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Strategy, Development and Outcome of Community Educational Facilities in London: Idea Stores in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Naoki SEKI*

Abstract

It has been recognized that community education involves a combination of sending teaching staff into the wider community and bringing adults into educational institutions to improve the overall environment and quality of life of the community. A local educational facility in England has been a topic of interest to those involved with Kominkan, community learning centres in Japan, but has received little empirical evaluation.

Based on an interview with the deputy head, this paper aims to research the strategy, development and outcome of the Idea Store project in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets is a disadvantaged inner borough comprising most of London’s East End and has a long history as a home to immigrant communities. Idea Stores combine library and adult education services in bright and welcoming buildings that are located within prominent shopping centres or in close proximity to supermarkets. Extensive research into the needs of residents led to the opening of the first Idea Store in Bow in May 2002. This was followed by four more Idea Stores, including that at Watney Market, in May 2013.

The concept of the Idea Store is to prove flexible and modern learning opportunities to encourage the participation of hard-to-reach people and to attract minority ethnic groups. Thus far, Idea Stores have been successful in playing a part in people’s everyday lives as community educational facilities.

Key word: Idea Store, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, minority ethnic groups, adult and community education, seamless service

Chapter 1
Introduction

This study discusses the strategy, outcome and development of Idea Stores, the community educational facilities, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The borough has seen increasing ethnic diversity in a growing resident population.

Community education is related to the idea of outreach that involves the venturing of teaching staff into the wider community and bringing adults into an educational institution to improve the environment and quality of life of the community in general[1]. A comparative study of Kominkan commences the trend of community
education, a main branch of modern British adult education. From an accumulation of studies\(^2\), it has been argued as a main point of reform that 'local education authorities have advance community education by inviting workers, the unemployed, immigrants and others to learn actively; thus, community facilities have become more important'\(^3\). However, till date, little research has been performed concerning case studies on community educational facilities for the purpose of future comparative analysis between Japan and Britain.

In this paper, I aim to explore the concept of Idea Stores, leading community educational facilities, that combine library and adult education services in Tower Hamlets. The district of London known as the East End is one of the most deprived areas in England, with the concentration of poverty resulting in adverse circumstances for its residents\(^4\). The strategy for Idea Stores was presented in April 1999, and the first Idea Store was opened in Bow in May 2002. The fifth Idea Store was opened at Watney Market in May 2013. The Tower Hamlets council aims to complete a network of seven Idea Stores from the original plan.

Several studies in architecture\(^5\) and library science\(^6\), both at home and abroad, have focused on Idea Stores, because the institutions have positively adopted a novel exterior and interior design while maintaining the traditions of a library. In contrast, little research has been conducted from the perspective of Kominkan or social education, and as such, there is a lack of understanding in Japan, with regards to community education.

This paper aims to investigate the plan and growth of Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets based on documentation from both inside and outside the country, and data collection from the Watney and Whitechapel Idea Stores\(^7\). The starting point was to conduct research into the district features of Tower Hamlets and review any existing unsatisfactory services. The next step was to clarify the strategy and development of Idea Stores, focusing on the concrete examples of two Idea Stores in particular: Whitechapel and Watney Market. Finally, I discussed the outcome of the Idea Store project.

**Chapter 2**

**The review of existing services in Tower Hamlets**

**2.1 The district features of Tower Hamlets**

The London borough of Tower Hamlets is one of 32 boroughs which make up the Greater London area. It was created in 1965 with the amalgamation of the former metropolitan boroughs of Bethnal Green, Poplar and Stepney. However, the name has been in use since the 16th century\(^8\). At that time, there were wharfs and warehouses along the Thames where shipwrights, shopkeepers and immigrants gathered; this was the origin of east London's multi-ethnic society. Wapping was famous for its wines, tobaccos and spices, and Spitalfields was well known for its production of quality silk fabrics\(^9\).

In the 19th century, London was the largest city in the world, and Tower Hamlets held power as a centre of trades and shipping channels with some vast docks. In contrast, it was also the home to many underpaid and overworked labourers, with poverty leading to an extensive increase in crime. However, the provision of housing, hygiene, education and other services for labourers saw some of the problems rectified between the two world wars\(^10\). Tower Hamlets was damaged by an air raid in the Second World War as it was adjacent to harbours being used for military purposes. After the war, the residential section was rebuilt as housing estates\(^11\). The redevelopment of the waterfront brought about the conversion of old warehouses into modern apartments, and the development of Canary Wharf created a gateway for international economy. However, many of the borough's residents still experienced high levels of deprivation\(^12\).

Regarding the borough’s present condition, the 2011 census revealed that Tower Hamlets
has 254,000 residents, a population increase of 57,990 (29%) since 2001. This presents the fastest growing population of any local authority in the country, and the 4th most densely populated area in London, with 128,5 residents per hectare. Working-age residents (aged 16 to 64) make up 74.1% of the population, larger than that for London, where it is 69.1%. Of the Tower Hamlets residents, 6.1% are aged over 65, lower than the London average of 11.1% (13). The population of the borough is growing due to the working age demographic.

Next, the single largest ethnic group in Tower Hamlets is Bangladeshi, at 32%. The Bangladeshi residents of Tower Hamlets represent 37% of the Bangladeshi population of London and 20% of that of England. The second-largest group is White British at 31%, compared to the average of 45% in London and 80% in England. The third-largest ethnic group is the “Other White” group, at 22.4%. There has been growth in most ethnic group populations in Tower Hamlets. These include Mixed White and Asian (+120%), Chinese (+127%), Indian (+126%) and Black African (+44%). The only exception is the White British group, which fell 10% in relative terms between 2001 and 2011 (14).

In 2011, there were 13,259 (6.7%) unemployed residents in the Borough, above the rate of 5.2% in London and 4.4% in England. The rate in 2001 was the same, at 6.6%. There were 1,985 long-term unemployed residents, or 2.5%, in Tower Hamlets in 2011, compared with 2% in London and 1.7% in England. There were 8,893 residents that were long term sick and/or disabled in Tower Hamlets, representing a rate of 4.5%; the rate for London was 3.7% and that for England was 4.0% (15). As can be seen from above, the district features of the Tower Hamlets are the rapidly growing population, the ethnic diversity, with a sizable Bangladeshi population, and little improvement in the labour market.

2.2 Survey design and problem identification

The distinguishing features of the district have an impact on the provision of educational and cultural services. Although over 30% of the adult population has the basic literary needs, their take-up of local services is low and the general understanding of the value they present is comparatively negative. Many residents do not engage with the council at all or benefit from what is on offer (16). In fact, fewer than 20% of the residents are active library users, and fewer than 5% use the council’s adult education service (17).

The council conducted extensive surveys in an attempt to establish what people thought of the existing service, before the planning of any new developments (18). Careful attention was paid to identify the perceptions of the different social and economic groups and users and non-users of services. The following results were obtained.

While majority of respondents considered the library service to be important for their community, both users and non-users evaluated the service as ‘outdated’. Among non-users, the reasons cited for discouraging use were: 1. lack of time (50%), 2. opening hours (31%), 3. little of interest (30%), 4. poor selection of books (30%), 5. poor atmosphere (12%). When asked what would encourage use of the library, the answers from non-users were: 1. longer opening hours (63%), 2. shopping (59%), 3. council information service (58%), 4. Sunday opening (56%), 5. art and exhibitions (56%). The council evaluated this result as follows. There was a strong desire by significant number of users and non-users alike to be able to combine a visit to the library with other activities, particularly shopping. 65% of females and 45% of males indicated that they considered shopping and a visit to the library to be complementary (19).

In order, the priorities for services were: 1. buying books and increasing book stock, 2. investment in IT, 3. convenient opening hours, 4. education support and 5. new lending service. In
Chapter 3
The strategy and growth of Idea Stores

3.1 The Idea Store Strategy

In April 1999, the council released a report titled *A Library and Lifelong Learning Development Strategy for Tower Hamlets*. It outlined the concept of the Idea Stores as follows: ‘Idea Stores will be the first place that people will go to for information about any aspect of their lives and to gain new skill. They will offer library and lifelong facilities in an integrated and attractive way. They will become a focus for the local community, a place where people can come for a coffee, to meet friends, to take a break from shopping and to enjoy the many facilities. They will be designed to be attractive to look at and pleasant to be in, using the best of modern architectural and graphic design. They will incorporate the best ideas from other councils and education bodies as well as the retail and leisure industry. They will also maintain the best traditions of the library movement and education sector’ (20). This excerpt can be interpreted as a council wanting to cultivate new users by improving services. From the interview with the deputy head, the source of the name, ‘Idea Store’, can be summarized as a necessary change to the image of services, away from the traditional notion of a ‘library’ being only a place for formal study. The very word ‘idea’ stirs our intellectual curiosity and suits the role of an institute aiming to provide broader learning and information services. He explained that ‘store’ is a daily and familiar word which can be interpreted in two ways: ‘shop’ or ‘warehouse’ (24).

The strategy outlined the need to maintain a traditional lending library and reference service, but with the inclusion of DVD and CD collections, a children’s library, adult classrooms, public IT suites, study spaces, childcare facilities and the provision of an exhibition space and café. All seven Idea Stores were marked for location in the heart of shopping centres, or in particular, 50% of the non-users stated that facilities which provided them public computers would encourage them to use the library service. Furthermore, 47% of the non-users stated that access to the internet would do the same. The council described number 4, education support in the following way: ‘There also seemed to be considerable synergies between libraries and adult learning; apart from facing the same problems, they had the same potential audience and could, potentially, each benefit from cross-selling of their services: of libraries of learners and vice versa’ (20). The council developed the view that libraries and adult learning services could be provided in one seamless operation.

The existing library and adult education centre sites had the weakness of locations; they were housed in ageing buildings and reflected the locational needs and life patterns of a society that had existed almost 100 years ago. The surveys made it clear that time is precious to everyone, and people were often reluctant to make a special visit to libraries, just to change a book, even when the buildings were close by. The survey indicated that people wanted a centre that would offer a wide range of possibilities, such as leisure activities and shopping. The council outlined that location was one of the weakness of the existing service, and emphasized that ‘it must also be located where it will be best fit present day life patterns’ (21).

The gist of the new strategy can be described in the following three points (22).

1. Providing a highly attractive and accessible environment in which people would choose to spend time
2. Delivering a customer-centred service, responsible to local needs
3. Reversing peoples’ preconceptions about public libraries and adult learning, and promoting appropriately what was on offer

As we have seen, before formulating the Idea Store strategy, the council tried to understand the needs of the local people and identify the obstacles that they faced in terms of accessing services.
close proximity to supermarkets. They would be constructed at Whitechapel Road, Isle of Dogs, Bethnal Green, Watney Market, Canary Wharf, Chrissp Street and Bow. The strategy included a commitment to move towards seven day a week opening.

In May 2002, the first Idea Store opened in the Roman Road Market in Bow. The centre saw a three-fold increase in the number of visitors, compared to the former libraries, and course enrolments doubled in comparison with the adult education centre it replaced, demonstrating the validity of the strategy. Two more Idea Stores, at Chrissp Street in July 2004 and at Whitechapel in September 2005, were designed by D. Adjaye, a world-class architect, which drew people’s attention. In March 2006, the new Idea Store at Canary Wharf in the business zone suggested a new direction. The council opened the fifth site, Idea Store Watney Market in May 2013, and two more Idea Stores would be opened at Isle of Dogs and Bethnal Green. All Idea Stores are situated within their respective catchment zones for use by the local communities and not for the whole borough. Bearing this issue in mind, the next section of the study focuses on the Idea Stores Whitechapel and Watney Market.

3.2 The development of Idea Stores

The third Idea Store opened on the Whitechapel Road, near the Whitechapel underground station. The impressive building, with its blue and green coloured glass façade, complements the pattern of street stalls, and the interior can be seen from the street. S. Allen characterizes the building designed by D. Adjaye, as follows: 'The Whitechapel occupies a busy block in a highly diverse neighborhood: All of London’s rich multicultural mix is on display... both materially and organizationally, there is little distinction between exterior and interior public space. The public is drawn into the building and encouraged to move freely from space to space. By working consciously and unapologetically with cheap, familiar materials, Adjaye gives the architecture a slightly provisional feel that undercuts any pretention of formality. Adjaye incorporated urban life and culture in one, providing a concrete and artistic form to the Idea Store strategy which could best cultivate new users. The building was awarded the ‘London Award 2006’ by the Royal Institute of British Architects.

The Idea Store Whitechapel is a five-story building, occupying 3,400 m² and is the flagship of all the Idea Stores. The café, exhibition and event space are located on the fourth floor. Although there are many art museums in London, very few residents of Tower Hamlets would have visited them. The works on show in the exhibition space at the Whitechapel Idea Store are changed every week for local people to enjoy a range of art. The café is open to the general public. On the third floor, visitors can use internet free-of-charge for 3 h a day, in a surfing space housing 42 PCs. There are also two learning labs for adults attending courses run by the council. Adult non-fiction and three more learning labs are on the second floor. On the first floor, there is a learning lab and an adult non-fiction and community languages section, which houses books written in Asian-African languages, such as Urdu and Somali, as well as English books for beginners. This floor is also equipped with a dance studio for exercise and gymnastics. The Whitechapel Idea Store also provides adult fiction, CDs and DVDs, a children’s library, free internet service for legal advice and other uses on the ground floor. It is open seven days a week.

The support for adult learning is one of its main features. In the same way as the Shadwell Centre, Idea Store Whitechapel is an extensive community learning centre with six learning labs and a dance studio. The council provided more than 1,000 courses in 2012-2013, covering a wide range of programs such as Preparation for Life and Work: Business and Finance: Cookery: Family Learning: Fashion and Textiles: Fit-

Preparation for Life and Work comprises employability, maths and English units. The centre also offers English for speakers of other languages courses aimed at helping people who are already working or to secure employment at either no cost or a reduced fee\(^{\text{32}}\). The council has been actively working to solve unemployment problems and improve the labour environment, as already noted.

People taking a course can access textbooks and reference books in the centre and can complete their studies at their own pace. It is worth noting that use of internet services and accessing books by informal visitor’s can also lead to the creation of learning interests and increased self-confidence. This collaborative service of library and adult education centre, as well as course information and exhibitions of class work being readily accessible, can motivate visitors to enroll in courses. This has been shown to be especially true in the case of former non-users, who may have previously been reluctant to join a formal course.

It is a 10 min walk from Whitechapel to Watney Market. Watney Market was a significant example of a successful East End market, where over 100 retailers and street venders used to gather six days a week from the second half of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century to the air raids of the First World War. It was closed in 1976; however, it reopened in one corner of the Watney housing precinct and is still open at present\(^{\text{33}}\). The Watney Market Idea Store opened in May 2013. Commercial Road is a main street connecting the city and Isle of Dogs. As such, the livelihood zones of Whitechapel and Watney Market are separate; this is particularly useful for the elderly and families raising children\(^{\text{34}}\).

Since the former Watney Market library was housed in a shop space inside the market, the size and design restricted activities. The council moved it to the public space facing the Commercial Road, and remodelled it as an Idea Store with three floors and 1,400 m\(^2\). The exterior is a mix of white walls and coloured glass, creating a feeling of transparency, and there is a bus stop close by. There are adult fiction and non-fiction sections, a designated learning zone and an internet surfing space on the second floor. The interior and furnishings, such as bookshelves, tables and seats and sofas, depict a unified, simple and modern design. The first floor is equipped with a teen zone, internet surfing space, children’s library, and section of Bengali books. On the ground floor is a One Stop Shop, which is a branch office that deals with local residents’ enquiries relating to child benefits, rental support and other council services. There are waiting rooms with books and an interview room for privacy. For better convenience, the council combined the new idea store with the service point that was previously in a different building.

Unlike Whitechapel, the Idea Store at Watney Market has no leaning lab, cafe or dance studio, but it does hold story time on weekday mornings, providing an opportunity for parents and children to meet up at the children’s library. There is a free space for group activities on the second floor, which is used to serve refreshments and is open to reading clubs\(^{\text{35}}\). Although there is no provision for adult learning such as a learning lab, informal learning is encouraged. It was determined that teenagers were seeking out places for exclusive use; hence, the council designed a ‘teen zone’, giving priority to internet surfing and a special learning zone. The zone is furnished with good quality desks and sofas to teach teens about taking good care of objects. The Idea Store Watney Market is located in north Shadwell; one of areas with a concentrated population of Bangladeshis\(^{\text{36}}\). As such, there is an extensive selection of Bengali books.

3.3 The outcome of the Idea Store project

Profiting from experience and developing a thorough understanding of local requirements
brought about the respective developments of Idea Stores. Idea Store Strategy 2009\(^{37}\), issued by the council in 2009, analysed the effect of the existing Idea Stores and libraries and provided new direction. It shows a four-fold increase in the number of visitors from 0.56 million in 1999–2000 to 2.06 million in 2007–2008. The figures for visits per 1,000 residents exemplifies the dramatic transformation from 3,100 (31st in London rankings) to 9,600 (2nd in London rankings) during the same period. It argued that ‘approved in 1999, the original Idea Store Strategy has radically transformed the performance of library and information services in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, moving them from being among the worst in London to among the top performing in the Country’\(^{38}\). The percentage of the population using the libraries is 56.6%, placing Tower Hamlets third in London and fourth in England.

The council presented the component ratio of Idea Store and library users by ethnic background; the ratio also shows the background of new visitors. The percentage of users is correlated with the percentage of residents as part of the total population over 16 years, as follow: White 45.2%–58.0%, Mixed 2.9%–2.2%, Black Caribbean 2.9%–22%, Black African 6.6%–2.6%, Indian 3.9%–1.9%, Pakistani 1.8%–0.5%, Bangladeshi 26.7%–26.7%, Chinese 3.6%–3.2%\(^{39}\).

J. Hartley collected questionnaires\(^{40}\) covering the level of importance users felt the Idea Stores have, both to them personally and to their community as a whole. A five–point scale was used: 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important. Regarding personal use, 40% of the respondents chose the rating of 5, and a further 34% chose the rating of 4. For the community, 69% rated the Idea Stores as 5; very important. What this means is that the Idea Stores are helpful not only to individuals but also to the entire community. As for the reasons for choosing their ratings, many respondents remarked on the good location and easy accessibility, along with the welcoming, social environment. There were comments made about how the Idea Stores provide vital resources for those who are unemployed or on low incomes, with access to newspapers and the internet, for job hunting and updating skills. The IT provision was also mentioned by many of the respondents who had family and friends in other countries as it enables them to communicate regularly. Furthermore, the educational benefits were commented upon by many of the respondents.

The Idea Stores support and encourage residents individually and communally, meeting the needs of people from different and complicated backgrounds, while at the same time expanding quantitatively. In a modern, commercial society, the Idea Stores respect, embrace and celebrate people of all character\(^{41}\). The Idea Stores have become an integral part of people’s everyday lives in the capacity of a community educational facility. This firmly indicates the success of a bold strategy that was based on a detailed survey, and the substantiality of a fully functioning hub for the entire community.

Chapter 3
Conclusion

I studied the strategy, development and outcome of Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets in this discussion. The Idea Stores came into being in one of the most deprived districts in England; an area with increasing ethnic diversity and a high unemployment rate, along with rapid growth in population. The council has tried to remove the barriers faced by residents and to respond to local demands, based on the result of a detailed survey. Since weakness of location was a hindrance to the use of existing services that were built 100 years ago, the selection of new, more suitable locations was needed. Ones that best fit present day life patterns. The council issued the Idea Store strategy in April 1999. The name was chosen due to it being worthy of new services, and eradicated the formal image of a library at the same time. Seven Idea Stores
were planned for placement within shopping centres or in close proximity to supermarkets, and five have already been fulfilled. The Idea Store Whitechapel, designed by Adjaye, is equipped with learning labs and a dance studio to support learning with the provision of a seamless library and adult education service. The Watney Market Idea Store has a section dedicated to Bengali books, a One Stop Shop, teen zone and other important facilities.

As a result of the reform, there has been a four-fold increase in the number of visitors. The percentage of users with ethnic background has been correlated with the percentage of residents of similar background. The results of a questionnaire indicate that Idea Stores are helpful to residents both individually and communally. The Idea Stores are a success, playing a part in people’s everyday lives in the capacity of a community educational facility. It is a future community educational facility. It is a future plan of library: The 10 Years of the ‘Idea Stores’ in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets [Shin Toshokan Kouso: Aidea Sutoa (Rondon Tawaa Hamuretukku) no Zyuuun], 2013, [Online] http://ameblo.jp/booksharing/day-20130715.html [Accessed 09/09/2013].

I tried to collect data from the deputy head, Sergio Dogliani, at the Idea Store Whitechapel on 8th February 2013, and the Idea Store Watney Market on 30th August 2013. The former is a flagship in a network of Idea Stores, and the latter is the newest one.


Endnote and Biography


researches in 1998. 1. User questionnaires: every user over the period of a month was asked to comment on the service. 2. Household survey: a questionnaire was delivered to every household seeking views and priorities for the service. 3. Market research: an independent market research company was commissioned to provide an accurate picture of the residents’ perspective on a range of library related issues. This comprised telephone interviews of non-users and face-to-face interviews with library users.


(21) London Borough of Tower Hamlets, op. cit., 3.3.

(22) Wills, op. cit., p.111.

(23) London Borough of Tower Hamlets, op. cit., 1.3.

(24) The remark of Sergio Dogliani in the interview at the Idea Store Watney Market in 30th August.

(25) London Borough of Tower Hamlets, op. cit., 4.3-4.4.

(26) Wills, op. cit., p.117.


(28) Born in 1966 in Dar-Es-Salaam, Adjaye moved to London in 1979 and studied architecture at Southbank University and the Royal College of Art. He is responsible for works from private houses to civic buildings across Europe, North America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In 2001 he was commissioned to design two Idea Stores for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. They were one of the most important his works. (Adjaye, D. *Output*, Toto Publishing, 2010, p.303.)


(30) The following account is based on the remark of Sergio Dogliani in the interview at the Idea Store Watney Market in 30th August.


(32) Ibid., pp.10–19.


(34) The following outline is based on the remark of Sergio Dogliani in the interview at the Idea Store Watney Market in 30th August.

(35) The remark of Sergio Dogliani in the interview at the Idea Store Watney Market in 30th August.


(38) Ibid., p.6.

(39) Ibid., pp.36–37.


(41) The remark of Sergio Dogliani in the interview at the Idea Store Watney Market in 30th August.