Urban Knowledge Hubs – Transformative Societal Spaces for Hybrid Libraries in the Baltic Sea Region

Pilot Evaluation Report

Royal Danish Library (*Det Kgl. Bibliotek*)
Aarhus University Library

Background for the Aarhus project

The Faculty of Business and Social Sciences (BSS) at Aarhus University is experiencing major changes in relation to buildings and campuses these years. A larger area of Aarhus, which was formerly a district general hospital, is in transformation from hospital buildings to University Campus. The project is called "Campus 2.0" and the Campus will consist of buildings for teaching, lecture rooms, group work, cafés etc. The campus will host both university related activities and rooms as well as non-university facilities such as apartments and recreational activities.

Themes for the development of the new campus are as follows:

- Research
- Technical and physical infrastructure
- Education
- Collaboration
- Common facilities
- Sustainability
- Relocation (From the Campus 2.0 website in Danish only).

When developing a new plan for the Campus in Aarhus, Aarhus University Library (part of The Royal Danish Library) has been a partner in developing ideas about how to run the library in the new surroundings.

Since the timeline for "Campus 2.0" turned out to not fit very well with the UKH project period and the vision to include students communities in this work, the Aarhus Local Project decided to focus on the Aarhus University Library branch in Herning instead, since this library was about to be moved and relocated during the period of the UKH project.

The background for the relocation in Herning did not only concern the library, but also other departments, such as the "Business Factory" which is a popular student incubator. The main reason for the relocation was to create a livelier and more welcoming student environment and, in this way, encourage students to spend more time on campus and attract new students as well.

Methods for input

To get an understanding of needs and thoughts from the students in Herning, who are primarily Business Engineers, workshops and focus groups were hosted. In the focus groups themes such as physical environment and mental environment were discussed. Several library related questions were also asked, and the library invited the students to give concrete input about the arrangement and services of the library. This included a "Cake for ideas" event in the canteen in Herning, where many students were eager to give input.

A more anonymous approach was also carried out with "wish boxes" during December 2023, where students could wish for whatever they wanted from the library and submit their wishes anonymously in a Christmas wrapped box. This approach did not generate much input in Herning, but at the other branches of the BSS libraries, the approach resulted in lots of small pieces of paper with great ideas and thoughts.

Tips and take-aways

Students are very eager to give their input and the "Cake for ideas" event was successful. The idea of making a pop-up station in the middle of the canteen, where the students usually gather around lunchtime, turned out to be very constructive. In their habitual space, the students were met by a setup of complimentary coffee and cake and a table with hands-on activities. Here we had 3D-printed models of small chairs, shelves, plants, cozy furniture etc. and everyone could make their own floor plan for the new library. Further, an extensive list of nice-to-have's, wishes and suggestions was made. The input was shared with our associated partners and a lot of the ideas were adapted by the architects.

Food and drinks are a positive factor when attracting students and to get the conversation started and going!

The more anonymous approach with wish-boxes was an idea pitched to us by a student worker during one of the focus-group interviews that was held in the very beginning of the project. The point was that many students are very cautious and self-conscious about others to see what they mean and not very fond of sharing suggestions. Therefore, we wanted to give the students an opportunity to share ideas on a piece of paper in a box, no one could see. In Herning, the time for wish-boxes during December was not very well chosen, since many students do not visit campus during December, because they are busy with exam preparations.

Be aware of the programme of the students – if it is exam time, it is not the best time of the year to carry out activities!

Materials Library

Another direct output from the "cake for idea" event was to explore the idea of building a materials library. Students were asking for components and materials to look at and feel in the library. During specific courses, materials like polymers, metals, ceramics, wood etc. is part of the curriculum. The students have to build a "product-line" and know the characteristics of the materials. Being able to examine the materials in person adds great value to the understanding of their properties.

Reflections

The new library was reopened in the beginning of 2025 and on February 19th a more formal inauguration will take place. To evaluate the space and the materials library we have a few ideas based upon previous feedback and methods. At the end of March, we will conduct evaluations in the library space. We plan on doing small interviews with students and staff in the room. Based on previous experience we may include an element on something edible. We will most likely use mixed methods and also allow students to provide feedback anonymously if they prefer to do so. Both angles are important, we learned from past activities. The anonymous aspect can be small questions on notes that the students can answer and put into a box or it could be a discrete flip-over in the library room or just outside the entrance, where a sticker could be added, depending on mood, such as a happy smiley or a not so happy smiley.

In our conversation with the students we might also draw back their memory to the process before the library relocation, where we hosted focus group interviews together with the University, and investigate whether we succeeded in accommodating their wishes for the library space.

We will of course have a lot of focus on students, as they are the primary users of the library space, but we will also take into account the users from outside the university. People of the general public also use the library resources. In Herning the library offers on-premises access to a selection of its cultural and historical collections and the library here is one of few locations outside the major cities where this content can be accessed.

Aarhus, January 28, 2025

https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/baltic-ukh/