



**LIBRARY** ■ Speaking volumes: Bisset Adams' Watney Market Idea Store

*East London's latest Idea Store exemplifies the gradual evolution of the local library, says Oriel Prizemen. Photos: Tim Crocker.*



The London Borough of Tower Hamlets pioneered the Idea Store, an innovative one-stop shop that brings together a range of council services in addition to library facilities. The latest, Watney Market Idea Store in Shadwell by Bisset Adams, replaces a nearby library, and effectively demonstrates the current state of evolution in local library design and thinking.

With a background in branding as well as architecture, Bisset Adams is credited with inventing the Idea Store more than fifteen years ago. The concept drew on the flagship NikeTown stores, providing an environment that corresponded to the natural

navigational instincts of teenagers. Its first Idea Store opened in Bow in 2002 (followed by the David Adjaye-designed Chrisp Street and Whitechapel Road in 2004 and 2005 respectively, and Canary Wharf in 2006), and the new project represents a mature reflection on the type.

While the notion of the Idea Store emphatically highlights its role in innovation and implies some sense of revolution, the success of the concept can also be attributed to its deep roots. The multi-service role of a branch library was not a new idea. A century ago public libraries often neighboured council offices, delivering



**Above** Extensive translucent and transparent glazing make the interior activities legible from the street after dark.

**Left** Workstations align the street facade on the second floor.

vaccinations, hosting events and recording births, deaths and marriages. Moreover, the connection with retail thinking also has a significant legacy. In the 1940s, the architect/librarian team of Joseph Wheeler and Alfred Githens advocated the use of retail techniques to promote browsing in their advice to the American Library Association.

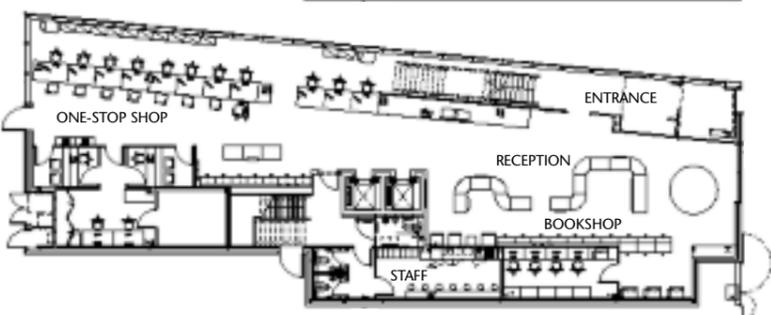
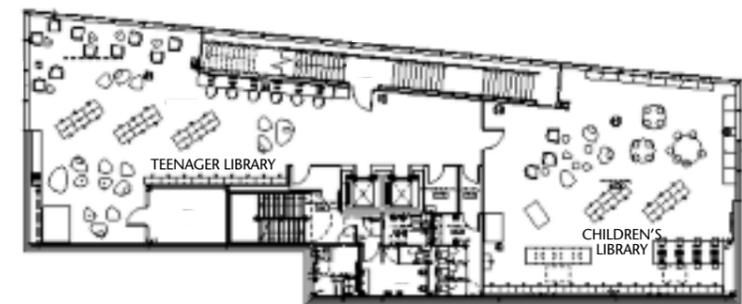
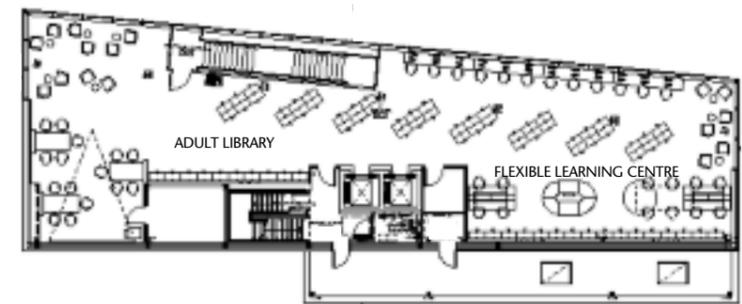
Where the Watney Market Idea Store seems most innovative, however, is in its modesty. The single most noticeable development in the design of the building is the use of a translucent facade. The library is extremely bright, with extensive daylight currently supplemented by artificial lighting (although project leader Paulo Ribeiro says the Building Management System is



**Above** Moveable furniture allows for flexibility of layouts.  
**Left** Ground, first and second floor plans.

still in training). The effect of all this illumination is uplifting, which as project architect Neil Hughes notes was a requirement of the client's brief. Bright light green and white finishes in the circulation areas set a tone of permanent seaside spring morning, a distinct contrast to the darker, deep-plan interiors of David Adjaye's Whitechapel Road Idea Store. For a building wrapped by glazing on three sides, and facing north across a noisy and polluted arterial road, the challenge of providing a tranquil, bright and secluded interior at Watney Market was significant.

The Pompidou-like placement of the stair straddling the main elevation, a well-trodden pronouncement of open access, remains an iconic feature of the Idea Store, just like the escalator at Whitechapel. The stair and service cores are the only fixed parts of the building; all fixtures and furniture are moveable, all surfaces wipeable, all services visible, and there is no apparent 'back of house'. The customer evidently comes first, and in this the design subtly echoes the retail model. Ribeiro's view is that 'when people enter a nice building, they are well behaved'. Indeed Idea Store



**Above** A linear staircase leads from the corner entrance.  
**Right** Fritted glass curtain walling aligns the street.

deputy head Sergio Dolgiani suggests that the integration into a one-stop shop of facilities that some visit by necessity and others by choice is itself a way of improving the collective experience.

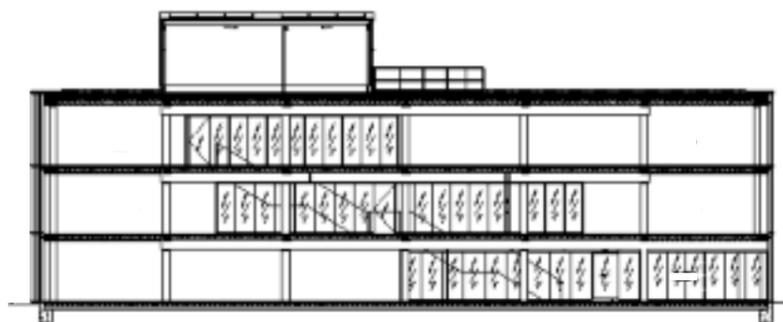
The connection to the adjacent street market and the public thoroughfare is particularly successful. The market had been in decline when the Georgian streets were redeveloped in the 1970s, but it survived, and today funnels a steady stream of customers from Commercial Road to the Shadwell Docklands Light Railway station. The new building should only encourage its revival. The original library had been located midway along the market, punctuating the shopfronts with little fanfare. Its new position at the corner of Commercial Road asserts a higher status for the building, less as a council service and more as an icon of aspiration. Bisset Adams' selective use of clear glazing within the predominantly obscure facade sets a visual dialogue between the readers and teens upstairs and passers-by in





**Above** The entrance is located on a prominent street corner.  
**Left/below** Long section; Commercial Road facade.

the street below. The interior spaces are comfortably furnished with armchairs, suggesting a piano nobile rather than a fusty browsing facility. Again this idea was well exercised in early library design in which first-floor reading rooms, like beautiful drawing rooms, were signified by decorative ceilings to attract customers from the streets below. This relatively modest £4.5m lottery-



funded building – the borough’s first with BREEAM ‘very good’ – overcomes significant environmental and pragmatic hurdles with apparent ease. Whether the whiteness remains (the cleaners are also reportedly rated ‘very good’), the furniture is regularly reconfigured or the light levels calm down remain to be seen. In the meantime, I would suggest that the series of Idea Stores should not be read as radical, novel and revolutionary simply because they appeal to the young – rather, they represent the fine-tuning of a set of already tested and refined concepts. Moreover, they show how the traditional gulf between architects as visionaries and librarians as victims is being gently narrowed.

*Oriel Prizeman is a senior lecturer at the Welsh School of Architecture and author of Philanthropy and Light: Carnegie Libraries and the Advent of Transatlantic Standards for Public Space (Ashgate, 2012).*

**Right** The facades comprise four glass layers with two cavities.  
**Below** Cross section; north-west corner window with signage.



**Project team**  
 Architect, interior design, graphic design: Bisset Adams; project architects: Paulo Ribeiro (above), Neil Hughes; main contractor: Geoffrey Osborne; structural engineer, m&e engineer, landscape, CDM coordinator: Mott MacDonald; qs: John Burke Assocs; planning consultant: Terrance O'Rourke.

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**  
 Lighting: Whitecroft, Delta; facade: English Architectural Glazing; roof works: CPR; m&e: Halsion; steelwork: SCWS; pc concrete: Acheson & Glover; flooring: Axiom Floors; guarding, balustrades: Securerail; passive heating/cooling system: Termodeck; rainscreen/staircase cladding: Trespa; floors: Nora (rubber), Tarkett (vinyl in toilets); furniture supply: Rainbow; Montana bookshelves: Icons of Denmark; graphics, signage: Principle Global; roofing: CPR; glazed partitions: Planet Partitioning, Komfort, IPS, vanity units, cubicles: Decra; doors: Leaderflush Shapland, Geze (sliding); nosings: Gradus; single-ply membrane: Samafil; sanitaryware, fittings: Twyford, Armitage Shanks; blinds: Armour; lifts: Kone.