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The *Soul* of the *City*

The remorseless destruction of our national public library system represents a failure of will and imagination on a colossal scale.

Across the country, public libraries are being marginalised. They are no longer regarded as vital institutions of knowledge and culture – inspirational places where connections are forged, ambitions take shape, hopes are realised and civic cohesion enhanced – the soul of the city.

Now, their future is disputed. Libraries are disparaged as the declining purveyors of a dying technology – the printed book. If printed books even have a future, their detractors argue, they can be cheaply bought from Amazon and the like. And anyone who needs information can get it from the Internet. Public libraries are rendered obsolete by Google and the Kindle.

Against that background of received wisdom, and faced with unprecedented financial constraints, local authorities are cutting their library services and closing branches. It is predicted that by 2016 over 1,000 public libraries will have closed since 2009 and over 3,000 librarians will have lost their jobs.

Dimly aware that the public continues to value public libraries, some councils make half-hearted efforts to keep libraries open by turning them into soulless mashups of customer services outposts, PC clusters and a few shelves of books. They relocate them to leisure centres and shopping malls. The grandeur of the aspirations that informed the public library movement in the 19th century is utterly absent.

The James Reckitt Library Trust does not believe that public libraries face inevitable decline. In every world-class city, public libraries are an integral part of the attraction and the brand. They are at the heart of what makes cities thrive. People's perceptions of public libraries must not remain padlocked to the past. Flourishing libraries will be places where technology has been embraced and where a new conception of what libraries can achieve has been forged.



To find out more visit

www.jreckittlibrarytrust.co.uk

Here in Hull our public library system has a proud history, but budget cuts have severely damaged services. Opening hours have been cut and some branches closed. There is every likelihood of further cuts in the future.

The James Reckitt Library Trust understands that this is not what Hull City Council wants to happen. The Council's Library Strategy for 2014 through to 2019 seeks to set out a more positive future. It places a welcome emphasis on connecting people digitally, ensuring that residents have both the access and the skills required to become digitally

connected, particularly in terms of job seeking, health, personal financial information and benefits.

But we need more than that. What is needed now is a vision of the future role of public libraries that transcends today's funding constraints. A vision that provides an inspiring conception of the future that everyone in Hull can work towards. A vision that allows our libraries once more to be vital agents of knowledge and culture, crucially important to 21st century lives, once again the soul of the city.





Dokk1, the new public library of Aarhus, Denmark, European City of Culture 2017

The *Vision*

How can public libraries fulfil their historic purposes in a world changed so utterly from the world in which they were founded? The answer is a new vision, built upon four pillars: cultural confidence, citywide connectedness, collaboration, and a creative economy.

Cultural *confidence*

Public library buildings in the past stood as symbols of the strength of civic culture. Even today, great and modern world cities, confident and aspirational cities, build great public libraries: Vancouver; Seattle; Copenhagen; Amsterdam; Singapore; Stuttgart.

Hull aspires to be a world-class city and visitor destination. Our city should have a new Library of Hull to demonstrate our confidence in the future, to be at the centre of the life of the city, to attract people to Hull, and to be a legacy of Hull's year as UK City of Culture 2017. It should be one of the key building blocks for the future.

The Library of Hull will stand as a symbol of cultural confidence, joining other creative spaces within the city to form a cultural and learning corridor from The Deep to Hull Truck Theatre. The scope of the Library of Hull would be large, varied and grand in aspiration. Certainly a library of books, but also a space for art and performance, a place for meetings and conferences, a place to encounter inspiring technology, a place to meet and socialise, a place to find out and to learn, above all a place to be inspired. A place to make the city proud of itself. A place that tells the world about the greatness of Hull.

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Citywide *connectedness*

Our vision is not limited to a single physical building. Whilst the Library of Hull will act as a beacon, its reach must extend beyond the boundaries of the city centre.

What we envisage is a network of services, tailored to the needs of individual communities. Services that encourage a love of learning and educational ambition, enhance health and wellbeing, and raise aspirations. Services that enable people to find the information they want; that encourage reading and storytelling; that prepare people for work, help them develop their skills, or allow them to create their own businesses; services that give them access to technology; that allow them to connect with those who share their interests; that give them opportunities for cultural enrichment.

We do not need to provide all these services in a single place called a branch library. We can imagine them being offered in all kinds of public spaces. And with technology a key enabler of our vision and a representation of its 21st century nature, we believe all physical provision must be underpinned by a robust digital offering, to create a sprawling web of virtual activity that connects every corner of the city.

We are talking about the construction of stunningly original, virtual spaces, both personalised and social – the civic buildings of the 21st century – which would enable people, wherever they were located, to participate in a blended environment of the physical and the virtual. Live performances in physical spaces could be streamed online, exhibitions could be digitised, and resources acquired and curated centrally would be made universally available via a new, free virtual network that would be available anywhere, on any device.

And all of this could be led and provided by local digital industries operating in a thriving creative economy.

This is not to say that physical libraries would disappear. However, the public library network would be defined less by a physical network of branch libraries as by the coordination of different forms of provision and engagement relevant to all the people of Hull, and where accessibility, physical or online, would be key.



Collaboration

Libraries should not operate in isolation. Our vision sees them as an integrating force acting alongside a whole range of organisations and services promoting culture, knowledge and information, all of which help to forge social and cultural identity and community cohesion.

The City of Culture constitutes a catalyst for cultural excellence and presents an unparalleled opportunity for Hull's libraries to take the lead in developing a collaborative approach that spans the entire city. It gives libraries a unique platform from which to build

connections with other channels of cultural transmission, such as our museums, theatres, performance venues, schools and colleges, the university, to create a network of interconnected, impactful openings for cultural enrichment.

Where there is a connection between the library service and any of our museums, or with Hull Truck Theatre, or Roots and Wings, or Artlink, the impact is significant. What new potential could be explored and exploited if such collaboration were to be extended?

A creative economy

Creative industries are often overlooked as increasingly important contributors to the UK economy. Locally, it is expected that twice as many jobs will be created in the cultural sector in Yorkshire and the Humber as in London over the next ten years, in part as a result of Hull's successful bid for City of Culture 2017.

This vision looks to position libraries at the forefront of Hull's imminent cultural, social and economic renaissance. By wholeheartedly embracing the digital revolution, libraries will be in a position to steer the

conversation surrounding their future down a more progressive route, whilst simultaneously supporting the establishment of Hull's 'digital hub' and building a relationship with Hull's Centre For Digital Innovation (C4DI).

Such a collaboration would clearly communicate the impact libraries could have on local lives, not only in terms of future careers and educational pathways, but also on Hull's potential to become a beacon for the development and delivery of digital learning, enrichment services and community cooperation.





Building an *aspirational* consensus

Hull has become a city of high aspiration. We will not accept second best. We believe we can make a reality of our dreams. So it is with our public libraries.

This is the battleground for the 'Soul of the City'. It is a 21st century vision, not one tied to a nostalgic view of the past. It links to the search for a legacy for the City of Culture, and connects with the aspiration to build distinctive digital and creative industries in Hull. It is a crucial ingredient of Hull's aspiration to be a world-class city.

The James Reckitt Library Trust, founded by the man who pioneered public libraries in Hull, extends an invitation to everyone who believes in public libraries as a force for the future to join us in making that vision a reality.

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*“the only thing you absolutely have to
know is the location of the library”*

– Albert Einstein

To find out more visit
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