LIBRARIES BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

EDITORS

Jörn Christiansson
Justyna Starostka

INTRODUCTION

The role of libraries has evolved significantly in recent years. As society becomes more digital and interconnected, libraries have expanded their scope beyond traditional book lending to become community hubs that offer a wide range of services and resources.

It is in this new role libraries and librarians have the potential to play a more significant part in helping to bridge the digital divide and similar gaps between citizen and administration, where the expectations to the citizen doesn't match the citizen's abilities.

Here the library can act as a buffer between typically vulnerable groups, e.g. elderly and immigrants, by providing ad hoc services or supporting groups of local volunteers that help citizens to access (digital) public services. But also as a bridge between citizens' needs and the developers of public services.

LIBRARY AT THE CENTRE OF CIVIC LIFE

This handbook is not only meant to inspire librarians about possible future developments of libraries, but also include information on the social mechanisms that make it possible to place libraries back in the centre of civic life.

For public service developers the handbook suggests that the open interaction happening in the library can be a resource for an open and transparent development of new public services and improvement of existing ones, not least with the suggestion that libraries can become an important resource to support the participation of the most marginalised groups.

The libraries are a space for inspiration, creation, exploration and participation, and with their strong tradition in promoting citizen engagement, democracy and learning they can become a civic innovation center, where citizens can engage in improving public digital services.

With this handbook, produced within the project CAPE (Civic Agency in Public E-service innovation), we aim to help librarians embrace this new role, providing practical guidance and insights on how to bridge these gaps, and hope to contribute to the knowledge of librarians and public service developers, as it offers a perspective that considers libraries at the centre of a process of public innovation and social inclusion.
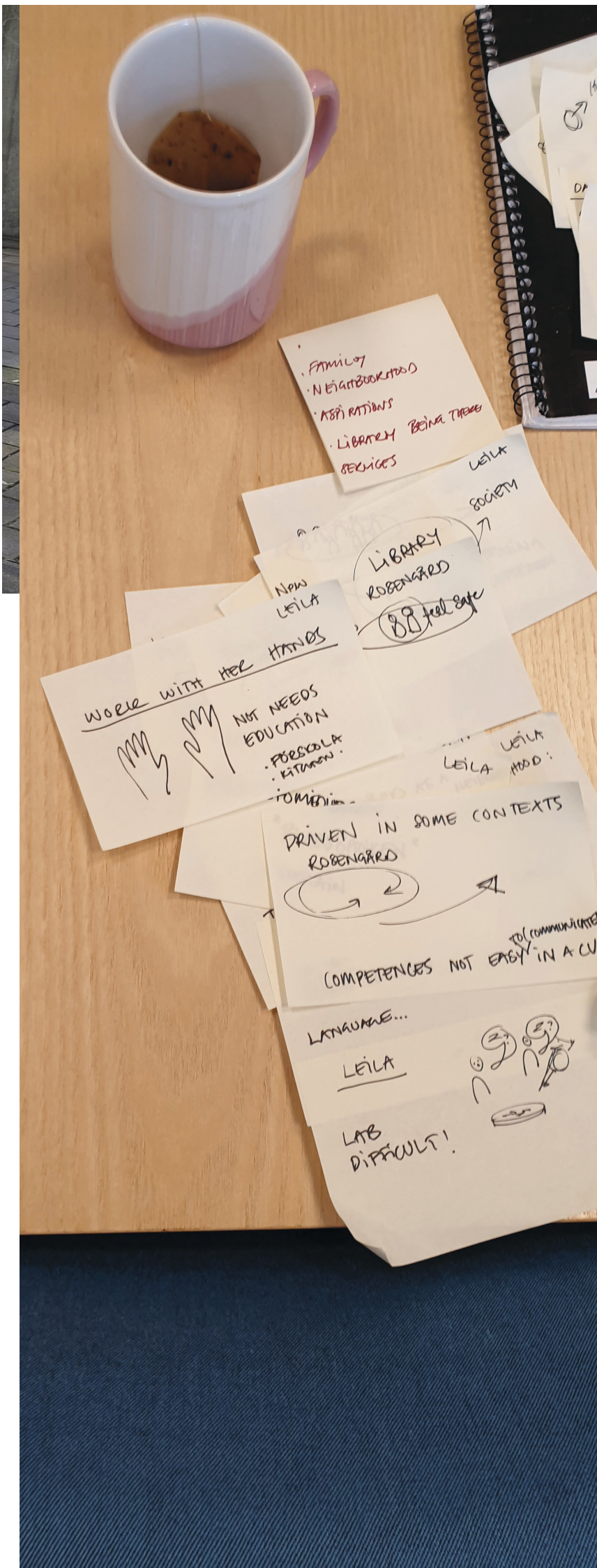
LIBRARIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Libraries in the Nordic countries are frequently visited, trusted and liked by the citizens.

Public libraries have served the society through providing free of charge culture and information services. They have provided low threshold access to information for the benefit of individuals' learning, cultural enjoyment and informed participation in society.

Digitalisation has changed the technological foundation of creating, storing, and consuming information and cultural content. But the heritage as centres of information and culture, the library's public mandate for democratic inclusion, and open doors as a public non-commercial space remains relevant, and are foundational for facilitating citizen innovation.

Also, libraries can provide the facilities for collaboration, places where digital hardware can be accessed, and room for social engagement that digital innovation requires.

BUILDING DIGITAL TRUST

The transfer towards digital public services has been apparent in many areas of life, including healthcare and financial services.

Unfortunately, many service providers fail to acknowledge the complexities of digital service ecosystems and particularly the challenges they set for clients in the margins of digitalisation, such as senior citizens and immigrants without advanced skills in local languages.

In this digital no man's land between the public administrations and the citizens, libraries are becoming a key location where digitalisation becomes more accessible and understandable for citizens and where they can find support.

The library is a safe place because of its nature to be a service offered to all citizens, including digitally marginalised groups, less educated people, elderly and ethnic minorities. Those groups have already been using libraries and are familiar with their spaces and personnel, and libraries are therefore one of the best places to build trust in service digitalisation.

THE GAP

In the digital era libraries have evolved from traditional repositories of printed knowledge into centres of information and innovation. Their roles have expanded to include several crucial functions.

Firstly, libraries serve as entryways to the digital world. They provide access to digital resources such as e-books, but they also play an essential role in promoting digital literacy, helping individuals navigate the fast-changing technology as well as digital services.

Moreover, libraries have become spaces fostering social inclusion and providing access to technology for those who may not have it at home. They serve as centers for lifelong learning, offering workshops, and digital skills training and support to bridge the digital divide.

GIVE CITIZENS A VOICE

The strong push towards a digital society means that more and more of the interactions between citizen and government is expected to take place digitally through services accessed on the Internet.

his change has created a form of inequality that is described as a 'digital divide', meaning that many citizens will find the access to public services quite hard. This growing digital inequality creates challenges in the Nordic welfare societies, who are otherwise often regarded as being at the forefront of public sector digitalisation.

Thus, an argument could be made that if people's everyday lives are affected by public services being digitalised, they should have a say in how these services are designed.

In today's public service development, however, the degree of user engagement is typically quite low. And even if there is awareness of the importance of user engagement in public sector design, we rarely see users having a strong voice in how services are designed.

Here public libraries could have an important role in engaging citizens in public sector design, to build public awareness of the value of this process, and help citizens acquire tools to participate in the development of new services or help improving existing ones.

In other words: Bridging the gap between citizen and increasingly digital public services.

THE LIBRARY AS A BUFFER

There are several reasons for why the library has strong potential as a platform for citizen engagement.

Today, the library is not only a place where citizens can access information or borrow books, but also a physical place providing the opportunity to hang out, experience, learn, participate, and perform.

On a general level, active citizen participation happens through volunteer programmes such as book clubs, language cafés or knitting clubs etc.. Through activities organised in dedicated spaces, like the maker spaces in which citizens of different age groups can learn and experiment with new technologies. And through co-creative activities sponsored by specific organisations or partners of the libraries.

In those co-creative activities citizens are often planning and running the event. They are creating and exchanging knowledge about very diverse topics, some related directly to public services they will have to use in their everyday life.

Some of these activities, both volunteer and co-creative, can be considered buffers between (vulnerable) citizens and public services, as they offer extra support for the challenged groups, be it digital or otherwise.

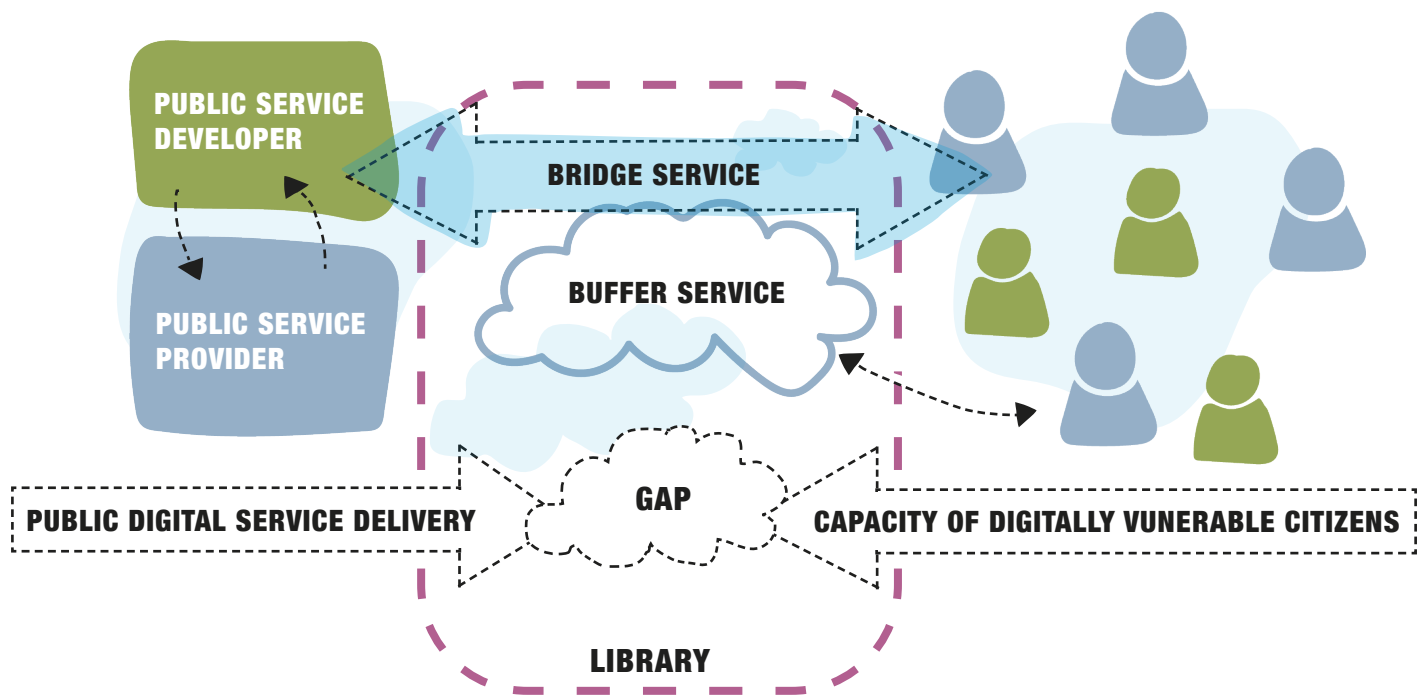## PICKING UP WHERE OFFICIAL SUPPORT LET GO

One good example of a buffering service can be an IT help desk. In the Nordic countries many public libraries have an important role in offering support to digitally challenged citizens through IT helpdesks hosted in libraries. The services are often operated by volunteers and are complementary to other public support services.

Looking to Denmark, officially it's the Borgerservice (Citizen Service) in municipalities that offers IT support for digital services like the online identification system, MitID, to users at all skill levels. However, this is limited to functional support.

That creates challenges for many citizens, usually elderly or foreigners, that often require more support in understanding the specific digital system. Often, they find that support in the volunteering IT helpdesk service at libraries.

The IT volunteers offer extensive help with the different services (like the MitID app) with detailed explanations, training and learning, and, as they are not limited by public sector constraints, they offer support and patience.

Acting as buffers between citizens and public services, those volunteers are playing a central role in alleviating citizens' problems in using public services.

PUBLIC SERVICE DEVELOPER

PUBLIC SERVICE PROVIDER

BRIDGE SERVICE

BUFFER SERVICE

GAP

LIBRARY

PUBLIC DIGITAL SERVICE DELIVERY

CAPACITY OF DIGITALLY VUNERABLE CITIZENS

Buffers and bridges for crossing the gap between public service delivery and citizen capacity.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What type of buffering services exist in my library? It-helpdesk? Language cafés? Psychological support? Legal support?
- In which areas are the citizens the most vulnerable?
- What are the buffering organisations that operate in my library?
- Are they formal or informal groups?
- Are the volunteers receiving funding?
- Where are the volunteers located?

THE LIBRARY AS A BRIDGE

The public library, with its strong tradition of democracy and citizen participation, can bridge the gap between public service delivery and citizen needs, thereby helping to reduce the inequalities in society.

Buffer services, such as an IT Helpdesk or a café helping people in their job seeking process which are often run by volunteers, could be instrumental in that proces.

Often, the volunteers possess extensive experience from different vulnerable groups of citizens and knowledge about the most common problems that citizens encounter.

This knowledge can potentially provide valuable input to the design of e.g. digital services or the bureaucracy surrounding job seeking in the welfare programmes, so that they better meet the needs of challenged users.

However, that knowledge is not being capitalised on as there is currently no link between the public or private service providers and the buffer services.

KNOWING THE COMMUNITY

Libraries stand out when looking at who could help establishing this link for several reasons:

•   **Libraries are focusing on communities:** The centre of a library's activity today is moving from the inner space of the library, the space for books, to the outer space, towards becoming community hubs that offer a wide range of services and resources.

•   **Libraries are listening to the community:** Because of their connection to the surrounding community libraries have the capability to intercept people's needs, not least with a special hearing capacity for disadvantaged people. Libraries can take care of a demand that would otherwise be neglected.

•   **Libraries are engaging different communities**: Their presence makes it possible to use the library as an aggregation place that can activate local communities, making it possible for them to participate in the process of shaping the services available.

This connection to the citizens could be utilised to strengthen the synergy between citizens, volunteers and public administration to potentially increase civic agency in public sector design.

Furthermore, if several libraries handling the same type of problems (e.g. IT helpdesks) were networked, the knowledge sharing can be strengthened even further and be utilised in designing or improving public e-services.

NOT ALL BUFFER SERVICES CAN BE BRIDGED. CAN YOU RECOGNISE SERVICES IN YOUR LIBRARY WHERE THERE COULD BE A LINK BETWEEN VOLUNTEERS AND PUBLIC SECTOR?

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What type of bridging services exist or may exist in my library?
- What type of knowledge might be in the library that potentially can be interesting for the public sector developers?
- Can I localise any natural leaders that may act as bridge initiators?
- Are there any connections with the public sector that may be the beginning of a bridge between volunteers and public sector providers/developers?
- In which areas the citizens are the most vulnerable?

A BRIDGE BUILT I - BALLERUP, COPENHAGEN

In 2022 MitID (the Danish national eID) was launched, which caused a wave of citizens, especially in the most vulnerable groups like elderly, reaching out for help at Borgerservice and libraries.

This was also the case at IT-stuen at Ballerup library. Here volunteers provide support for digitally challenged citizens that goes well beyond what Borgerservice offers, and in that way accommodate the extra needs of the elderly population in Ballerup.

Already an established buffer service, IT-stuen's volunteers had extensive knowledge about what was lacking for their users in the support offered by Borgerservice for the MitID identification service.

This knowledge could be used to improve Borgerservice, but more importantly it could be used to improve the MitID app to better match the needs of e.g. the elderly citizens challenged by the new digital service.

The interface that meets the user of the MitID app has been developed by Digitaliseringsstyrelsen (Agency for Digital Government). To explore possibilities to improve the MitID app, a dialogue between user experience designers (UX-designers) at Digitaliseringsstyrelsen and the IT-volunteers at IT-stuen was established.

They met and participated in workshops hosted at Ballerup library which acted as a platform for mutual learning and exchange. Here the UX-designers had the opportunity to tap into the volunteers' experience and knowledge, and the volunteers in IT-stuen received information about future developments for the MitID app.

Today a digital forum has been established where the volunteers in IT-stuen and Digitaliseringsstyrelsen continue to exchange ideas and information with each other.

This bridge enables citizens to communicate their needs to the developers of MitID so that service can be improved with newer versions, and stands as one working example of how public libraries can give citizens a voice in public sector design through the exchange of knowledge with public sector developers.

MITID IS DENMARK'S THIRD GENERATION EID.

TODAY, MORE THAN 90 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION USE MITID IN SITUATIONS TO DOCUMENT ONES IDENTITY ELECTRONICALLY.

MITID ENHANCES THE SCOPE OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR, AND HELPS THE PUBLIC SECTOR TO OFFER BETTER SERVICES TO CITIZENS AND BUSINESSES.

IT ALLOWS FOR CITIZENS TO ACCESS THEIR PUBLIC SELF-SERVICE SOLUTIONS 24 HOURS A DAY.

A BRIDGE BUILT II
- ROSENGÅRD, MALMÖ

Buffer and bridging services can also be developed from scratch. This is demonstrated in another case based in Rosengård library in Malmö, Sweden.

As Rosengård is a space where many immigrants live they naturally come to the library to receive support in different services, one of which was a job-seeking activity.

Here a buffering service has developed to provide them with the extra support they need in their job seeking process through the Swedish Public Employment Service. The buffering service is integrated in a language café and is operated by volunteers.

Through the work with the immigrants using the language café, the library had direct access to the local community and identified unemployment among immigrant women as a main challenge in the community.

After interviews and a first workshop at the library with the women, librarians got to learn how the immigrant women's contact with the unemployment office was hampered by their skills not being acknowledged and by the bureaucracy involved.

The library itself then decided to bridge this gap and organise a job fair with representatives from job centers, employment agencies, vocational training representatives, etc. in order to give the women a better insight into their opportunities.

This buffering service handles another kind of service problem than IT-stuen, but it has the same potential to contribute with knowledge to improve public services.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The key for the public libraries in adopting a new role in (digital) societal innovation is collaboration.

Libraries should ask who their key innovation partners can be and how to contact and motivate them to co-innovate. It is about identifying who has access to local knowledge. Who needs support and help with digital services, and who has willingness to volunteer.

The library's role can also be one of participant if not a leader. Here some of the questions to consider are:

- How to find and get involved in exiting innovation projects?
- What are the unique resources that each public library can provide to the collaboration?
- How can the low threshold public space and the neutral non-commercial space be utilised as a platform for innovation collaboration?
- How can we build on the cultural and social capital that libraries have accumulated over decades?

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

Libraries have had the attention of researchers as sites of civic engagement for a long time. Many libraries are highly engaged in their local communities, providing knowledge as well as being a gathering point for local action. As such they are not just knowledge repositories, but sites of knowledge production.

This makes libraries highly interesting partners for collaboration with public research institutes such as universities. The interests of both libraries and universities largely align in aiming to provide better services for the public.

In these collaborations libraries can provide access to communities and citizens, and researchers can help develop and design new tools and practices.

So, educational and research institutions are obvious partners, but also commercial actors have a lot to contribute to digital innovation.

Consider how and where the interests of libraries, citizens, and firms meet and the commercial and non-commercial expertise complement each other. And once the creative and dynamic first phases of innovation have passed, what kind of role can a library take to ensure that the best new ideas and solutions get integrated with existing practices for lasting impact?

The answers are local and case specific and the aim of this handbook is to offer some guidance in asking the right questions and offering some possible directions for paths to take.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO FOLLOW?

The main purpose of this handbook has been to introduce librarians and other library staff to a new model for civic innovation, introducing and focussing on the concepts of buffer services and bridges.

If you want to apply this model in your own library it starts with a vision and follows a process divided into three phases:

PHASE 1 - PREPARING

It is important to first formulate and agree across your organisation on the reasons for doing civic innovation and how it relates to existing visions, strategies and practices in your library. Next step is to identify one or more challenges to work with that could become buffer services and potentially lead to bridge services. Here you need to consider all stakeholders that are involved in the challenge and their expectations, and what stakeholder(s) may take ownership of the initiative. You also need to consider the resources available (budget, facilities, skills) and constraints for launching your initiative. Remember that not all services offered at your library are buffers and that not all buffers can be bridged meaningfully. Identify where your community's needs are and go from there.

PHASE 2 - RUNNING

Here your library's engagement can vary depending on who takes ownership of the activities. Your library can have full ownership of the activities, from monitoring for issues in the community and identifying needs, to facilitating the design and implementation of buffer services and civic bridge services. At the other end of the spectrum, your library can host activities and facilitate the engagement of different stakeholders that run the actual process. In any case, engaging participants and maintaining relationships will always be an important task for your library, and the ability to reach citizens in your community through various channels is imperative for engagement. Main activities in running these activities include gathering data about the issues from citizens, facilitating co-design workshops where the issue can be analysed and buffer and bridge services can be developed, and finally evaluating and celebrating outcomes of the activities.

PHASE 3 - SUSTAINING

As the concept of buffer and bridge services relies on a long-term commitment where they are basically maintained for as long as they are needed in the community, we have presented a set of principles to enable sustaining the services. Maintaining and nurturing the relationships with stakeholders is important to sustain value for everybody involved. Documentation, knowledge sharing, and learning are important fertilisers for the nurturing of relationships. Finally, telling the stories of buffer and bridge services is important for the community to make the initiatives live on and to inspire future civic innovation activities.

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is written within the scope of a CAPE - Civic Agency in Public E-service innovation research project, which looked for ways to expand the roles of libraries.

Within the project we explored a new approach to public e-service design with the concept of civic innovation centres; a new way to frame libraries as spaces where citizens engage in co-design of new public services or improving existing ones.

In the project we worked with public libraries, researching, co-designing, and prototyping different forms of engagement.

In Denmark our project partner library was in Ballerup municipality. It is a local library that acts as a community center in a newly opened public space located in the old post office (Posthuset). Ballerup Library primarily serves the local community.

In Finland we collaborated with Oodi Library, which is the Helsinki Central Library. Oodi opened in 2018 and the famous building was designed by ALA Architects. It is situated in the Töölönlahti area of Helsinki city center. Beyond books, Oodi hosts a café, a cinema, studios for playing and recording music, co-working spaces, meeting rooms, and a makerspace.

In Sweden our main activities were focused around Rosengård Library in Malmö. Rosengård is characterised by a large population of immigrants from other countries; more than 50 languages are spoken in the area and around 100 nationalities are represented.

Collaborating with three different libraries offered our project a unique advantage. Each library presented a diverse set of challenges and opportunities, reflecting the varying contexts and demographics of their respective communities.

By working closely with Ballerup, Oodi, and Rosengård we gained different libraries contexts, from serving a specific local community in Denmark to addressing more general challenges in Malmö and serving very broad community in Helsinki.

The CAPE project was financed by NordForsk and lasted from October 2020 until December 2023.

THANK YOU!

EDITORS

Jörn Christiansson
Justyna Starostka

AUTHORS

Suzan Boztepe
Jörn Christiansson
Amalia de Götzen
Nils Ehrenberg
Erik Grönvall
Turkka Keinonen
Per Linde
Nicola Morelli
Joanna Saad-Sulonen
Alicia Smedberg
Justyna Starostka

NOTES:

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....