

# Helsinki City Library, a Cornucopia of Urban Culture and Learning

## Tuula Haavisto

Library Director and Culture Director emerita of Helsinki City Council

**Through opening the new Central Library Oodi, the City of Helsinki has launched an up-dated public library concept which influences the city library network as a whole. The traditional task of libraries promoting literacy, reading and information usage, has been expanded to include new forms of networking, supporting learning, active citizenship and media literacy. Users and visitors show their appreciation by using libraries more and more actively.**

**T**he new Helsinki Central Library Oodi was inaugurated in December 2018, receiving widespread national and international attention. The library was widely presented in the international media from Italy to Portugal and Spain, from Brazil and Malaysia to South Korea and Russia, including coverage in The Guardian, The New York Times and The Washington Post. Also the most important group,

ordinary library users in Helsinki, received the bold new library warmly. Very seldom does an expensive new public building receive such unanimous applause.

Both Helsinki residents and city visitors have supported the library with their feet: during December 2018, 286,000 visits were counted. The two-millionth visitor of the year 2019 stepped in on 15 August 2019.

Helsinki Central Library Oodi © Maarit Hohteri





In the Helsinki city centre, there was a particular lack of spaces for family use. Since opening the new Oodi Central Library in December 2018, families are one of the most eager user groups. © Risto Rimpfi



The Oodi library has videogames and multimedia rooms available © Jonna Pennanen

Oodi library is a leading example of the updated role of public libraries in Helsinki. According to reactions from numerous international guests, the concept would be relevant in their circumstances as well. Oodi seems to be an suitable answer to many new and longstanding needs of today's citizens.<sup>1</sup>

Within six months after opening the Oodi library, 13,000 new library cards had been issued in Oodi, and 24,000 in all of Helsinki, which means an amazing growth of 64% compared with the previous year. The total number of visits to Helsinki libraries between January and June 2019 was 42% more than in 2018. Several branch libraries had also increased their visitor numbers, some stayed as they were and a few had fewer visitors than a year ago. Lending numbers grew 6% (200,000) from the previous year, and again, there were several libraries showing higher growth numbers.

People want to come together at a place in which to work and spend time, they want to learn new skills, and they still want to read, though this need seems to be diminishing. Recognising these needs was an important factor in the three-hour-long political discussion before making the final building decision in January 2015, as was covering citizen support for the project, which politicians are keenly aware of doing.

For the planning of the new central library, Helsinki City Library developed a new vision. The traditional task of public libraries, promoting reading and literacy, was expanded: 'The library is an enricher of ideas and thoughts where, by sharing knowledge, skills and stories we together create a new civic society.'

1. In Finland, public libraries in general are an adequate answer to a variety of needs: more than half of the population, and even more than that in Helsinki, use public libraries regularly in one way or another. This covers both physical libraries and multifaceted library services via the Internet.

---

**Within six months after opening the Oodi library, 13,000 new library cards had been issued in Oodi, and 24,000 in all of Helsinki, which means an amazing growth of 64% compared with the previous year. The total number of visits to Helsinki libraries between January and June 2019 was 42% more than in 2018. Several branch libraries had also increased their visitor numbers, some stayed as they were and a few had fewer visitors than a year ago. Lending numbers grew 6% (200,000) from the previous year, and again, there were several libraries showing higher growth numbers.**

---

Based on these needs and thoughts, the new library was designed to offer:

- an open, non-commercial, public space
- information and skills for a more functional society
- a rich city experience created by the residents themselves
- the house of reading in the Töölönlahti cultural area<sup>2</sup>
- a pioneer in intelligent everyday life - fab labs, virtual services, robots...
- a library for all senses - a new programme every day

These goals were not developed solely by the library staff or other civil servants. An important element from

2. Töölönlahti Cultural area is a concentration of cultural institutions laid out in a park along a bay in the city centre. The institutions housed there include: the National Opera and Ballet, The National Museum, Finlandia Hall, the Music Hall, Helsinki City Theatre, and one branch of Helsinki City Museum, among others.

## Services & Facilities Offered at the Oodi Library

Book Heaven	A wide selection of books and magazines in nearly 20 languages, which can be read on site or borrowed. The collection includes more than 100,000 items, including music, console and board games, films, etc.
Urban Workshop & Makerspaces	Offers a wide range of professional tools from a soldering station to a laser cutter, 3D printers, not to overlook traditional handicrafts or sewing machines. The work facilities and tools can be used independently or with the assistance of the library personnel. A range of workshops and events for all ages are organised to put ideas into practice.
Study, Work and Meeting Facilities	Oodi offers an extensive schedule as well as open and pleasant facilities that can be used for particular work needs, for study, or for teaching sessions by reserving group facilities of various sizes. Computers, printers, photocopier-scanners and Wi-Fi connections are available for use.
Music Services	Creating music from start to finish (rehearsing, recording and producing) is possible in the different studios and playing rooms that can be booked, and which feature workstations, amplifiers and other musical equipment. Instruments and music equipment can be borrowed using the library card. Concerts can be hosted in the library, as well.
Gaming Services	Oodi offers devices and facilities for digital gaming in specifically adapted rooms that can be booked. Spaces for board games are also available.
Events, Workshops and Lectures	Oodi users can take part in a diverse range of events and workshops, attend lectures and be inspired by media art displays, which take place on a regular basis.
Services for Children and Families	Oodi has space for relaxed quality family time and for doing things together. Children are welcomed on every floor of the Oodi library building, which has an accessible entrance for prams and buggies.
Film, Information and Playground Services	Other complementary services are offered on the Oodi premises such as film screenings (with a 250-seat auditorium), information desks for different citizens' services, the municipality participation space and a playground space that serves as an open meeting place for families with children and offers specific activities.
Restaurants and Coffee Bars	2 restaurants and coffee spots are available within the library premises.

the very beginning was citizen participation. Nearly 20 different ways to involve people and also future partners in the planning were applied. At first, all in all, 2300 Dreams/Visions were collected from citizens during 2012-13. A set of eight edited thematic reports based on those was produced and used as an official planning document. After collecting 'dreams' on quite a broad level, the issues consulted with citizens became more concrete, for example, families participating in the family library planning gave useful input, such as the idea of several 'parking lots' for baby carriages in the building.

Practical and successful participation resulted in a deep feeling of ownership of the new library among the people of Helsinki.

Since its opening, citizen participation has continued to be part of the permanent working model of Oodi.

### Modern Library Act

Oodi library is also the flagship of the new Library Act of Finland (2016). The objectives of the Act are to promote equal opportunities to access education and culture, availability and use of information, reading and literacy, lifelong learning, competence development and active citizenship, democracy and freedom of expression.

According to the Act, the concrete tasks of public libraries are to:

- provide access to materials, information and cultural contents;
- maintain versatile and up-to-date collections;
- promote reading and literature;
- provide information services, guidance and support in the acquisition and use of information and in versatile literacy skills;



- provide space for learning, recreational activities, working, and civic activities;
- promote social and cultural dialogue.

Also the new Act is enlarging the scope of libraries from reading and literacy towards learning and societal communication. The library space is considered to be a service in and of itself. Library floors are no longer monopolized by shelves and reading tables.

Two Finnish examples worth mentioning regarding fresh working concepts in line with the new Act, are the Metso Live Music and Novellikoukku. Metso Live Music of the Tampere main library Metso is a series of events offered by the music department consisting of an interview with, and music by, well-known visiting musicians. The guests often give a concert in Tampere, so this is also cooperation between the library and other cultural venues. The events are free-of-charge and extremely popular, so that musicians currently offering a concert in Tampere even hope to be invited as guests of Metso Live Music. Novellikoukku ('attracted by/hooked on short stories') is a concept created by the Helsinki City Library, consisting of a two-hour-long session, where one person reads short stories of choice, as others knit or crochet, and comment on the stories heard.

### Dynamic Library Network of Helsinki

Returning to the Helsinki perspective: in all, Helsinki has 37 libraries, two mobile libraries, hospital libraries

3. Mobile libraries are book buses, one of which is equipped especially for children. Hospital libraries offer books for the patients and staff to read. Currently most of them are located in homes for the elderly, where people have longer stays. Home services bring books to those people who, for one reason or another, cannot leave their homes.

and home services.<sup>3</sup> A gigantic newcomer like Oodi could easily overshadow some of other libraries. However, a political decision was made in 2015 to safeguard the whole library network, because it was so highly valued.

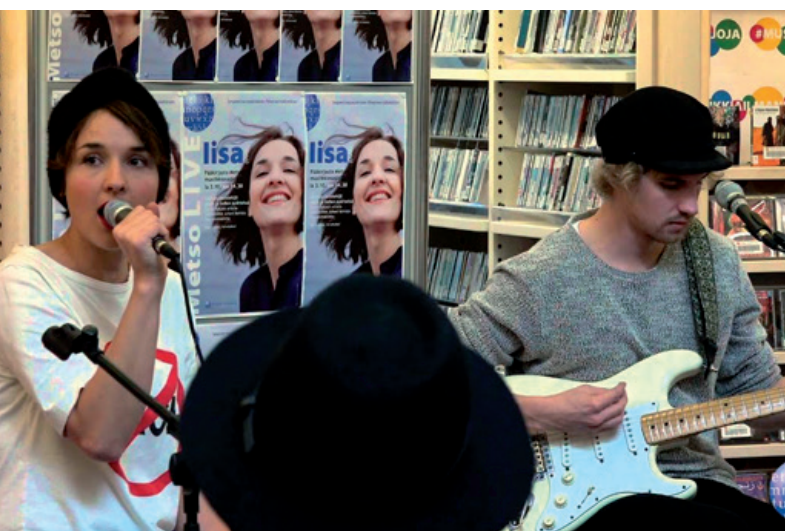
Oodi is somewhat of a moving force in the network. The city library ensured, through various decisions, that what was learned through Oodi would be spread throughout the network. For example, a systematic job exchange system to Oodi was organized, open to every interested staff member. The citizen participation methods have also been applied to the whole library system.

Users have not abandoned other libraries in Helsinki. Their importance as meeting places in their own surroundings is exactly the same as Oodi: non-commercial public spaces with long hours, open to everybody. Users appreciate the fact that in libraries they are received as individuals instead of belonging to some labelled group such as 'the elderly,' 'youngsters,' 'immigrants,' or similar.

Helsinki branch libraries also offer numerous programmes aimed at kids, and young schoolchildren (in Finland considered to be 7 years and up) often stay in the nearest library during afternoons when their parents are still working. A variety of local discussion events are organized in libraries, which are appreciated as neutral grounds even for challenging debates. Reading circles and language cafes (for immigrants to practise the Finnish language) are always popular. Most libraries offer exhibition space, used by amateur artists, collectors, local history enthusiasts and hobbyists.

All libraries in Finland are highly motivated within the traditional field of public libraries, promoting literacy and reading. Competition for peoples' free time is stiff because there are so many tempting Internet and other activities. In the age of countless social media channels,

Metso Live Music in Tampere City Main Library. Young artist Lisa in close contact with listeners. © Juhani Koivisto



In Spring 2019, 14 language cafés offered weekly meetings in Helsinki libraries, reaching hundreds of immigrants who want to learn the Finnish language. © Satu Haavisto



libraries emphasise the importance of reading long narrative and analytical texts. A profound understanding of the world requires serious concentration which does not come about without reading whole books and well-thought-out and argued articles and publications. Today's constant flood of visual images has its advantages but it cannot provide the basis for the same analysis as can a good text. Reading and literature enhance creativity in an immeasurable way.

Further, public libraries consider media education as part of their tasks, especially for groups which have no natural connection with digital contents via education, training or work. Helsinki City Library works, for example, with an association called Enter Ry, which offers peer advice and training in ICT for senior citizens.

The Helsinki City Strategy (2017) states that 'the basic task of the city is to provide quality public services and

create conditions for a stimulating and enjoyable life. Functionality is based on equality, non-discrimination, strong social cohesion and open, inclusive ways of operating.' The City library's action planning follows this strategy and the Library Act, to serve citizenship in the best possible way. ●

### Sources

- Finnish Library Act (2016): <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2016/en20161492>
- Helsinki City Library <https://www.hel.fi/kulttuurin-ja-vapaa-ajan-toimiala/en/services/Libraries/>
- Helsinki Central Library Oodi <https://www.oodihelsinki.fi/en/>
- Helsinki City Strategy 2017-21 <https://www.hel.fi/helsinki/en/administration/strategy/strategy/>
- Ministry of Education and Culture (2016): Finland is one of the top countries in the world in the field of library services <https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4150031/Library+services/65df0ce2-685f-4c3c-9686-53c108641a5c/Library+services.pdf>

Libraries in Helsinki are accessible to all © Jonna Pennanen



Fab labs and makerspaces serving do-it-yourself-people can be found in the Oodi Central Library © Jonna Pennanen

