

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

### Pilot Evaluation Report

#### National Library of Latvia (*Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka*)

#### Background for the Riga project

The National Library of Latvia opened to the public a decade ago and aims to enhance and improve its services for high school and college students, who make up the largest group of library visitors. The library's Youth Space, central to this collaboration, had great potential but lacked a clear purpose. The motivation was also to more clearly position the National Library of Latvia within the "Knowledge Mile" – a spatial connection in the city of Riga that includes several higher education institutions and the library. The goal was to gather input from outside the typical library circle, particularly from young people, to create new services, a knowledge hub, and a space for interaction. The collaboration aimed to establish a modular space for students' group and individual work, a cozy atmosphere for book-reading sessions and shared reading experiences, while also modernizing the space with 3D printing and artistic tools to ensure functionality and versatility.

Previously, users did not seem to fully understand what the space offered and were not using it to its full potential. Noise from events disrupted the nearby reading room, so the plan was to divide the space into distinct areas for different functions. The library wanted to attract new users and transform it from a useful but uninviting environment into a more attractive one.

The collaboration also aimed to offer young architects – who often lack commercial project experience – a space to experiment and prototype. With a limited budget for ready-made solutions, the library serves as an ideal "playground" for innovation. Frequent users, such as students and graduates, bring fresh perspectives, often inspired by their travels and experiences in libraries worldwide. By involving young architects, a "youth for youth" approach was adopted, where the target audience plays an active role in the creation process.

Desired outcomes included updating the space to create a more inviting environment and ensuring it is used effectively, even when events are not taking place. Although resource limitations restricted extensive improvements, we provided an opportunity to compile ideas and develop a vision for the library's future. Listening to user feedback and engaging in discussions about staff and user preferences were crucial in establishing a positive foundation for future initiatives.

## Methods for input

The associated organization has been involved from the outset of the project, contributing to the development of the project description. To gather diverse perspectives, focus group interviews were conducted, and the insights gained from these sessions shaped the subsequent user workshops. The co-creation process included three focus groups: 1) library users and students who typically do not use the library, 2) regular library users and students, and 3) secondary school students, both users and non-users of the library.

After summarizing the feedback, users were invited to participate in co-design workshops, which brought together both library staff and young people in mixed groups. During these sessions, participants were encouraged to share their ideas and aspirations by discussing their hopes and concerns for the space. The workshops included hands-on activities like origami and clay modeling, giving participants the opportunity to bring their creative visions to life. The youth participants were particularly engaged, taking the lead in the design process and ensuring their ideas were practically implemented by themselves.

## Tips and take-aways

***Be Visionary:*** Start by dreaming big, and then make decisions based on those aspirations and the resources at your disposal.

The focus groups highlighted varying opinions about how the space should be used. Some participants desired a more dynamic environment, while others preferred a quieter area for study. The challenge was to strike a balance between users' preferences and what could feasibly be implemented within the project's scope, all while adhering to the regulations set by the National Library of Latvia.

***Engage Partners from Your Target Audience:*** For a truly meaningful co-creation process, select partners who are also part of your service/product's target audience.

We are completely satisfied with our choice, as the aspiring architects brought lightness and creativity to the project. This collaboration not only resulted in a new layout and comfortable furniture solutions, but also opened doors to new types of public-private partnerships. They introduced us to other players in the field, such as those involved in 3D printing workshops.

***Integrate into the Existing Urban Ecosystem:*** Research both your users and the location of your institution to better integrate into existing urban knowledge hubs.

Outreach efforts were focused on universities with lower engagement with the national library, seeking to understand why those students were not visiting and what could be done to make the library more appealing to them. The focus groups and creative workshops provided valuable insights into the target audience and their needs.

***Continuous Development:*** Always keep an eye on the future of your project, nurturing new networks and collaborations to drive ongoing growth.

Even after the inauguration of the Youth Space, we have ideas for the second stage of the pilot, including implementing additional elements from the concept paper, developing new events and services, and fostering new collaborations with various stakeholders.

## Pilot space

The implementation phase focused on prototyping new tables that utilized magnets to create flexible seating arrangements, allowing the pieces to be easily linked together. These tables were designed by young architects and produced using 3D printing for the individual components. This approach aligned with the overall vision for the space – modularity, adaptability, and the integration of technology. The process played a crucial role in preparing the space for use, ensuring it met the needs of a variety of users. In addition, the young architects donated two pieces of acoustic furniture: a computer stand/locker and a coffee table with a storage compartment, both designed to help balance the room's acoustics. As for infrastructure, the library added a new TV screen, space divider curtains, and inflatable sofa beds, while reusing bean bags and chairs. As a result of these changes in the Youth Space, the librarians enhanced the free-access collection, organizing information resources based on the interests of young people, and the space gained additional reading zones. Technological equipment is now available alongside traditional resources like physical books and study areas.

## Evaluation and reflections

First of all, we set up a survey to assess the space. Several QR code stickers in the room provided access to an anonymous online questionnaire. By January 31, 2025, 40 respondents had completed it. The survey results showed a high level of satisfaction. The majority of users reported that their overall experience in the Youth Space was 'good' (58%) or 'excellent' (30%). A similar pattern was observed for the question regarding how well the Youth Space meets their needs for studying, working, or other activities, with 58% responding 'well' and 25% responding 'very well'. In terms of interior and equipment, respondents highlighted the importance of comfortable seating, design and atmosphere, group workspaces, and board games. They noted that the layout of the room is very flexible. Technology was also seen as crucial, with specific mentions of Wi-Fi, the TV screen, and the 3D printer. The majority of users visit the space to informally meet or participate in events. The most rewarding feedback for the project implementation team is that 100% of respondents would recommend the Youth Space or its services to a friend.

We also organized four introductory/ feedback workshops: 1) with organizations and other stakeholders that host events at the space (such as jigsaw speed puzzling, improvisational theater, etc.), 2) with local scout organizations, 3) with library staff, and 4) with secondary school students.

The main conclusions of the workshops were that youth engagement and diverse creative activities are vital for strengthening the library's role as a dynamic, accessible public space. The workshop highlighted the need for modern technologies, such as VR goggles and 3D printers, to meet young people's interests and foster digital engagement. Proposals for new collaborations with local and international partners, including universities and NGOs, could provide further opportunities for multifaceted projects.

Marketing library events require improvement, particularly through targeted, interactive content on social media to reach a broader audience. The easiest way to inform people about youth space events is by installing a screen with an event calendar and regularly updated information. Motivational programs, like room reservations or exclusive event access, could also boost youth interest and activity.

An important improvement that will be necessary is to harmonize the acoustics, as the space-dividing curtains did not work and sound is still disturbing the nearby reading room. This could be addressed by constructing a proper wall that complies with building regulations and fits the overall library design. During the space evaluation process, several custom-made acoustic furniture pieces were temporarily placed in the area, which helped contain the sound within the room. Testing these items showed positive results, so we may consider purchasing additional round tables, which were particularly praised by the young audience.

The evaluation should continue for some time to ensure we can design the new services as precisely as possible, especially those related to technology and the skills needed to use it. We are satisfied with the results so far, as the Youth Space has not only gained a fresh look but also fostered new collaborations and a high level of satisfaction among users of the space.

**Riga, January 31, 2025**