The History of Children’s Library Design: Continuities and Discontinuities

By

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The public children’s library in Britain is little over a century old. During that time its design is something in which librarians have taken a keen and persistent interest. The history of children’s library design is marked by a four identifiable phases. As a new cultural phenomenon with no architectural precedent to follow, children’s libraries before the First World War not surprisingly drew on the design format of the schoolroom, with its ordered rows of forward-facing desks, tables and chairs and its disciplined, sterile ambience. This ‘school-shelter’ format corresponded to early motives behind children’s library provision centred on the need to safeguard the moral fibre of the nation’s young, to rescue children from the degradation of the streets and to build a healthy population that could help strengthen Britain economically and imperially.

The design of the children’s library after 1918 mirrors an increasingly liberal approach to children’s library provision, contrasting with the stereotype of control and repression attached to pre-modern provision. As attitudes to childhood changed and as children began to receive greater attention from child welfare experts and greater protection from the state (something which had begun to happen before the war), the formal, sombre ambience of the children’s room began to give way to a brighter, domestic setting: the middle-class home. The inter-war period saw heightened levels of comfort in the children’s library (although by no means everywhere, it should be emphasised). There was also an increase in the variety of decorative and spatial devices – from curtained windows and bright paintings, to inglenooks, work tables and raised performance platforms – which emphasised the role of the children’s library as a place of relaxed free expression and constructive play.

Once economic recovery allowed the resumption of library construction, the post-Second World War decades witnessed a proliferation of open-plan modernist designs, the roots of which can be traced back to earlier in the twentieth century, to the evolution and influence of Scandinavian design and to developments in the design of the American house. In accordance with the universal spirit of modernism, adult and children’s library’s became more alike in their design: office-like – even space-age – efficiency replaced cosy domesticity.

Over the past generation, as increasing anxiety has been focused on the trajectory of the family in the fractured post-modern age. As increasing importance has consequently laid on nurturing and on early-years education, children’s library design has in many ways reflected the cocooned ‘comfort zone’ of the domestic haven, itself the focus of a considerable commercialisation under the marketing influence of retail giants like IKEA and a vibrant culture of home improvement. In addition, as society experienced a marked strengthening of consumer and popular culture, the children’s library took on the image of the playground, designs becoming more playful, vivid and hi-tech, the use of colour and the choice of furniture and fittings aping the McDonaldisation and Disneyisation of family-based mass leisure and entertainment.

Finally, taking an overview of the series of themes and periods we have identified, certain continuities and discontinuities present themselves. The early shelter function of the children’s library can be seen today in its role as a cocooned ‘comfort zone’. The original schoolroom image, though still visible in the 1920s and 1930s, and even detectable in the era of the children’s library as ‘modern office’ in the 1960s, has now diminished. The open plan of post-war modernism was, naturally, in keeping with contemporary developments in office design, although it also reflected the emergence of the open-plan house, re-enacting the link of the children’s library with the domestic sphere. Design for constructive play in the inter-war period has undergone a metamorphosis and has re-emerged in the early-twentieth century in the form of the children’s library as playground. Heavy references to the domestic environment in the 1920s and 1930s has recently re-appeared under the guise of the high-styled IKEA-like environments for young library users; while, in keeping with the trend towards cocooning, the open-plan, free-flow interface with adult sections seems to have lost some of its appeal. But what remains constant is the important place of the children’s library and its design in public library provision, in Britain and elsewhere.