

INSIGHT



The Lek Bibliotek prototype at Kista Library was created and tested by Linn Holmstedt, Caroline Karlsson, Marcus Ruotsalainen, and Hedda Svenblad. Photo © Emilie Lindholm.

UX Research & Design

The play library at Kista Bibliotek: a UX prototype

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LAST issue, I devoted my column to the essential outcome of UX research: the prototyping of new spaces and services.

This time I want to focus on one specific prototype, as a UX interlude if you will, before I return next month with more technique-based content. The prototype in question was one of the very best to arise from any UX programme I’ve facilitated and is currently being tested in a busy public library in a multi-cultural suburb of Stockholm called Kista (pronounced Shee-sta). Kista Bibliotek was IFLA’s public library of the year in 2015 because of its stunning design and layout and having just spent a week there, it’s not hard to see why. However, as with any library I’m invited to work with, I was confident that there would be an opportunity to improve its spaces and services still further through UX.

More fun and interaction

The prototype I want to detail here was in response to the finding that the library needed to offer more fun and interaction for small children. The idea was to create a mini librarian’s desk at which kids could play at running a library. It would be equipped with a laptop, a scanner, receipt machine, staff lanyard, cardboard spectacles, a trolley, and of course books to be scanned in and out. Old equipment hanging around a store room was quickly requisitioned and spray-painted in bright primary colours. A small wooden trolley (from a staff member’s home) and a pile of withdrawn books completed the scene and, in no time at all, the prototype lek bibliotek (“play library”) was born. A staff member who had helped build the prototype installed themselves nearby ready to observe and

record responses to it. All we needed now was some willing children.

High demand

In its first half-hour, several kids were observed cautiously wondering what it was for, but not daring to use this unfamiliar addition to their floor-level bookshelves. However, like wildfire the situation quickly changed as word suddenly seemed to get around that this was the only place to be. Children were now confidently installing themselves at the desk, tapping away at the laptop and scanning like pros. Wearing the spectacles was discovered to be vital to the play and a second pair was quickly fashioned, together with another chair, when it became clear that the desk would be permanently staffed by two children at a time! Soon demand was so high that the observer had no choice but to put down their notepad and institute a queueing system so every child had their turn playing librarian.

Planting seeds

What next for the “play library”? One idea is to link the play to children’s thoughts on libraries: asking them what the library is for and why they think it is important, perhaps by moving the desk beside a display board of quotes and drawings that they are asked to create after using the set-up. My recent time working with Tasmania public libraries made me realise that five-year-olds may just be the best marketers for libraries we have. On one memorable day there a kid drew a picture which she told me depicted how “libraries and books make people less angry and more intelligent.” You just can’t beat an insight like that.

From play to profession

A realisation that did not strike us at Kista at first was the value of trying out this prototype in a library which is in an area of low income and high



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immigration. It’s just possible that the “play library” might plant the seed of a career in libraries in those kids who might otherwise feel it to be reserved as a middle-class white profession. After all, how many of us played libraries at home with our own books before we pursued the career for real?

A few tins of spray paint

As the “lek bibliotek” was put together in a few hours and the only cost was a few tins of spray paint, it’s a great example of a “minimum viable product”: a prototype put together very quickly and tested on users at virtually no expense as part of a UX design process. I can’t wait to return next month to see how it develops in response to the kids who are currently flocking to it. And judging by the amount of shares of this story on social media I wouldn’t be surprised if “play libraries” started springing up in libraries worldwide.

The 5th annual UX in Libraries conference will take place at Royal Holloway, University of London between 17-19 June 2019. Booking is now open at: <http://uxlib.org> **IP**