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Library innovation is hard work Lessons from a Norwegian case study

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1. Introduction

In Norway, as in many other countries, cultural policies are undergoing deep change. Libraries, archives and museums used to be managed by different public bodies. From January 1, 2003 they are supervised by a single organisation. In the future, the three cultural sectors will be expected to coordinate and integrate their activities.

Gjerdrum is a small rural community, with about five thousand inhabitants, 20 miles north of Oslo. Its public library was one of the first institutions to act on the new policy. When the library was offered a site in a new Centre of Culture, we designed the new quarters as a combined library, museum and local archive.

The head of the library is an experienced project worker, with international experience as a change agent. The project was carried through and the redesigned library opened in 2002. But developing and realizing a new vision of what a local library could be, was not easy.

Building new projects at the grassroots level takes strategic planning, systematic network building, political vigilance and a great deal of hard work. The paper presents the main stages of the process, from vision to established fact, as a case study in innovation - and analyse the lessons learnt. Hopefully, other libraries can benefit from our experiences and our conclusions.

2. Green fields

A month before Christmas 2001, Gjerdrum public library closed. On April 2, after four months of travail, it reopened. The old library had shared a bleak utilitarian building with a repair shop for agricultural machinery. The new library is part of a cultural complex. The building contains a large auditorium for performances, several meeting rooms, space for exhibitions, and a cafeteria with catering facilities. And the new library offers more than books. On a small scale, we are also the local archive and the local museum.

For a place this close to the capital, Gjerdrum is surprisingly rural. Rich farm land and low forested hills dominate the landscape. Norwegian farmers like space. They do not congregate in villages like French and German peasants. They prefer to settle on their own land, with a comfortable distance to the next dwelling. Neighbours should be seen, but not heard.

Here we live in a green world. Fifty yards from the library windows cattle graze and horses stare at you. The municipal centre - aptly called Ask - has only a few hundred inhabitants. A generation ago, it was hardly more than a crossroad in the middle of green fields. Now it has a dozen shops, a couple of schools, a small hotel, the main municipal offices, a health care centre and a sports complex. But the grass remains.

The municipality used to be an agricultural enclave, a bit remote from modern, post-war, industrial Norway. But the balance between tradition and modernity is shifting. Gjerdrum lies on the axis between Oslo city and the new Oslo airport. The total population is increasing rapidly.

Young professionals are moving in. But if you pass through by car, you hardly see them. Farmers have governed this piece of Norway for generations. They refuse to waste fertile land on housing projects. The new residential zones lie in the hills - or on occasional pockets of clay and barren soil. Along the hillsides, hidden by trees, a dense network of small roads connect hundreds and hundreds of well-built modern houses.

The new families are young, highly educated and upwardly mobile. The adults often work outside the municipality - in Oslo to the south or in the airport area to the north. Gjerdrum is no longer provincial. It remains green and peaceful and unspoiled, however. The people that move in prefer it that way.

At home in Gjerdrum, they demand efficient public services. They are eager consumers of cultural goods - and eager producers of culture, as well. The number of voluntary organisations in Gjerdrum - and in most Norwegian municipalities - is overwhelming. We can choose between 55 voluntary organizations, if we include political parties. Civic society booms.

The Centre of Culture seems to offer a new local performance every week. The afternoons are busy with rehearsals. Our next-door neighbours can definitely be heard as well as seen. We have singers and dancers and big-band jazz. We enjoy the tutus and the trumpets. We have actors and painters and poets galore. Finally we are surrounded by a **cultural space**.

3. Culture and identity

When I was offered the position as head of the library in February 1999, the institution had been neglected for many years. The library was one of the very few places in Norway that still worked with a traditional card catalogue. The average public library has four employees for every 10.000 inhabitants. Before I was recruited, the municipality of Gjerdrum had only one person - working three days a week. This was less than a third of the national average. And it was hardly 20% of the official staffing norm.

But winds of change were blowing. In 1998, Oslo International Airport was relocated. From a place 5 miles west of Oslo it moved to a former military airport 30 miles north of Oslo - just 12 miles north of Gjerdrum. The whole region is expanding. Quiet Gjerdrum is next in line. Over the next decade, our population growth is expected to be the fastest in Norway.

The capital and its airport are powerful engines of growth. The danger to Gjerdrum, and other communities in the middle, is suburban decay. When people move in without putting down roots, a place is drained of its culture. Commuters drag their bodies home, but their minds stay elsewhere.

Our local politicians struggle with this dilemma. There is no way back to the traditional farming community. The world knocks hard at our door. But economic growth is not the same as cultural growth. People who care want a community with its own history and traditions, its own social identity and life.

Old Gjerdrum was not a backwater, but heir to a deep and rich peasant culture. To survive as a cultural community, the new must be grafted onto the old. But the traffic must go both ways. Sorry, Mr. Bond - but the old needs to be shaken **and** stirred by the new.

Creating a cultural centre in Ask was encouraged and supported by the municipal administration. But the centre is not - formally speaking - an official undertaking. The community has a tradition of volunteer work. Both the Cultural Centre and the Sports Centre were built by local membership organisations, with substantial contributions from volunteer. The Cultural Centre is organized as a limited company. The shares are owned by the organisations and private persons.

4. The local past

Archives

In 1997, the Director General of the National Archives visited Gjerdrum. He reported that the old municipal documents were

- haphazardly stored: not systematized, stowed away in cardboard boxes directly on the floor, exposed to water damage
- removed without documentation: borrowed by private individuals and kept at their homes
- incomplete and deficient: dispersed in private hands and possibly lost for good

Such conditions are widespread. National and regional archives are taken care of by professionals. But at the municipal level, professional management of archives is the exception rather than the rule.

This applies to all types of archives: official, commercial, non-governmental and private. Archives in daily use get a certain amount of attention - but the historical material is widely neglected. Official and commercial archives must conform to legal guidelines. The law is more concerned with current affairs than with historical value, however. The archives of voluntary organisations and of private persons are totally left to the initiative of concerned individuals.

But what about the libraries? Library students learn a certain amount of archive management during their education. More importantly: librarians know how to collect, organize, classify and retrieve items in general. We hunt and gather. We impose law and order on the document world.

Every municipality has a library. Many of the smaller communities - those with less than two thousand inhabitants - only offer part-time library positions. They find it hard to recruit accredited librarians. But nearly all municipalities with bigger populations have full-time professionals running their libraries.

Till now, public libraries and public librarians have generally stayed out of the archive business. There are exceptions, but the profession as a whole has never taken local archives to its heart. We have the competence, but we lack the will.

At a deeper level, we see libraries and archives as separate spheres of action. Putting archives on our agenda would increase our work load. More importantly: archives are not **our** responsibility. Mental walls have kept the institutions apart.

Museums

Museums fare worse, however. Local archives suffer from neglect. But rules, guidelines and practices for managing historical objects are weaker still. The material past has never received the same attention as the written sources. In historical work, paper has a higher status than wood and iron.

But this may change. During the last 25 years or so, professional historians have paid much greater attention to material culture. This is a European trend. Political and narrative history give place to a broader social and structural understanding of the past. Historical researchers collaborate much more closely with archeologists than before. Material remains tell their own story. And objects need not be 2000 years old to be of interest. Even the recent past can be illuminated by material objects.

Local history is more than an amateur pastime. European historians have discovered that national narratives miss the significance of regional and local conditions. To understand the nation, we must understand the regions. To understand the regions, we must understand the communities.

Local history has often been treated as **exclusively** local. In that case it will only interest local people. But Gjerdrum is part of a meaningful region, with tight links to other regions - north, east, south and west. We belong to Romerike. **Rike** is related to German **Reich**. Twelve hundred years ago, we probably had our own king.

Today, change follows the airport and the young families that move in. But local names reveal earlier immigrants - from Finland and Sweden, Denmark and Germany. The Swedes and Finns were poor peasants. The Danes were administrators from "the king in Copenhagen". The Germans were miners and technical specialists. The local history of Gjerdrum is a piece in a larger puzzle - which can be extended to include Scandinavia, Europe and even the "modern world-system".

6. Architecture

Our "extended" library was designed by an architect from the Norwegian Library Centre (Biblioteksentralen). Biblioteksentralen is the Norway's largest supplier of books and other library items. It is run on commercial principles, but the organisation is jointly owned by the municipal sector and the Norwegian Library Association (Norsk bibliotekforening).

Being an early bird in the field has both advantages and disadvantages. The company offered to do the architectural work free of charge, as a demonstration project. We must pay for the furniture, however.

But the design process takes time and effort even if the architect is free. Good architecture requires a running dialogue between customer and designer. It is not a question of

1. making the plan
2. implementing the plan
3. celebrating the opening

The architectural process was complex. We started with great ideas and exciting visions. But the work must be followed very closely as dreams materialise in concrete spaces and specific colour schemes. When sketches solidify into walls and wiring and paint, personal attention is crucial.

The municipal tradition of voluntary work helped. Much of the work on the cultural centre was done for free, by local people. Volunteers in regular jobs came on weekends. Retired people also came on workdays. During the building period I tried to contribute as much voluntary work as possible. This was immensely useful later on. I could walk into the building site at any time and find people I knew. They were my building mates. I speak their lingo.

I have heard that modern novels should have a beginning, a middle and an end - though not necessarily in that order. But modern **buildings** must start with the beginning and end with the end. Once the bricks are in place, we are bound to live with them. A personal streak of obsession came in handy. I know this building from skeleton to skin. I dreamt about it at night and struggled with it during the day. I learned that architecture is an ongoing process.

Being close to the physical builders, I knew what was happening on the floor. Visions are fine, but God is in the details. Minor decisions - the position of a door and the orientation of a staircase - remain undecided for a long time. And suddenly the window of opportunity closes. Those who hesitate are lost.

Designing for a library is difficult enough. Designing for a museum and an archive at the same time was worse. All three are collections, but they store and present their collected objects in very different ways.

On the design side, three architects were involved:

1. the local architect (with offices in Ask) that had designed the Centre of Culture and that supervised the construction work
2. a Library Centre architect working in Denmark
3. a Library Centre interior architect working in Oslo

As the new building took material form, we could more easily visualise the library space and its functions. We were able to identify problems and needs and proposed many changes. All new ideas were first discussed with the local architect. If he accepted the proposal, our man in Denmark corrected the architectural drawings - which were computer-generated, of course - accordingly.

Links to local community leaders were also important at this stage. Since the building process was managed by a broad committee and not by the municipality as such, the local political climate was important. The library needed political support to realise its vision.

Below I give some examples of architectural details that were modified **during** the building process:

1. To establish close contact with our users, the service desk should be placed next to the entrance.
2. Since our staff is very small, we must often switch between office work and user service. The offices should therefore lie next to the main service area.

3. To get closer contact with the public from the offices, we wanted glass walls between the offices and the public area. The glass walls also provided the offices with more natural light.
4. The library storage space was moved from the first to the second floor, releasing a first-floor room for the local archive. The archive is now located next door to the local history collection

The interior architect started her work in March 2001. She had already done interior design for the libraries in two neighbouring "airport" communities, Ullensaker and Nannestad. But the integration with archive and museum services was new.

The local history association has deposited a small collection of traditional tools and other household objects with the library. Once the project is realised, we may get additional donations. This is a community with a long historical tradition. Who knows what the attics hide?

But we have neither space nor staff for a separate museum section. The exhibition must be integrated with the books on show. The same space must serve both purposes. The library - or rather the LAMBRARY: Library-cum-Archive-cum-Museum - must also fit in with the building as a whole.

The museum objects are highly visible. They are **meant** to attract attention. For balance, we must reduce the visual impact of the rest of the furniture. We need clean and simple lines - classic Scandinavian design, in fact. As background colour, the architect chose the same deep, brownish red that is used elsewhere in the building. It is a traditional colour in rural culture - farmer's red, we call it. **Bonderødt**.

To exhibit the objects, we put tall glass cases at the narrow end of the book shelves. Each shelf, with its case, forms a single coherent whole. In architecture, gestalt principles are important. Attractive spaces are experienced as unitary. They have a meaningful shape as a whole. But they also consist of meaningful parts.

Many details require attention:

1. Archives are **heavy**. Stacks of paper, in close proximity, impose a greater load on the building than books on open shelves. We must ensure that the archive does not collapse on our heads. It would make a great headline, though: **librarians killed by old documents!**
2. Old paper needs a controlled physical environment. The archive should be painted and aired a couple of months in advance. Otherwise, gases might damage the archive materials. The air conditioner should also be installed in advance.
3. Museum exhibits should not be exposed to intense light. But visitors that browse for books need comfortable light to read the titles and scan the content. We decided to keep the overall lighting level moderate, but to provide local spots of light between the shelves.
4. We must accommodate people with disabilities. The lighting pattern should work for people who are visually impaired. Even the floor must be designed with such people in mind.

5. Many library users are hard of hearing. The acoustics must be tested to avoid echoes and the service desk should have a wire loop. Here we need expert help. Every Norwegian county has a centre that gives advice and lends out specially adapted equipment for functionally impaired persons. I know where to go, since I developed a classification system for such a centre many years ago.

7. National actors

It was the government that decided to integrate libraries, archives and museums. The change, I believe, is ultimately a consequence of new data technology. Libraries, archives and museums are all devoted to storage, description and presentation of cultural objects. The physical institutions show many similarities - but also important differences.

Lending books, giving access to sources, and presenting material objects require different types of skills and training. Three different professions developed: librarian, archivist and curator. But once the collections are digitised, the distinctions vanish.

The physical objects are different. The virtual objects are similar. They must be stored, retrieved, and presented to the public in roughly the same way. The digital variants of librarian, archivist and curator need basically the same professional background. In a digital environment, the three professions may fuse into one.

At the national level, the decision had broad political support. The cultural institutions themselves were much more ambivalent. The library bodies, in particular, were unhappy. But one might say: they had their chance - and blew it.

For more than a decade, the major actors in the Norwegian library world had discussed the future organisation of libraries at the national level. It was a match with four contenders:

1. the directorate for public libraries
2. the directorate for academic and special libraries
3. the national library
4. the national library association

At the end, nobody won. Since they could not agree among themselves, the government stepped in. The two library directorates were combined and placed under the new united directorate for libraries, archives and museums. The former head of museums became the new director general.

The new integrated policy was a necessary condition for our project, however. The proposal was presented to Parliament in late 1999. Next year, the director general of public libraries asked for relevant local projects. The invitation came to us via the county library.

To understand Norwegian libraries, you should know that our 19 county libraries are **service units** for the municipal libraries. They have collections, but do not lend to the public. Only public libraries can borrow directly from the county. The county librarians advice and support - but do not direct or decide. Municipal autonomy must be safeguarded.

In our dealings with the municipality we needed support both from the national and from the county level. The directorate of public libraries gave good advice and the county librarian was a staunch ally throughout the process. Since he came from the outside his words were taken seriously.

Since we wanted a "three-ring" library, we also contacted the directorate of museums and two experts on local archives. The director was supportive - and he gave us the idea of integrating the exhibition with the book collection. Small museums with limited resources soon turn dull and uninteresting. Why should I see the same exhibition twice? But in a library, the stock on the shelves is constantly renewed. The museum exhibits are an added bonus.

At a later stage we could renew the exhibition by borrowing items from other museums in the region. Most museums show only a (small) percentage of their stocks to the public. They do not have the space. Nor is it meaningful to exhibit a series of very similar objects - if you have seen one sickle, you have seen them all ... Which makes interlending between museums interesting.

The archive experts gave detailed technical advice on building, storage and conservation. We had to get this information into the design process at an early stage.

8. Local actors

Developing a new and untraditional library in a traditional rural setting was a genuine juggling act. You need to be aware of several distinct processes and to collaborate with many different actors at the same time. Deciding to move was only the first step. What kind of movement was envisaged?

When we move house, we may hire a firm to transfer our belongings. The transport costs money, but the furniture is unchanged. In a couple of days or weeks we go on with our daily lives. We relocate, but we do not change. For the library, I wanted more.

The old library was essentially a space filled with books. We wanted the new library to be a space filled with **activities**. Most of our activities still involve literature, one way or the other. People come here to borrow books, to read comics and to study works of reference. There are story hours for children and poetry evenings for adults. But we want more than literature. Even a small public library can be a multifunctional cultural space.

Our opening hours are far too short - 22 hours a week. But we invite local organisations to use our space when we are closed. It is an ill wind that blows no good. They appreciate our help and serve as ambassadors to the community.

We explore the educational use of computers. We arrange concerts. We encourage distance students to use us as a place of study. We pester the local schools. The teachers want our services, but not our collaboration. We insist on joint planning of library visits. We want music, art, and exhibitions. Our aim is to become the local **Centre Pompidou** - in the middle of green fields.

We even have a golf course in the library. A **small** golf course. A **very** small golf course. Actually, it is a 5 * 10 feet putting green - donated by the local golf association. They are trying hard to get a planning permission for an 18 hole course. But so far, with our single hole, we monopolise the field,

The older generation of local politicians dislike spending money. They remember Norway as it used to be: a semideveloped peasant country at the very edge of Europe. In their youth they learnt to be careful with every penny.

Their concept of culture may be a bit fuzzy. They are more committed to sports than to the intellectual and esthetic dimensions of culture. They do not relate to the library as an important local actor. Since they are respected in the community, their views count. If they really put on the brakes, it is very hard to realise a project.

Younger politicians are different. They are more dynamic and tend to be impatient with the people of the "old school". Most of them have higher education. The library - and culture in general - finds its best supporters among these people.

But it is not fair to describe all elderly politicians as old-fashioned. Some of them share the flexibility and commitment of the young. They are willing to take risks in order to support new initiatives. I discovered many of them among the building volunteers. As a member of the volunteer network, I could test and promote proposals from the library informally and at an early stage.

It is said that "nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come". But if you sit down and wait, nothing happens. In local politics, the time of power will only arrive if the idea has been circulated in advance.

In Norway, public libraries are intensely local institutions. Every municipality has its own independent library system. Gjerdrum is small, but not untypical. The average Norwegian municipality has about 10.000 inhabitants. But the median municipality is smaller.

I do not know if you remember the median? If you order all Norwegian municipalities by size, and find the municipality in the middle - that's the median. Half the communities are larger. The other half is smaller. The median is "the girl in the middle"...

The median municipality has about 5.000 inhabitants. This means, by the way, that the typical Norwegian public library has only two staff members: the head librarian and her assistant. The public library system consists of 435 autonomous units. Small is beautiful.

The municipal process was essential. The library project had to be on the official administrative agenda. But networking in the local community is also crucial. On the organisation chart, the library is just a small unit at the bottom of the hierarchy. This is normal in all respectable bureaucracies. Layers of middle managers muffle our screams.

Our most important ally was the local history association. Both the museum and the archive must build on the work of the association. Through many years the members have collected papers and objects that document local history. The association is a body with unique competence. As a librarian I know how to organise collections, but I can never match their detailed knowledge of places, people and events.

Friendly local politicians constituted a second network. My strongest support came from people with broad sympathies. On the one hand they value local history and traditions. On the other they are willing to take risks. They respect the past and support the future.

Not everybody was ready to take political risks for cultural causes. Some people appreciated the project, but wanted to avoid controversy. Such silent supporters could also be valuable, however. They create a more welcoming climate for the risk takers, and they add to the momentum once change is in the air.

For the library it was also important to have friends and supporters in all political parties. The community has a broad range of parties. During this period the municipality was governed by a center-labour alliance. But the "library cause" was not monopolised by any single party or tendency - left, centre, or right.

When political support spans the whole political spectrum, the project does not stand or fall with a particular administration. Again we were helped by the volunteer tradition: people from all parties contributed to the building activities.

Norwegian municipalities are self-governing entities. Municipal autonomy has been a pillar of the regime since 1837. Not for us the centralized systems of Germany, France, Spain or Russia. But municipal organisations are basically administrative. They are reasonably well equipped to handle the normal flow of casework. Here, they are guided by detailed legal rules and regulations from higher political and administrative levels (county, state).

But small communities are less prepared for the management of projects and of innovation processes. Personalities and personal relationships play a greater role than in bigger and more formalised institutions. In such cases, political processes may be complex, subtle, and hard to grasp.

Complexity can be defined by the conditions of failure. Juggling one ball is easy. A process is simple if only one thing counts. You can focus your full attention on a single object. A process is complex, if many different things can go wrong. To achieve success, all components must succeed.

9. The rules of the game

The head of the public library is not a top-ranked position in the hierarchy. The big municipal departments, in terms of staff and budgets, are schools and health. To make an impact, I had to draw on my previous experience with projects, politics and social networking.

At this point, I should perhaps say something about my background as a project worker. In the eighties, during the state of emergency in Poland, I worked with solidarity actions. After the fall of the regime, I coordinated several local development projects, including an agricultural trainee program.

I am not involved anymore, but the program is still running. Every year, around fifty young farmers from south-east Poland are invited as trainees for about three months. They do not come to the fertile plains north of Oslo, however. They work on the smaller farms on the rugged west coast of Norway, in the region where I used to live.

These projects involved networking, fund raising, political mobilisation, and - during the emergency - a certain amount of physical risk. The work required contacts with politicians from different parties, in Poland and Norway, at local and national levels. Several voluntary organisations, in both countries, were involved. So were the churches.

Some projects succeeded. Some failed. And some just faded away. Good will and grassroots diplomacy do not always work. The element of risk is real. But we can learn from any experience if we **treat** it as a lesson. After fifteen years as a community project worker, I know more about the rules of the game.

Let me sum up the rules, here at the end:

1. Local library development is a complex process.
2. Complexity means that many things can go wrong
3. Administrators manage simple processes
4. Entrepreneurs manage complexity.
5. Local politics is both personal and political
6. Personal networking is essential
7. Political alliances are essential
8. Work talks louder than words
9. Carpe diem
10. Don't forget to relax in the grass

Note

The paper was drafted by Bozena Rasmussen in Norwegian. It was translated into English, edited and revised by Tord Høivik.

Bozena Rasmussen - [Tord Høivik](#) - 2003/03/18