

# The Development of Public Library Design in the Netherlands; a Case Study on Forum Groningen

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March 24, 2023

## Abstract

It was thought that because of the rise of the digital age, public libraries would eventually go extinct. However, research shows that nothing could be further from the truth. Visitor numbers are rising each year and new libraries are opened. There has been a change in the typology of public libraries that ensures the important role the library has in society to this day. This paper will analyse this change, which is very important for the future of public libraries. The past developments in public library design and organisation are researched and the current value of the public library is analysed. This will lead to the case study conducted on the Forum Groningen. This is a multifunctional library building that was opened a little over three years ago and is an example of the “new” public library, and everything that comes with it. The paper will dive into the process behind the building, the typology and design, and the perception of the building by the public and by experts in the field. The combination of literature research and analysis will give an overview of developments in the realm of public libraries, connected to the Forum Groningen as an embodiment of this change.

**Keywords:** Public Library, Development, History, Forum Groningen

# Introduction

With the rise of the digital age and growing popularity of the internet in the beginning of the twenty-first century, many people were afraid this would make the public library less relevant and make them become extinct. However, it turns out library buildings actually kept becoming more popular (Scott, 2011). The reason for this probably (partly) lies in the evolution of the public function of libraries. The role of the library as a truly public meeting place, where people of all parts of society are welcome, gives it a very prominent role in communities. Librarians Joyce Sternheim and Rob Bruijnzeels (2021) write that in addition to the importance of meeting, public libraries also give space for interaction, the exchange between people. "Meeting does not automatically lead to the exchange of knowledge, ideas and inspiration that is so instrumental to the development of collective intelligence. It needs something that triggers people's curiosity and reflection, something that encourages conversation. And what is so unique about the library is that it can actively use its collection for this purpose" (Sternheim & Bruijnzeels, 2021).

An example of a building where the library meets other public functions in a continuation of the public sphere is the Forum Groningen. This very large building in the middle of the historic centre of Groningen, the Netherlands that houses a library as well as a cinema, museum, restaurant, tourist information, study places and more. For this reason, a case study of the Forum in relation to the typology of a public library will be conducted in this paper. During the build, this project was widely criticised in the media, but now that it's finished and landed in the city, it is one of the most visited and highest praised buildings in Groningen. This transition the Forum has gone through will also be something to research.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the development of the function, design and use of public libraries in the Netherlands, their current place in society and how this is reflected in the Forum Groningen. The question this paper will seek an answer for will therefore be: How did the typology and function of public libraries in the Netherlands develop over time, how is their place in society changed and how is this reflected in Forum Groningen?

# Development of public libraries in the Netherlands

## Early history

Public libraries have developed in the Netherlands over the course of a little more than a century. The first public libraries and “reading rooms” started to open in the Netherlands in the beginning of the twentieth century. These first public libraries already had a social purpose, by building a general collection, accessible for everyone, educated and uneducated, rich and poor (Huysmans, 2007). Despite these intentions, it lasted another seventy years for the different library organisations to merge and become truly public. In 1972, the public, catholic and protestant libraries formed the Dutch Library and Reading Centre (*Nederlandse Bibliotheek en Lektuur Centrum; NBL*C). This was the precursor of the current Association of Public Libraries (*Vereniging van Openbare Bibliotheeken; VOB*). Under the motto “spreading knowledge, income and power”, the progressive Den Uyl cabinet (1973-1977) adopted the Law on the Public Library Network, which was supposed to make the library more public (Huysmans, 2007). For example, the librarian used to be the mediator between the customer and the books, whereas now people could stroll past the shelves and get whatever book they want. These new rules and organisation of public libraries led to an expansion of the public libraries, in number of branches, books and members. The popularity of public libraries kept rising towards the end of the twentieth century (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022).

## Need for modernisation

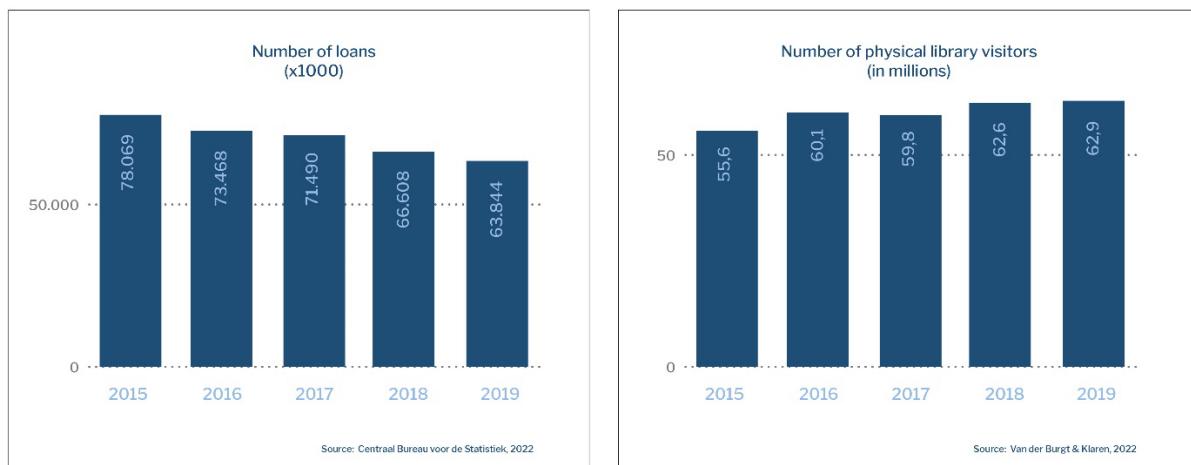
Around the turn of the century, the trends in public library usage started to change. The public library reached its highest point of popularity (measured in number of members and distributed books) in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. After that, statistics show a decrease in the use of public libraries (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). Because of for example the rise of other media such as film, audio and internet, and the rising wealth, people were reading less (Huysmans, 2007). The Dutch government wanted to see a new change in the public library network, and appointed an advisory committee for the restructuring of the public library network. In the year 2000 they came with the advice for restructuring the library organisations, as well as a guideline for public libraries describing the five (new) core functions of the public library (Stuurgroep Herstructureren Openbaar Bibliotheekwerk, 2000):

1. Warehouse for knowledge and information
2. Centre for development and education
3. Encyclopaedia for art and culture
4. Source of inspiration for reading and literature
5. Platform for meeting and debate

These core functions show an expansion of the functions of public libraries beyond just the supply of books. The advice for example also mentions the need for the upcoming IT and internet to become an integral part of the services of the library. Public libraries need to change and adapt to keep fulfilling their role in society (Sternheim & Bruijnzeels, 2021).

## Revival of public libraries

As a result of the public library's ability to adapt to modern society, many public libraries are thriving and more are still being built. Even though the number of members and borrowed books are still decreasing, the number of visitors of public libraries in the Netherlands is increasing each year, up to 63 million visitors in 2019 (Van der Burgt & Klaren, 2022), see figure 1. The decrease of members and borrowed books together with the increase of the number of library visitors show that the reasons people visit a library have changed.



**Figure 1** - Decreasing number of loans and increasing number of visitors in Dutch libraries in recent years. (Graphs based on data from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022 and Van der Burgt & Klaren, 2022)

In the book *Imagination and Participation: Next Steps in Public Library Design* (Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021) librarians Rob Bruijnzeels and Joyce Sternheim explore recent transitions and the future of public libraries, and the reason for their continuing popularity. The authors argue that public libraries are experiencing a revival. For many years it was thought that with the rise of the digital age, libraries would become less necessary and eventually go extinct. But the opposite turned out to be true (Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021). Society started to acknowledge the importance of public libraries for the social, economic and cultural vitality of communities. In addition to that, the number of visitors is rising and a lot of new, modern and popular library buildings are still being built. The function of public libraries does not solely consist of the distribution of books anymore. The rise of the internet and digital sources of

information have changed the position of the public library in society. Most libraries nowadays offer a lot more than just books. They provide internet access and workstations, educational programs, recreational facilities such as a café or exhibition space and many more (van der Werf, 2010).

The architecture of libraries has changed quite a bit over the last century. Curator and writer Huib Haye van der Werf (2010) describes that they have changed from classical houses of power, to equalitarian houses of knowledge to the current open houses of diversity. As well as the exterior appearance, the programs of public libraries have also changed immensely. This is due to the change and especially the increase in number of functions under the roof of one library. Because of the change in accessibility and forms of information, the library has to change to keep serving the same goal. As van der Werf puts it: "In many ways, the library has become an appendage of the public space. An institute that houses multi-faceted and varied programs under the same roof. As a result, the public library is still a symbol of the power and potential of citizens and it is still a location where people come together and cultural identity is created." (Van der Werf, 2010).

# The role of the library in society

## Unique

Although the relevance of the library in the sense of being a distributor of books may be up for discussion, a lot of people do agree on the unique value public libraries hold in society, as shown by visitor numbers and argued by different experts (Dijkstra et al., 2010; Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021). As mentioned in the last chapter, the functions housed in libraries have changed and increased in recent years. Even though public libraries lost their monopoly on the distribution of knowledge, their unique value to society is now found in other things. Libraries are one of the few truly public buildings in the city where visitors don't have to pay for a ticket or buy goods to be able to be part of it. Van der Werf (2010) describes the public library as a place where cultural identity is created, and according to him the physical presence of the library as a place for cultural diversity is of great importance to the city. Even though libraries are no longer the only place for enlightenment and empowerment, they aim to be a concentrated version of that public space.

## Public libraries in urban development

Local governments “sell” their cities through city marketing. They market their cities as cultural and innovative places, and need urban and architectural projects to do this. In the past, mostly buildings such as opera houses and museums were used for this purpose, but public libraries are now also used for the economic strategies based on image and branding (Skot-Hansen et al., 2013). There are different ways in which a public library can benefit the city. A relatively recent trend in urban development is building iconic (cultural) buildings that attract visitors to a city or part of a city. A very successful example of this is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, by Frank Gehry. This iconic building brought millions of visitors to Bilbao and boosted the city economically (Plaza, 2007). The effect this museum had on the city came to be called the “Bilbao-effect”. Many politicians now want iconic buildings with similar effect in their city, to attract visitors and boost the economy (Skot-Hansen et al., 2013). There have already been examples of public libraries attempting (and succeeding) to be cultural icons, such as Rem Koolhaas’ Seattle Public Library, opened in 2004. Apart from creating cultural icons for the city, urban developers also use libraries as a tool for placemaking (Skot-Hansen et al., 2013). Cultural institutions are used to boost a specific part of the city, for example in the redevelopment of industrial areas. They become important people-magnets and markers of the identity of a certain (part of the) city. A very prominent placemaker library is the Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA) by Jo Coenen. It was the first building to open on the Oosterdok Island in Amsterdam in 2007. The Oosterdok Island is a former industrial area near the historic city centre, and was abandoned in the 1990s. The city came with a plan to turn the Oosterdok Island into a new cultural anchor of the city. The public library by Coenen was the first building to open and a way to revive this part of the city. Because there was cultural activity starting to develop there, other parties became more interested in settling on this island. The development turned

out to be a great success, and the island transformed from an abandoned industrial area to a booming cultural domain attracting large numbers of visitors (Kloosterman, 2009). Moreover, many public libraries that succeed in being placemakers and attracting many visitors often house multiple different functions, such as cafes, small shops and places for cultural events (Skot-Hansen et al., 2013).

### **The public library as a meeting place**

Ragnar Audunson (2005), Professor of Library and Information Science in Oslo, describes the distinction between high-intensive and low-intensive meeting places, and the importance of low-intensive meeting places such as libraries. High-intensive meeting places are important for our individual lives, and include places like a job, church, sport club, association etc. These meeting-places provide meaning to one's life, and keeps them involved in society. However, Audunson states that in a society that is becoming increasingly more diverse and multicultural, so called low-intensive meeting-places are essential for society as well. The aforementioned high-intensive meeting-places often represent only certain parts of society and tend to lead to fragmentation. At these places, you will mostly meet peers, people of the same background, ethnicity, religion or political preference. Audunson argues that the one place where you meet a relatively correct cross-section of society, is the public library. He describes this as a low-intensive meeting-place, a cross-cultural meeting place where all kinds of people run in to each other and thereby build tolerance for each other. To achieve this goal of cross-cultural contact and communication, libraries have to focus on becoming a place where people of different cultural backgrounds all feel welcome.

### **Breaking your bubble**

The fragmentation in society caused by high-intensive meeting places, is amplified through the growth of the internet, especially social media. Even though the internet seems to be doing what libraries tried to do all along: providing infinite information to anyone, we should be critical about it. The internet gives us all kinds of information without a critical institution that tells us how we should judge this information. It is important to be able to separate the real, scientifically proven information from the coincidental and untrue (van de Wiel & Bey, 2010).

Another risk with the internet, and social media in particular, is that the information you see is generated through algorithms that know your views and opinions. So information that is presented to you generally confirms the perspective and ideas that you already have. Just like high-intensive meeting places where you only communicate with people with the same opinions as you, your digital environment can do the same thing. Bruijnzeels and Sternheim (2021) argue that a library should be a place for people to escape their algorithm-formed digital bubbles, and have conversations and debates with people of different backgrounds, with different opinions. They argue that the public library is the perfect place for this, "not

just because you can meet people face-to-face and have spontaneous as well as organised encounters, but also because you are surrounded by essential sources of knowledge and inspiration: the library collection" (Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021). The physical presence of a public library can thereby be a great addition to the digital world of knowledge, to educate people in how to perceive this knowledge, and to learn to see things from different perspectives.

# Case study on Forum Groningen

## Introduction

Forum Groningen is a multifunctional public building in the middle of the historic centre of the Dutch city of Groningen. It houses a library as well as a museum, restaurant, tourist information, study places and much more. In 2007, the design of NL Architects was chosen by the public as well as the jury (Hannema, 2020). Because of the high costs and prominent place in the city centre, citizens and media have expressed a lot of criticism, especially during the building phase. The Forum opened in 2019, and since then, the general opinion has become more positive it seems. The building has won multiple architecture awards and national and international media were full of praise (Hannema, 2020). In this chapter, the process behind the Forum, the specific typology and the development in public opinion is further researched.



*Figure 2 – Forum Groningen (Wiersema, n.d.)*

## Process leading up to the Forum

There have been discussions on the design of the Grote Markt, the main town square of Groningen, and its surroundings for quite some time. In 1997, the council first mentioned plans for a parking garage beneath the square. This led to a plan by urbanist and architect Jo Coenen, with an underground parking as well as underground shopping street and square (Veldhuisen, 2001). The council voted in favour of this proposal, but the opposition and many inhabitants of the city did not agree. Some citizens and

organisations even came into action, and set up the committee *Geen Gat in de Grote Markt* (= no hole in the Grote Markt) (Verschuren, 2001). The council eventually decided to settle the matter with a referendum in 2001, where more than eighty percent of people voted against the plans, and thereby stopped the project. The high turn-out of the referendum showed the engagement of citizens when it came to the design of the city centre.

In the years that followed, the municipality focused more on the east side of the Grote Markt. This is a part of the city that was reconstructed after the Second World War, and the municipality described it as a “dead and unused side of the square; unworthy of a central town square” (Burgemeester en Wethouders, 2008). They want to use the plans for the east side of the square to restore the pre-war intimacy of the city, to add the Forum as new crowd puller and to provoke investments and economic development in this part of the city (Burgemeester en Wethouders, 2008). This shows the tendency of local government to revive parts of the city using iconic (cultural) buildings, as mentioned in the previous chapter. After the failed plans in 2001, the municipality started the process of the development of this area all over. They conducted a public survey, established a think tank with 40 involved citizens, and created a competition for the future design. Eventually, architect and urbanist Willem Jan Neutelings came with a refreshing proposal to change this area from an “inhospitable” place to a new booming area in the city in three steps. An important part of the plan is the realisation of the Forum Groningen (then called the “Groninger Forum”, the name was changed later). This would be a “striking building where history, information, film and debate will go together in a new concept” (Burgemeester en Wethouders, 2008).

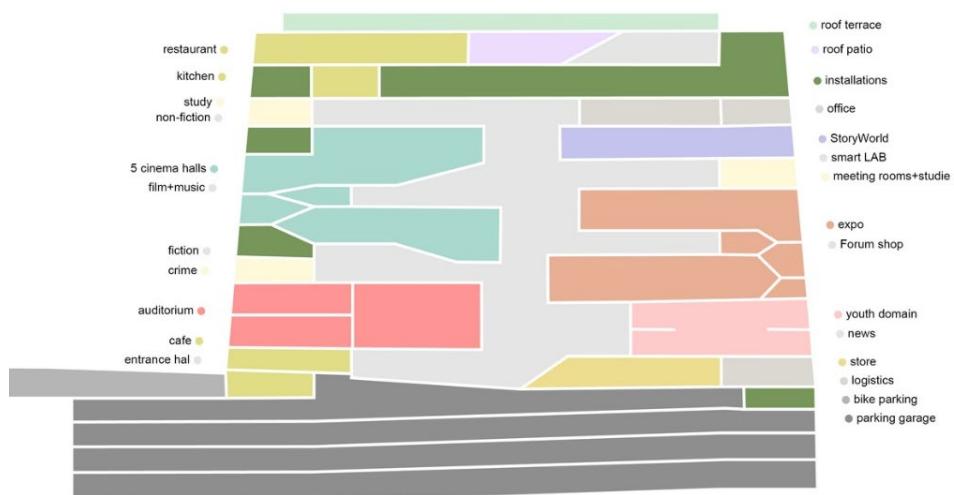
The further development of this area and the Forum itself was a democratic process. In 2005, a referendum on the urban plan for the east side of the Grote Markt, including the first concept of the Forum, was held. A small majority voted in favour of the plans, so the development continued (Burgemeester en Wethouders, 2008). In 2007, an online election was held where all citizens of the city could vote for which architectural design the Forum would get. The design by NL Architects was the clear winner of the public election, and was also chosen by a jury of professionals (Hannema, 2020). So then the building process could begin.

After further elaborating the design and demolishing some of the buildings on the site, the process of building the Forum started in 2012. It was estimated to cost 70 million euros and to be opened in 2017 (NOS Nieuws, 2019). However, there were some setbacks in the process. A major setback was making the Forum earthquake-proof. Because of the gas extraction operations in Groningen, the area has dealt with earthquakes for years. In 2015, it was found that the design of the Forum was not earthquake resistant, and the build was put to a temporary stop. Making the building earthquake-proof cost a lot of extra money, and delayed the building process by two years, which cost even more money. In the end, the building has cost around 140 million euros, double the amount of the original estimation, and was opened two years later than planned, in 2019 (NOS Nieuws, 2019).

## Typology and design

In the vision of the architects, the Forum should not specifically be a library, cinema or museum, but rather one truly public building that will hold an infinite source of information. As NL Architects mention on their website, the building “should form an extension of the Public Space and offer a place for people to meet and debate” (NL Architects, 2007). The combination of the different functions and the public space that connects them into one building, makes the Forum a unique and innovative typology. It shows what a public library can also be like, in a completely new context and with a new look. This vision is in line with the findings of Bruijnzeels and Sternheim, mentioned earlier in this paper. They mentioned being a truly public space where people can meet and debate as one of the most important functions of a modern library (Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021). This shows good communication between the library and the architects on what the building has to achieve.

By stacking the different functions in the building, the architects try to blur the boundaries between the different functions. By placing the less public and more closed functions (such as museum, cinema and offices) on the sides of the building, a composition of different public squares at different heights is created in between, connected by an enormous atrium with escalators (NL Architects, 2007), see figure 3 and 4. The designers have deliberately not placed the escalators in the most efficient way, but in such a way that the visitor walks past everything and can discover the entire building on the way to the roof terrace, where a beautiful view of the city awaits. The library function is intertwined throughout the building, and is largely located on the public squares. Careful consideration has also been given to the placement of various collections of the library. For example, the comic books are located near the entrance to the comic book museum and the films are located near the cinema. The public route through the large open atrium with all those different functions creates public space. Visitors can visit this building for all kinds of reasons, to take in all those different sources of information, to meet other residents of the city or just to enjoy the rooftop view.



**Figure 3 - Scheme showing the different functions in the Forum and the open atrium in the middle (NL Architects, 2019)**



**Figure 4 – Public squares connected through an atrium with escalators (Aldershoff, 2019)**

### Public opinion

While the process started on a positive note by the public election of the design of the Forum, the optimism faded over the years that followed (Hannema, 2020). Shortly after the design was chosen the economic crisis of 2008 came along, followed by more setbacks in the process as mentioned before. As the opening was delayed over the years and the total cost doubled, many people started to be more sceptic about the Forum. People felt that the municipal money could be spent in better ways. In addition to the economic aspect of this project, people were also afraid that this massive modern looking building would have a large negative impact on the historic city centre (For example: Kaatee, 2020). Resident of Groningen Johan Meijering wrote a book of almost 500 pages about why the building of the Forum should be stopped, called *Groninger Forum: een Bodemloze Put* (which, ironically, can now be found in the library of the Forum). Meijering (2016) describes the Forum as “an uncontrollable colossus: a large, irresponsible and extraordinary risky project in the beautiful historic city centre.” And even in the week of the opening, the majority of *Groningers* didn’t see the Forum as an asset to the city, as reported by a survey done by local broadcaster RTV Noord (2019).

However, as time went by, the Forum eventually seemed to conquer the hearts of the public, as well as of architecture critics (Hannema, 2020). It won a large number of architecture awards, including being elected best building of 2020 by the Trade Association of Dutch Architecture Firms (BNA). The public also seemed to love it; in the first three months after opening, the visitor numbers already reached one million (Forum, 2020). Never before did a cultural institution in the Netherlands attract that many visitors in such a short period of time. The Forum even got international appreciation, the Guardian called the project “rather marvellous” in their article titled “The new-look shopping mall that doesn’t sell stuff”

(Balch, 2020). German newspaper Welt describes the building as cool, interesting and innovative (Driessen, 2022).

One of the causes why some people might have changed their mind about the building was explained by Kamiel Klaasse and Pieter Bannenberg of NL Architects: “In presentations, we often show the building from a birds-eye view. People then say: what a colossal building, have they gone completely mad? And the funny thing is, when they go there, they can’t find the building right away. That’s a good one. Searching for the building when you felt it was too big for that location.” (Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021). There is more to this change in the public opinion though. Kirsten Hannema, journalist at *de Volkskrant*, describes that the mood changed as soon as the public set foot into the building (2020). It was mostly the vibrant interior of the Forum that convinced the BNA jury that elected the forum ‘building of the year’, they described it as “a building with enormous appeal and great quality of stay” (Hannema, 2020). An appealing feature for many people was also the view from the Forum to the city. From the impressive atrium as well as the 40 meter high rooftop, visitors have great views over the city of Groningen, for free. The lively interior of the Forum, where there is something for everyone, in combination with the new perspective over the city, conquered the hearts of most citizens of Groningen in the end (Hannema, 2020).

## **Forum in a wider context**

As explained in previous chapters, there seems to be a trend going on in public library design, of expanding and diversifying the functions housed in a library. The Forum Groningen is a great, and maybe somewhat extreme example of this, but definitely not the only library taking this route. Bruijnzeels and Sternheim (2021) make the comparison between Forum Groningen and the Lochal Tilburg, a library opened in the same year as the Forum, on the other side of the country. Both libraries were used as catalysts for area development, and both were very successful. However, they are very different from each other in many ways. The Forum is an elegant modern monolith, whereas the Lochal is a raw, industrial former train depot. In contrast to the Forum, the Lochal’s main occupant is the library. While you have to search for the collection in the Forum, the Lochal shows its books clearly throughout the building. But this doesn’t mean the Lochal is a traditional library. The designers of the building, CIVIC architects, explain the functionality and flexibility of the building. The Lochal is focused on the creation of new knowledge. It acts as a covered public space (much like the Forum) with amenities shared by the library, co-working facilities and arts organisations (Civic, 2019). Located throughout the library are so-called ‘labs’, focussed on learning new skills surrounding a number of themes. The flexibility comes from the large curtains that separate the spaces. They can be opened or closed to create for example quieter work spaces or an auditorium, and are a reference to the textile industry in Tilburg.

So even though the Forum and Lochal differ in many ways, they also show similar trends in the changing typology of public libraries. They both express the character of the cities they are located in, and work

very well in those specific locations (Bruijnzeels & Sternheim, 2021). The public library is changing from a place to borrow books to a public space that can be used for a number of different functions. Different aspects attract different sorts of people and this makes for a truly public space that is a representation of society.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, a lot is happening in the ever-relevant realm of public library design. This paper tries to find an answer to the question: *How did the typology and function of public libraries in the Netherlands develop over time, how is their place in society changed and how is this reflected in Forum Groningen?* Through the points made in the different chapters of this paper, an attempt at answering that question can be done.

Firstly, the development of public libraries from the first reading rooms in the beginning of last century, to the large public libraries we see today shows a massive transformation. Because of different developments in society and the way we save and consume information, the public library had to change its functions and attitude to keep fulfilling the same role in society. Recent years showed that the public library can be, and has to be, more than a distributor of books. As people consume knowledge through all kinds of different media, the library no longer holds the monopoly on knowledge. But it's proven to still be a relevant typology in modern society, though expanding their function to a multifunctional public meeting space.

The value of the public library in society is found in a number of things. First of all, the library is a truly public space where all parts of society meet. It is one of the few public buildings left where everyone is welcome and people are not consumers. It is a place of cultural diversity, where individual as well as communal identities are created. Public libraries can be hotspots in the city and are widely used as catalysts in area development. It also provides a low-intensive meeting place where people of different backgrounds meet and share opinions and perspectives. This is of great value in the multicultural society of today. It is a place to escape your personal and digital bubble and expand your world view.

The Forum Groningen was used as a prime example of what the evolved typology of the public library can look like. Despite setbacks and contrasting opinions during the process, this new public arena for the city proved to be a great asset to Groningen and a beloved place to visit. The multifunctional approach of the Forum ensures that there is something for everyone, and that's why it is relevant for the whole community.

All in all, the typology of public libraries has changed a lot over the years, and managed to stay relevant in a changing society. Today, public libraries stand at the heart of society, by providing a common ground, a place for people to meet and debate, and above all learn new things and expand their views.

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