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Embracing changes or struggling with stereotypes? The awareness of changing images of Flemish public libraries by students in interior architecture

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Introduction

Public libraries are confronted with numerous societal challenges that influence their functions, profile and identity. The realization of a livable city, a more inclusive society and a learning or knowledge society are only a few examples of these societal challenges (Crowhurst-Lennard and Lennard, 1994; Smith, 1996; Evans, 2002; Geller, 2003; Sproull and Patterson, 2004; Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2007; Mellon, 2009; Brown-Saracino, 2010).

As such, the overall image of a public library is clearly dynamic in nature. And although this dynamic nature is nowadays intensively discussed within the world of public libraries (Aabø, 2005; MacLennan, 2007; Dahlkild, 2011, Vallet, 2013), its origin, precise features and impact on society is certainly not yet fully understood, neither by library practitioners nor by academics. This is presumably also the reason why an overall awareness of this changing identity far beyond the borders of the public library world itself may certainly not be considered to be self-evident. The awareness of librarians and library scientists is clearly growing, but not necessarily the awareness of partners (e.g. educational institutions, public social workers) nor users (e.g. individual citizens, communities). In two recent research initiatives on the changing strategic roles of public libraries (Vallet 2013, 2015), we discovered for instance that political and administrative policy makers of Flemish cities – who finance and invest in public libraries – do not always fully know and comprehend the “new” ambitions and associated identities of Flemish public libraries. One can argue that these new ambitions may be too scarce or even generated within a (too) isolated or “library in-crowd” setting. But that has clearly not been the case. Over the past few years, the Flemish platform of public libraries Bibnet & LOCUS has for instance organized several information and

interactive brainstorm sessions to discuss societal challenges for public libraries and to promote new (shared) concepts and innovative ideas. Additionally, after the local elections in 2012 all Flemish public libraries have presented their formal library plan including their (new) future ambitions for the next five years to their new local governments in order to jointly elaborate the so-called local strategic plan imposed by the Flemish government. Thus, the presence or absence of awareness as well as the way(s) in which this awareness can be triggered or hindered, do become interesting points of attention when reflecting on the changing identity or image of public libraries.

Within this article we will focus on these two points of attention for a particular user group (bachelor students of interior architecture at the University of Antwerp, Belgium). The central theme of their bachelor-proof assignment in 2015 was the (re)design of Flemish public libraries in view of their (new) strategic ambitions and the underlying societal challenges. The main interest of the teaching staff was to check whether the interior architecture students were capable of making and developing “fitting”, this means practically relevant and useful interior designs for the previously described central theme. Notwithstanding this outspoken pedagogical ambition, the actual realization of the assignment generated additional insights into the presence and “design-triggered” awareness of the changing identity of Flemish public libraries by these bachelor students.

This article will report on the specific nature of these additional insights. Subsequently, we will focus on the following two-folded research question: (i) what do we learn from the realization of the bachelor-proof assignment on the awareness of the changing identity of Flemish public libraries by bachelor-students of interior architecture, and (ii) in what way can the realization of the design assignment itself influence, stimulate and trigger this particular awareness; or what are the (presumably) underlying “enablers” and “disablers”?

In order to answer this research question, we have held an explicit focus-group debate and evaluation with all members of the teaching staff and an additional colleague specialized in the essence and profile of the interior architecture discipline. In the near future, this information will be confronted with the additional experiences of the students themselves and the public libraries involved. Thus, we will obtain a kind of reflective discourse that will allow us to make some critical end-remarks on the final lessons learned. Notwithstanding these future activities, the present focus-group debate with the staff members already generates some interesting in-depth results.

The structure of the article is as follows. In a first paragraph we give some additional background information on the precise nature of the bachelor-proof assignment. In the next three paragraphs we will report on the gained insights of the teaching staff. Subsequently, we will focus on (i) the initially observed notions of the students on the changing identity of Flemish public libraries, (ii) the observed changes in their notions as the design-assignment evolved and ended over time, and (iii) the uncovered enablers (triggers) and disablers (obstacles) of these changes throughout the design-assignment as perceived and depicted by the teaching staff. In the last paragraph we will also give some suggestions to public libraries and teachers to (better) encounter these disablers.

The assignment - diving into the deep blue sea

When describing the essence of their assignment, approximately 60 bachelor-students were asked to translate the new ambitions and changing identity of two Flemish public libraries in “fitting” alternative interior designs:

- On the one hand, it concerned a project within the city of Kortrijk (Belgium) where the explicit (new) identity of a so-called “neighborhood herald”¹ (Vallet, 2013) resulted in the ambition to create tailor-made library branches that would fit the specific profile of each urban quarter. In the assignment, the neighborhood of the “Lange Munte” was taken into consideration. Thus, the

assignment was focused on the creation of an interior library branch design that should stimulate the presently absent social cohesion within “Lange Munte” between different types of inhabitants being (i) isolated and impoverished middle-class senior citizens, (ii) poor and not (yet fully) integrated immigrants covering more than 20 nationalities, and (iii) young families that are expected to move to the neighborhood in view of a new (but still to be built) housing project. The library branch “Lange Munte” had to be built or set up within a vast reconverted church building of the Seventies. To guarantee the previously described ambitions, the church building should also (i) give shelter to the existing urban neighborhood center and (ii) support the activities and encounter initiatives of individual citizens as well as neighborhood societies (e.g. local brass bands, theatre groups, reading clubs). Thus, an original “joint” set up within an open (church) building was the major challenge of this highly conceptual interior design (i.e. in a conceptual design the central idea and main features of the overall design are crucial).

- On the other hand, it concerned a project within the municipality of Destelbergen near the city of Ghent (Belgium) where the explicit (new) identity of a so-called “target group patron”² (Vallet, 2013) resulted in the ambition to create a so-called “house of the child” within one existing library branch. As such, this library branch should not only focus itself on the information, education, cultural participation and dwelling needs of children from the age of 1 up to the age of 18 years, but should also give shelter to other public and social profit organizations that provide specialized services to the same target group (e.g. a medical childcare center for babies and toddlers, a multifunctional space for creative workshops and storytelling, and a garden for outdoor recreation). The library branch “house of the child” was located in a very new and modern, but rather small-scaled cubic building. Thus, a high concentration of different functions and organizations on a relatively small surface was the major challenge of this rather practical interior design (i.e. in a practical design the operational feasibility and details of the design are crucial).

In order to realize the interior design assignment, the teaching staff elaborated the following support and feedback procedure:

- At the start in February 2015, the students received two initial lectures on the changing roles and identities of public libraries throughout Europe and even throughout the entire world. These lectures were not only based on scientific research (e.g. publications and research reports), but were also illustrated by examples that visually reflected the immense variety of the changing identities (e.g. photographs, pictures, sketches and plans of the interior). After all, students in interior architecture are very sensitive and susceptible to visual representations. These representations show how a “space” is actually crafted, molded and modified in view of a certain (preferred) mental and behavioral conduct or experience of people dwelling and using this space. By using visual representations, the teaching staff wanted to be sure that the story of the changing images of public libraries actually matched the general interest and familiar “world” of their students. Combined, the textual and visual information should therefore certainly stimulate their awareness.
- Immediately after the lectures, the students were given a short initiating assignment. They had to collect images of public libraries that they themselves found fascinating in view of a particular (changing) identity of these public libraries. As such, the students made use of (i) the internet, (ii) the collection and archives of the university library and (iii) informal visits to some public libraries within Flanders. To support them, the teaching staff provided them with a list of inspiring examples. To make sure that their inspirational search would not be too limited, the teaching staff also motivated the students to have a close look at related initiatives, like for instance some interesting community centers, urban encounter initiatives, museums for children, child day-care centers and primary schools. Taken together, this mainly self-organized search by the students should furthermore trigger their awareness.

- In addition to the previously described lectures and initiating assignment, a trip to the premises of both public libraries was also organized. During these visits, the teaching staff made sure that the students were confronted with the ambitions of the different stakeholders involved (e.g. oral presentations, questions asked by the students, hands-out of policy documents and architectural plans). After all, the changing identity is not only created or determined by the library director, but also by the public library staff (e.g. daily activities and initiatives), the political alderman of culture (e.g. local financing facilities), the administrative director of the local cultural policy (e.g. embeddedness in the cultural strategic plan of the municipality or city), the municipal or urban social welfare team (e.g. related social ambitions), the Flemish platform of Bibnet & LOCUS (e.g. related ambitions and financing facilities on the Flemish policy level) and representatives of the partners to be involved (e.g. those who will get shelter within the same building: see before). As such, the teaching staff wanted to be sure that the students received an in-depth, well differentiated and real-life picture of the changing identities involved. Taken together, these different ambitions should additionally trigger an especially nuanced, non-cliché, non-stereotype awareness that would form the basis of an explicit multi-perspective list of requirements for their designs (i.e. what do the clients or customers actually want?). Finally, during the visits the students were also invited to make their own observations and (first, preliminary) interpretations of the changing identities within both projects. This was realized by means of self-taken photographs, sketches (e.g. ground plan, different rooms and spaces, entrance, circulation, atmosphere and lightening) and measurements (e.g. inner surfaces and heights). Once again students were stimulated to actually “absorb” and thus understand the story of the two public libraries more in-depth by matching the received story by the “others” with their own particular spatial interest and familiar world of interior architecture.
- Subsequently, the students were divided into groups of maximum four members. Each group received a double assignment: the making of (i) a *conceptual* design for the public library project in the city of Kortrijk (i.e. focus on the central idea and main features of the overall interior design) and (ii) a *practical* design for the municipality of Destelbergen (i.e. focus on the operational feasibility and details of the interior design). Taken together, both interior design assignments reflected and thus checked for the competences that gradually had been developed throughout the entire bachelor curriculum of interior architecture at the University of Antwerp. During this rather intense design process, students were free to collect additional information by means of different data collection techniques (e.g. photographs, individual interviews, policy documents, plans, sketches and observations). As such, the students decided mainly themselves how the subsequent awareness could or would grow and what kind of emphasis they found desirable or preferable to be elaborated into their interior designs. By giving them enough freedom to act, the teaching staff wanted to generate especially a self-managed exploration process that would further trigger their fascination and public library awareness. In order to achieve this goal, students received intermediary feedback information on a weekly basis from the staff members, emphasizing and triggering well-considered and -argued choices in the interior designs “under construction” (e.g. how do these choices coincide with the two changing identities?).
- At the end of July, the design assignments came to an end. The results were evaluated by a jury consisting of all staff members involved, four internal colleagues and four external representatives of the respective projects. As such, the staff members wanted to receive extra information on the accuracy and usefulness of the elaborated interior designs. Each group of students had to present their respective interior designs by means of different communication techniques (e.g. plans, renderings, sketches, a scale-model, samples of material used and an oral presentation of approximately 15 minutes).

When considering the very nature of this assignment in retrospect, we would like to use the metaphor of

“diving into the deep blue sea”. Although this metaphor might not be that self-evident for librarians, it still is a very useful and relevant metaphor for the teaching staff. In order to create a fitting interior design, the students had to explore the associated but for them rather new and complex societal challenges of the two public libraries involved. They had to inventory expectations and fascinations, gather in-depth information, observe numerous variations, and gradually build insights that not only helped them to (i) understand the challenges themselves but also to (ii) develop interior design blueprints and to (iii) assess the implications of these designs on the initial challenges (i.e. do they match?). As such, students had to collect strange and peculiar “sea-artefacts” and assess the impact of their “fishing” and exploration activities on the “sea environment” itself. In short, the bachelor students clearly had to leave familiar grounds and dive into a new territory, being that of the sea of changing public libraries.

The initial images - on *general* and *homogeneous* stories about the sea

To have an idea of the initial images or notions of the bachelor students on the changing identities of public libraries, the staff members collected mainly information by means of short informal discussions, reactions and questions of the students made during the two lectures, the initiating assignment and the visits to the premises. After that, the bachelor students began to process the received information into interior designs so that the initial images changed and design-triggered images came apparent (see next paragraph).

When considering the features of these first images of public libraries, the teaching staff uncovered a somewhat two-sided story.

On the one hand, the bachelor students were clearly familiar with the general concept of the public library in so far that they as a child and during their leisure time as well as their early school career frequently visited them (i.e. every week, at least once a month). The main reason for their visit was the lending of books and the collection of information (e.g. a school assignment). Nowadays, they still visit public libraries but mainly to find a quiet, easily accessible space to study, in particular during their examination periods. This kind of intensive “study dwelling behavior” is also noticed and registered by the director of the library of the University of Antwerp. During information sessions held on different advisory and decision boards of the University of Antwerp, she emphasizes that students increasingly make use of the University library despite of the vast amount of social media devices that enable them to stay “at their digs”. Unfortunately, their dwelling behavior is sometimes considered to be problematic. Thus, students seem to take a kind of twelve-hours siege including lunch-time break within the library, so that saturations occur and passing-by students or other visitors don’t find an empty or free seat anymore. In short, the public dwelling tends to resemble private residence. Additionally, there are long queueing-lines before opening time, small piles of personal garbage left within the library after their departure and increasing problems in respect to the traditional culture of silence within the library (e.g. frequent mobile telephone calls within their “claimed” and “privatized” spot). Informal talks with directors of public libraries confirm these experiences within their own libraries. So, and notwithstanding these problems perceived mainly by people running these libraries and more traditional public library visitors or users, the bachelor students certainly were familiar with the general concept of the public library, being - according to them - mainly a place to find books, information and an easy to claim – but not always quiet – place to reside. It is interesting that the students themselves did not really suggest other, new or changing functions or roles, although they themselves clearly showed a changing behavior within the library space of the University in comparison to the past (and were also called attention to this by the library staff and traditional visitors or users).

On the other hand, the bachelor students of interior architecture did not really see or experience fundamental “changes” or even different or alternative changes between public libraries. During the initiating assignment for instance they mainly looked for modern, impressive and fascinating buildings

and interiors, irrespective, however, of the associated change in (new) roles of the public library and/or its societal environment. It was clearly more a matter of spotting trendy interior designs than associating societal challenges and underlying policy-wise ambitions. The “link” was not made by them. Similar impressions occurred when talking about the particular design feature of digitalization. According to the students “modern” public libraries are definitely assumed to not go without, but for them the digitalization is not immediately associated with more general societal challenges and new functions for public libraries (e.g. that of an information gate-keeper). Interesting are also the students’ impressions that all public spaces are changing – read “modernizing” – so that there is no clear distinction between them. As such, all public spaces want to support the dwelling and encountering needs of people, and all public institutions want to contribute to the learning society. Subsequently, the particular changes of public libraries seem to get lost in this overall public transition phase. And after all, the “study dwelling behavior” and the “claiming of collective spots” can nowadays be realized in almost any public space and interior (incl. fablabs, creative spaces), which begs the question whether public libraries are special on that account.

When theorizing these findings, we are inclined to talk about a strong isomorphic or “similar-form” trend between new functions of public spaces and institutions, that seem to fade out the particular desired identities of each public institution on itself, and likewise of public libraries. This trend presumably also explains why the initial awareness of the bachelor students is certainly present, but in very general and homogeneous or one-sided terms.

The changing images - on very cautious and limited in-depth stories about the sea

One would expect that the intense self-exploration and the repeated confrontation with additional in-depth information should trigger and alter the previously described notions of the students. That is certainly what the teaching staff expected to happen. By hearing, seeing and doing, the initial awareness of the students would undoubtedly change in favor of a more detailed, dynamic and differentiated image. The teaching staff assumed a kind of “wake-up call” during the realization and finalization of the design assignment. But that is not what really happened, or - unfortunately - only to a limited extent.

Instead, the teaching staff noticed for instance that mainly the central concepts as well as the further tailor-made elaborations in function of the specific target groups, were still formulated in rather general and even stereotyped ways. The borrowing of books, the associated stock problems of the collection and the need for attractive reading spots for visitors remained the major point of attention. Admittedly, these spots sometimes consisted of interesting, self-designed furniture (e.g. movable platforms, convertible chair-table constructions), or were located on original places (e.g. transformed windowsills, separate cubic constructions that formed additional “rooms” for children to “hide and seek”, double-used staircases). But the overall ideas were only scarcely focused on the new functions or ambitions of the libraries involved (e.g. inviting spaces for public encounter, cultural participation and creativity).

Additionally, most interior designs were too much focused on the desires and wishes of their designers, being that of a middle class, white male and female adolescent. It was very difficult for the students to put themselves in the position of the different target groups involved. As far as the “Lange Munte” library branch for instance was concerned, it was striking that sometimes too little attention was paid to the encounter of very diverse profiles of neighborhood inhabitants. Admittedly, there was a kitchen facility for illiterate migrant women to have “cooking-encounters”, but it was clearly a very trendy, fashionable and western design of a kitchen. There was also an additionally created outdoor-square (i.e. created by removing some external walls of the church or installing interesting out-door staircases), but elderly people do not really sit on large, windy outdoor staircases, and the luxurious materials and impressive magnitudes would certainly invite trendy young urban dwellers living in the center of the city, but not the elderly and multi-cultural inhabitants of this modest, impoverished neighborhood. As far as the “house of

the child” was concerned, some choices of color (e.g. only black and white), materials (e.g. a concrete floor to sit on), furniture (e.g. hanging book shelves approximately one meter above the floor) were certainly not suitable for babies, toddlers and children beneath the age of ten. Also, nearly all students had forgotten to equip the library branch with small, children-sized toilets in a unique and for them fascinating setting (e.g. a remark of an external member of the jury with a lot of experience with young children: “Going to the toilet is for them really a fascinating experiment and an activity on itself, especially when it is not at home”).

In view of the previously described remarks, the teaching staff was therefore somewhat disappointed about the end results. True, some interior designs actually met the evaluation criteria of (i) a clear and consistent central concept, (ii) an explicit tailor-made elaboration (in view of the location, the target groups and the new ambitions involved), (iii) a well-considered selection of innovative, unique and/or original interior design aspects (e.g. in materials, circulation or atmosphere), and (iv) a well-documented and explicitly used set of inspiring references (e.g. ideas detected and/or observed in already existing and new public library projects). But most interior designs did not really meet these expectations, certainly not in a very convincing and satisfying way. Of course, one can argue that the expectations of the teaching staff were perhaps too demanding, especially as the external members of the jury were relatively pleased with the results. But the teaching staff evaluated the students from a particular perspective, being that of an intensively trained group of junior experts in interior design that should be highly susceptible for contextual settings (i.e. the changing images of public libraries).

Enablers and disablers - assumed ingredients of a (more) fascinating and professional dive

After the design assignment and given the previously described output, the teaching staff reflected on the possible causes of these somewhat surprising results. Why did the initial awareness of the students not change? Why did they not incorporate the vast amount of in-depth information received throughout the entire assignment process? What additional – and presumably overlooked – features of the assignment could have caused these results? What were the possible enablers or disablers of this process supported by the teaching staff and the public libraries involved? What can they both learn in relation to the triggering of the public library awareness of young people?

Answering these questions is certainly not easy. After all, the bachelor-proof assignment concerned only one and a rather new assignment experiment. But answers to these questions would nonetheless be very interesting, as they generate a first set of inductive insights on how the awareness of young people on the changing identity of public libraries can be triggered - or disturbed and prevented? Giving them information and even involving them in a real-life (short-term) library project in respect to their own professional fascinations (i.e. their interest in making interior designs) is clearly not enough. More is needed. But what can teachers as well as public libraries actually do? Let us look at some critical reflections and suggestions made by the teaching staff on this subject:

- Possibly, a general easy-to-trigger empathy for societal challenges of young people has been overestimated, even when it concerns challenges that actually happen in their own habitat and where they themselves take part in (i.e. they actually visit and use public libraries). A related and more fundamental question could therefore be: how consciously, detailed and differentiated can young people sense and thus comprehend their complex and dynamic living environment? Presumably, the information overload – not in the least generated by the digital society – can trigger a kind of selective perception in order to “survive” and master their “information-flooded” lives. This selective perception may perhaps explain why the initial images of changing public libraries were rather vague and homogeneous, and details seemed to vanish amongst the numerous like-wise changes of other public spaces and institutions where these young people also reside:

what differentiates the public library from all the other public places that we see, visit and use? And this “protective” selective perception may perhaps also explain why additional in-depth information did not really alter the initial image substantially, even not when the information was collected by the students themselves and lasted for six months (but not on a full-time basis). And it was surprising how even the numerous interesting references of newly designed public libraries that directly related to their future vocational interest, were only noticed in “quick glimpses” but not taken further into consideration as long-lasting inspiration for their proper designs.

In view of the previously described overestimation of an easy-to-trigger empathy for societal challenges of young people, a more limited but highly selective and clearly distinctive information flow seems to be advisable (i.e. what really makes public libraries different?). Such an information-flow may perhaps better trigger their awareness, certainly when this would last long enough (more than six months or on a rather full-time basis?), so that it can break through the protective barriers of their selective perception.

For public libraries this might imply that quick, overwhelming and rather general information or marketing campaigns are presumably not that effective for communicating the new image(s) of public libraries to young people. These general information-flows can easily be overshadowed by like-wise initiatives undertaken by other public organizations. Such overwhelming information overkill presumably wipes out any long-term and in-depth effect. A more specific and focused information-flow in which the particular nature of the “new” public libraries is emphasized, may therefore be preferred.

For teachers working and focusing on the changing images of public libraries, it might help if *external* library specialists would give the information in place of the “familiar” teaching staff that unfortunately is not always seen as experts or specialists in the subject by the students. As such, the information-flow might not really be perceived as distinct or different. It also might be a good idea if more than one clearly distinctive project about the changing identities of public libraries would be offered. If, for instance, more assignments or courses within the curriculum on the interior design of new and changing public libraries would coincide and would use the same carefully chosen set of information, the selective perception barriers of the students might perhaps be more easily encountered.

- Additionally, a general attitude of young people to act independent, pro-active, explorative, risk-seeking and critical has been overestimated as well. When confronted with a rather *complex* societal challenge like that of changing public libraries, young people seem to stick very close to their so-called comfort-zone presumably in order “not to drown” in the complexity, which is of course understandable given their young age and “maturity under construction”. A related and more fundamental question could therefore be: how willing, keen and capable can young people be or get to explore their complex and uncertain living environment? This comfort-zone reflex may perhaps explain why the students were not that creative or innovative and did not do more than formally assigned, asked and evaluated by the teaching staff (i.e. marks on the bachelor-proof). All staff members noticed that the students always looked for the “shortest, safest and easiest way” to design. They mostly glimpsed at the safe (because selected by the teaching staff and public libraries involved) information, but they rarely realized additional, self-planned unsafe (because not really framed) observations or interviews with the target groups themselves. Additionally, the students focused intensively on the “technical and material” requirements of the interior designs of public libraries (e.g. needed length of bookshelves, available surface), and not or only to a limited extent on the “perceptive and experience-related” requirements of public libraries (e.g. evoked fascination, desires). Thus, the representatives of the two public libraries involved reported repeatedly to the teaching staff that they were not contacted (anymore) by the students to give additional information on, for instance, the names and coordinates of (local) experts, colleagues, neighborhood communities or inhabitants to be contacted for an interview or focus-group debate. And when the students were asked if they nonetheless had done this, they confirmed also repeatedly to the teaching staff that they had not. Some citations:

- “Our students do not seem to understand that they certainly need to observe both locations and interview the target groups involved in order to know precisely what kind of scenography they should create by means of their interior designs”
- “We assumed that they would certainly explore the public library sites by themselves, but this is unfortunately not the case”
- “We clearly need to give them explicit orders to do this, and even then they seem to be very reluctant to do so, how come?”
- “They do not explore the cases intensively although we have taught them to do so during the last three years, why is that so?”
- “Why have they not asked the librarians to join and observe them for a couple of days, they had their names and numbers and had already met them in person during our organized site visit?”
- “Why do we really need to monitor them so closely and nearly force them to take more initiative?”

Related to this comfort-zone reflex of the bachelor-students is the overestimated presence of a critical attitude towards the received information. The teaching staff was somewhat surprised to find out that the students automatically took nearly all of the received information by the public library and all actors involved for granted. They obviously did not seem to feel the need to check and double-check it. Of course, “questioning” received information implies that you deliberately and consciously create a kind of position of discomfort. And also the subsequent search for “other, contradicting or objecting” information triggers a feeling of discomfort. Nonetheless, critical attitude is very essential for making good and fitting interior designs for the social challenge involved.

For public libraries, the previously described underestimation of the comfort-zone reflex and the lack of a critical attitude might imply that more effort should be given to make young people more conscious of the various user, residing and dwelling facilities within changing public libraries. They themselves may not be inclined to reflect on this in a very deliberate way, so they should be gradually and explicitly triggered and invited to do so (e.g. a step-by-step approach or dialogue that invites them to see, observe and tell their own story and gradually explore new opportunities that complement their initial story). Understanding the “perceptive and experience-related” changes of public libraries is too complex, uncertain and uncomfortable a situation, to be thought of as “it will happen spontaneously and in an instance”.

For teachers it might help when an intense (compulsory?) participative observation exercise within a public library could be organized, or a cooperation with other students that are more familiar with the discipline of library sciences (i.e. a multidisciplinary approach of the bachelor-proof assignment). Thus, the comfort-zone of the interior-design students could be enlarged or at least be stretched out. Another solution might be a (more) careful, and well-considered ex-ante (early) consideration of the assignment itself. It was certainly a good idea to relate the bachelor-proof assignment to two existing or real-life cases. In this situation, the students did not experience a high degree of discomfort caused by the abstract and/or virtual nature of the changing images of public libraries. Perhaps, though, it was not that interesting to focus (too) much on the technical and material requirements instead of the perceptive and experience-related requirements of the public libraries involved. Thus students were given a “lead” to hide in their comfort-zone, in form of easy to grasp facts and figures. And maybe it was neither a good idea to give them two instead of only one public library, as this double information-flow might have confused them and lead them to stay in their comfort zone.

- Finally, also the professional copy-cat behavior of young students has been underestimated. Students who want to become interior architects are not only influenced by their curriculum (and what is taught), but also by the attitude and thoughts of the people teaching them and certainly of the famous, leading and by the teaching staff “staged” professionals in their domain. A related and more fundamental question could therefore be: how willing, keen and capable can young people be or get to copy the thoughts and design behaviors of professional examples? And if this is the case, how can their awareness then (also) be triggered by these people or “exemplary idols”? This copy-cat behavior may perhaps explain why the students did not link the societal challenges explicitly to the changing images of public libraries and then to their own (fitting) interior designs. In numerous examples of new built public libraries selected by the teaching staff and also consulted by the students themselves in the initial assignment, students did not find much or even no information at all concerning the “link” between the context (i.e. societal challenge and new ambitions of public libraries) and the specific features of the interior design. Most arguments used by the architects and interior architects to explain and account for their interior design were based on their personal reflections, desires and fascinations. How can we then expect students to behave otherwise and actually make this contextual link? Of course, it is a prerogative of designers to also be inspired by personal ideas and ideals (i.e. “I design this because I want it and find it important”), but the challenge may be to also be inspired by the societal and contextual environment of these designers. The latter is especially important when asked to make a design for a public or semi-public space like a public library. After all, the present and future users, dwellers, admirers, and actual makers of this public space have an equally important prerogative on the design. This certainly does not imply that their prerogatives are “more” important, but at least that a dialogue and thus the joint creation of a (more) contextual sensitive instead of a purely individual design is appropriate.

In view of the previously described copy-cat behavior, the explicit use and in-depth debates on references and examples (i.e. on interesting public library buildings and the interior architects involved) would be advisable. Students should be made attentive in how to consult, read and judge upon these existing interior design references for public libraries. And judgement should not only be based on the personal view or idea of an interior architect, but also on judgements made by all actors involved and thus certainly also by the public libraries themselves. As such, a multi-perspective evaluation including also representatives of the public library (i.e. staff, users, dwellers, policy makers) will enrich and trigger the actual images formed in our society. Only then interior architecture students and younger people can actually learn if and how “links” between the changing images and their interior design features can be accomplished. And presumably only then their awareness on the changing images of public libraries can be accordingly shaped and intrinsically absorbed. In short, public libraries as well as teachers should evaluate and communicate more explicitly why certain public library buildings and their interiors do (not) fit certain changes within the images of public libraries.

Conclusion

By means of a bachelor-proof assignment in interior architecture, we have gained some interesting insights into the presence and “involvement-triggered” awareness of the changing identity of Flemish public libraries by young people. Additional research is certainly needed to further investigate, confirm and embed these results within a more robust theoretical framework. But the present inductive insights of this “experiment” are nonetheless interesting and certainly challenging for the teaching staff as well as the public libraries involved.

It is clear that an intense and conscious awareness of young people on the changing images of public libraries is not that self-evident. Images do exist, but only in rather general, vague and homogeneous terms. Additionally, similar trends within other public spaces and institutions seem to overshadow and even fade out the particular or specific features of these public library images. And involving students in a

more active way (i.e. by means of a proper interior design assignment), can neither be seen as a water-proof guarantee to trigger their awareness.

Presumably this is due to the rather complex nature of the underlying triggering process. Reflecting on the outcomes of the assignment and the displayed behavior of the students, the teaching staff has identified three possible disablers, being (i) the overestimation of the susceptibility to complex societal challenges (i.e. it is difficult for young people to comprehend the complex and dynamic nature of the changing public libraries in a conscious, detailed and differentiated way), (ii) the overestimation of the eagerness to leave existing comfort-zones and explore unknown challenges (i.e. young people are not automatically willing, keen and capable to explore the complex and uncertain nature of changing public libraries), and (iii) the underestimation of (vocational) copy-cat behavior (i.e. young people copy the design-behavior of interior architects that do not explicitly refer themselves to the link between the design and the societal challenges of public libraries). Although a further literature study is certainly needed to corroborate these reflections, we can already refer in this conclusion to some interesting publications within the discipline of interior architecture that make similar reflections. In particular, there is a growing concern for the not-self-evident awareness and explicit link of societal challenges to the interior design of buildings and institutions. However, According to some examples of interior architecture, the debate is rather new and is certainly not yet fully supported within the discipline, neither by practitioners nor by academics (Anderson, Honey, and Dudek, 2007; “A Global Assessment of the Interiors Discipline,” 2011).

To encounter these disablers, different strategies for teachers as well as public libraries are suggested. In view of the particular reader profile of this journal, public libraries might for instance avoid quick, overwhelming and rather general information campaigns that presumably wipe out any long-term and in-depth awareness effects. Instead, more specific and focused information-flows in which the particular nature of the “new” public libraries is emphasized (in comparison to other public institutions), may therefore be preferred. Additionally, public libraries should know that young people have to be confronted gradually and carefully with unknown and uncertain societal challenges. As such, they should be gradually and explicitly triggered and invited to reflect on the changing images of public libraries in a very deliberate and conscious way. And finally it would be interesting if public libraries should communicate more explicitly their experienced “fits” and “misfits” of the public library building and its interior in view of the changing images within the public libraries. Thus, they can enrich the ongoing debate within the discipline of architecture and interior architecture, and in particular trigger the awareness of young people vocationally fascinated by these particular disciplines.

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1. When being an area-oriented herald, the public library supports the (re)innovation and (re)development of certain areas or neighborhoods within the city (“the library as a partner and local representative of urban government”). ↪
 2. According to this specific strategic role, public libraries protect and/or support certain, mostly vulnerable target groups within urban society (“the public library as liaison or personal coach of urban citizens with special social, cultural, informational and knowledge needs”). Thus, target groups may concern children, (isolated) senior citizens, migrants and citizens with a language and/or social deprivation. ↪
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