loss of library space is not generally conceptualised in this sense.

This is significant also because, at the same time, the nature of the library environments that remain has been changing. Newly built and recently refurbished libraries are much
more informal places – libraries are becoming the living rooms of the towns and cities in which they are sited (4). This is changing the opportunity for, and nature of, potential interactions occurring between their users within such spaces.

This paper explores two key issues in the nature of libraries as an integral part of the public realm. How, on the one hand, their loss affects communities’ access to public space and thereby a key place in which to meet and engage; and on the other hand, how their design can successfully facilitate public engagement and influence richer opportunities for human interaction. A number of design principles for these vital public places are proposed, with reference to significant precedents in contemporary library architecture to illustrate the discussion.


2) Alistair Black, “‘We Don’t Do Public Libraries Like We Used To’: Attitudes to Public Library Buildings in the UK at the Start of the 21st Century,” Journal of Librarianship and Information Science 43:1 (2011): 42.


**Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

Dr Smith is Reader in Creative Pedagogies and a lecturer on the undergraduate and postgraduate Architecture programmes at Liverpool John Moores University’s School of Art and Design. His research on library architecture and design focuses in particular on how digitisation and new programmatic challenges are affecting these civic and cultural landmarks in towns and cities, and on the role of physical books and library spaces in an increasingly digitised society. He has also studied the impact of library transfer on library provision.

Dr Smith’s research in this field has been published in papers and book chapters, and presented at conferences internationally. He has also innovated ways in which studio design work can inform this research, creating collaborative partnerships with students in the design of contemporary library projects that have developed new ideas and concepts, and challenged conventions in the typology. This work has also led to international publications.