“New Beauties”: The Design of British Public Library Buildings in the 1960s

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Abstract

In 1960 the architectural correspondent of London’s *Times* newspaper praised contemporary architects for having evolved what he called “new beauties”: attractive, modernist buildings created out of new techniques and approaches to style and structure. This study features a particular set of these “new beauties”: public library buildings of the 1960s, both large and small. In the 1960s, public library design finally broke free from its Victorian heritage. The new library buildings that appeared in this decade, clothed as they were in the architectural modernism of the time, reflected an age of optimism and intended modernization, when faith in the postwar welfare state was at its height, when hopes for technological and economic renewal were running high, and when the outlook of professional librarians was becoming increasingly progressive.

Introduction: From Old to New

In 1960 the Royal London Borough of Kensington, a salubrious district of central London, opened a new central library (Kensington designated “Royal” in 1901, fulfilling a wish by Queen Victoria to honor her birthplace) (*Official Architecture*, 1960, pp. 506–509). The library’s architect was Vincent Harris, who a generation earlier had designed the simplified-classical Manchester Central Library (1934). For Kensington he produced a substantial library in an “English Renaissance” style, in keeping with the Borough’s esteemed status (fig. 1). At the time, the building was the largest public library in London. The previous year, in response to the Kensington design, students from the nearby Royal College of Art had formed a protest group called Anti-Ugly Action (AUA). They had marched on the Borough’s town hall and the new library chanting “it’s an
outrage,” wielding placards saying “Fake Buildings Are A Sin” and “Britain Builds Blindly.” They held a public meeting at Kensington Town Hall to gain further support against the library’s pseudoclassical style (Daily Telegraph [1959, January 26; 1959, February 5]; Manchester Guardian [1959, February 5]). The AUA also involved itself in the campaign opposing the planned new library in Guilford city center, a stone-clad, neo-Georgian design—in keeping with nearby Jacobean buildings but out of step with the rise of modernism. Yet, illustrating that not everyone was a convert to modernism, the AUA was itself the subject of criticism from those who admired the Guilford Public Library plan and who lambasted the students’ preference for “acres of glass and concrete” (in the context of architecture, the words modernism and modernist are used in this article rather than the word modern, which carries the connotations of design that is merely new, up-to-date, or recent) (Mervyn, 1959).

The design of Kensington Central Library was in marked contrast to the many contemporary libraries being built or planned at the time. The majority in the worlds of both libraries and architecture would have viewed the Kensington design as backward-looking, its “opulence and heaviness . . . suggest[ing] a wealth we have come to dissociate from the building of our affluent age” (Platts, 1967, p. 475). Commentary on the new library was offered by the architectural correspondent of the Times who wrote, shortly after the library was opened, that it was “a manly type of building”; it was an example, he opined, of dignified architecture, its neoclassical idiom having been “forcefully handled” by a veteran architect “who was designing important buildings in similar style almost half a century ago.” However, within this apparent compliment lurked a hidden slight. Indeed, he went on to comment that the dressing up of an admittedly well-planned, modern, steel-framed building was “somewhat ridiculous,” especially in light of how much contemporary architects had done “to evolve new beauties [my emphasis] out of new techniques and structures” (“New Library,” 1960).

This study features a particular set of these modernist “new beauties” of the 1960s—public library buildings, both large and small. Breaking free of their Victorian design heritage, the new public library buildings of the “Swinging Sixties” (Sandbrook, 2006) reflected an age of optimism and modernization, when faith in the postwar welfare state was at its height and when the outlook of professional librarians was becoming more progressive.

**The Modernization of Britain: “White Hot” Technology and the Welfare State**

The election of a radical Labour government in 1945 resulted from the “equality of sacrifice” of the war years and the promise of egalitarian reconstruction that accompanied it (Addison, 1975). A welfare state was
forged out of the pragmatic needs of a *warfare* state. Writing in 1945, the industrialist and politician Ernest Simon, famous for his slum-clearing work in Manchester, expressed the belief that in twenty years Britain could be rebuilt: “Let us be inspired with enthusiasm for a great national plan of reconstruction. Let us determine to plan and build healthy and pleasant cities, the finest the world has known, and a monument to the ideals and to the efficiency of British democracy” (Simon, 1945, pp. 7, 223). In 1942, the Fabian Socialist G. D. H. Cole wrote of the “fundamental resolve to rebuild our nation in the spirit in which we [effectively] began fighting the war in 1940” (p. 12).

The spirit of reconstruction spilled over into the library world. The desire to rebuild the public library system was encapsulated in a landmark survey and report in 1942, researched and authored by Lionel McColvin, Britain’s most prominent librarian of the time. In terms purely of bricks and mortar, it was recognized that “the destruction by bombs of the Central Library at Coventry, and the similar destruction elsewhere, raises the problem of rebuilding our libraries after the war . . . whether they be destroyed by enemy action or not, they will have to be moved into new buildings or radically enlarged and reconstructed in the near future” (“Library planning,” 1942).
However, the regeneration of Britain’s library buildings, including the central library in Coventry (more about this later), was something that had to wait for a generation after the war.

The desire to build a better postwar world soon manifested itself in the construction of a welfare state comprising the nationalization of key sectors of the economy, a commitment to Keynesian demand management to avoid the mass unemployment of the past, the provision of a national health service free at the point of use, fair welfare benefits, an expanded public education system, and a large-scale program of state housing (Hill, 1993; Lowe, 2005). Regarding the last, local authorities were given new powers to clear slums and bomb-damaged areas, and expand public investment in urban regeneration as well as in the construction of entirely new settlements, the “new towns” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 1361; Saint, 1988). All this was inaugurated in six short years before the return to power, in 1951, of the Conservatives who, although scaling down government expenditure, nonetheless accepted many of the previous government’s reforms and established a consensus around the need for a welfare state of some kind (Kavanagh & Morris, 1989); even if later Conservative administrations sought always to contain it and adapt it to Conservative values (Glennnerster, 1995).

In design terms, the intended modernization of the nation—the aim, literally, of “building a better tomorrow” (Elwall, 2000)—had been flagged during the war by posters issued by the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, which disseminated educational material to the armed forces to prepare those serving for the postwar world. Three posters, designed by Abram Games, depicted the new Britain for which people were fighting. Each carried the image of a modernist building: a block of flats (the influential Kensal house design, 1937), a college, and a health center.

In 1951 came the Festival of Britain (mainly staged on the south bank of the River Thames in London), which aimed to promote better-quality design in the redevelopment of Britain’s town and cities. The Festival, held as a “tonic to the nation” (Elwall, 2000, p. 10) at a time of severe austerity, was a key moment not only in postwar aspirations for meaningful reconstruction but also in postwar architecture, a moment “when modern design as a whole was introduced to a more or less accepting public as a matter of daily routine” (Powers 2005, p. 231). By the mid-1950s, modern architecture was no longer the exclusive interest of a small elite group of pioneers. It had won broad acceptance and even approval. Although modernism had made in-roads before the war, it was now fully established and had become a symbol of postwar reconstruction, in particular of the phase of modernization that got underway in the years approaching 1960 (Bullock, 2002).

Arguably, however, the authentic “modern times” that the Festival anticipated did not arrive until the early 1960s, years that saw the emergence
of a vibrant “pop” and youth subculture, a general opening up of social mores, and a restored faith in technology and science: the birth control pill became widely available in 1961; the Beatles went to the top of both the single-play and long-play popular music charts in 1963. Also in 1963, Prime Minister Harold Wilson declared that his Labour Party was restating its socialism “in terms of the scientific revolution,” and that a new Britain would be “forged in the white heat of this revolution” (quoted in Wilkie, 1991, pp. 73–74). This was followed in 1965 by the unveiling of the new Department of Economic Affairs’ National Plan, which aimed at a 25 percent growth in gross domestic product between 1964 and 1970 (Department of Economic Affairs, 1965).

At times, not least because it contrasted so vividly with the austerity of the late 1940s and early 1950s, it appeared that plans for economic and technological renewal might have some substance, as Britain scored or projected a number of technological “firsts”: the vertical take-off (Harrier) jet; the hovercraft; and, in association with the French, the supersonic passenger jet, Concorde (Childs, 1997, p. 127). One of the most iconic technologies of the 1960s was a building: the six-hundred-foot tall Post Office Tower in London (opened in 1965), the “centerpiece of Britain’s brand new communications network, and an uncompromising statement of technological modernism” (Sandbrook, 2006, p. 44). Other tall buildings carried a similar message of modernity; especially the high-rise, modernist housing blocks that sprang up throughout the country’s inner cities. Even as Britain’s empire dissolved, the promise of modernity and ingenuity were encapsulated in cultural productions like the movie adaptations, beginning in 1962, of Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels (Bennett, 1987; Lidner, 2003); and in the popular “kidult” puppet television adventure show Thunderbirds, which glimpsed a future world—and in many episodes a future Britain—that was highly sophisticated in its technological achievements (Marriott, 1992). In the popular imagination, science became exciting and lively rather than desiccated and boring (Sandbrook, 2006, p. 44). Experts came out from behind their hidden disagreement into situations—not least on television—where their contests and discussions were open to public scrutiny (Agar, 2008).

Whereas the first half of the twentieth century was defined by the two world wars, the iconic period of the second half was the decade of the 1960s (Marwick, 1998). Even if one takes into account those who decried its hedonism and loosening morals; its continuing prejudice in terms of race, gender, disability, class, regional origin, or religion (witness the tensions in Northern Ireland); and the fact that the period eventually came to be classed as one full of “false optimism” (Marwick, 1982, pp. 178–185), the 1960s appeared to many at the time to be a “sundrenched” decade, full of hope and driven by a sense of social, cultural, and economic renewal.2 Public money was liberally pumped into the social and cultural
infrastructure of the nation. The welfare state provided the financial and moral patronage for the large-scale building, mostly in modernist style, of houses, hospitals, schools, universities—and libraries.

**The Growth of Architectural Modernism**

The modernism in which the designers of Britain’s welfare-state institutions invested did not appear overnight. Its roots can be traced back into the nineteenth century, as Pevsner revealed in his classic *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936), which examined the gradual transition from Victorian historicism to the modern. Moreover, Pevsner was of the opinion (though others may disagree) that the modern appeared in Britain, not in mainland Europe: “The Modern Movement, i.e. a style of the twentieth century completely independent of the past, originated during the last years of Queen Victoria’s reign, mainly in Britain, and that, shortly after 1900, a few French and a larger number of German architects took the lead in developing it” (Pevsner, 2007, p. 17).

One line of descent, predating Pevsner’s dating, can be traced back to the Gothic, which by virtue of its flexibility challenged the symmetry of the Classical. The Gothic also claimed an organic heritage, evocative of the harmony of nature, the supposed cohesion of premodern societies, and the claimed pleasure and freedom of expression inherent in preindustrial craft labor (Yates, 1990). The Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements claimed similar groundings.

The centrality of nature to modernism came to be expressed in its vision of “sun, space and greenery,” as seen in the large open decks of Alvar Alto’s Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium in Finland (1929) (Weston, 1996, p. 185), as well as in Le Corbusier’s “Five Points of New Architecture” and his house design that included roof gardens for fresh air and exercise; long horizontal windows to admit even, generous, and life-enhancing light; and structures raised off the ground by pillars, thereby eradicating the unhealthy basement and allowing for the free flow of people, cars, and air (Weston, 1996, p. 9). Modernism also claimed the simplicity found in nature. This explains its heredity in terms of the Garden City/Suburb Movement, and the rural simplicity it championed, as well as the vernacular “English domestic” styles of Voysey and Lutyens. Like nature, modernist buildings were to be “honest”; materials and structures were not to be hidden behind sham decoration; and the design of a building was to be appropriate to needs and its surroundings: “Buildings, like people, must first of all be sincere. . . . Decoration should be of the surface, never on it,” declared Frank Lloyd Wright (“Anthology,” 1935, p. 41).

Another lineage is that of the “practical” architecture of the industrial revolution: from utilitarian factory and warehouse, at the everyday level, to Paxton’s glass and cast iron Crystal Palace, built with the potential for indeterminate expansion to house the Great Exhibition in London’s Hyde
Park in 1851. From its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, “the Modern Movement was in many respects pre-occupied with the urge to catch up with the Industrial Revolution” (Blake 1977, p. 51). Modernism in architecture came to be imbued with a faith in scientific progress and in the beneficial effects of modern technology. Modernist architects yearned to create buildings that combined beauty with technical, economic, and social efficiency, a state of mind that Guillén (2006) has termed the Taylorised beauty of the mechanical. Modernist designers conceptualized buildings as machines, in the tradition of early twentieth century Taylorist/Fordist scientific management, which viewed organizations in a similar light (Rayward, 2008, p. 4). Like a machine, a building subjected to modernist principles made for precise control of human behavior (the equivalent of output) and, consequently, increased productive living (the equivalent of efficiency). Le Corbusier, of course, famously regarded houses as machines for living in (Rayward, 2008, p. 7). Frank Lloyd Wright, in his 1901 paper The Art and Craft of the Machine, though motivated by a faith in tradition rather than the utopian, revolutionary aims of the European modernists, nonetheless urged designers to embrace and study the machine, praising its power to “enable” good design (Wright, 1901/2007). Banham (1980) viewed the embryonic modernist structures of the early twentieth century as arising out of, and reflecting, what he called the “first machine age”—an age whose machines contrasted with the “ponderous and simple-minded” machines of the Victorian “cast iron, soot and rust” industrial age; by virtue of the fact that they were “light, subtle, clean and could be handled by thinking men in their own homes out in the new electric suburbs” (p. 11).

But whatever its origins and specific form—for the word applies, of course, to arts other than architecture—modernism (meaning here the modern movement generally) rested, as Hobsbawm has put it, “on the rejection of nineteenth-century bourgeois-liberal conventions in both society and art, and on the perceived need to create an art in some way suited to the technologically and socially revolutionary twentieth century, to which the arts and lifestyle of Queen Victoria, the Emperor [Kaiser] William and President Theodore Roosevelt were so plainly unsuited” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 515).

Architectural modernism stood for a clean break with a past in which the main concern was the imitation of styles from previous centuries. The pressure for such a break became intense during and immediately after the Second World War. The population sought a new world, and modernist architecture was closely associated with the desire for a fresh start—although it has to be recognized that developments after the war were the fulfillment of the groundwork prepared during the 1930s, which served, as Powers has described it, as a “rehearsal for the real action” (2005, p. 231).³
Modernist architecture and what became known as the International Style (modernism was labeled as such in 1932 at an exhibition held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art) were characterized, according to Hitchcock and Johnson (1995), by three features. Firstly, frivolity and elaboration were avoided. Whereas in the nineteenth century the ornamentation to which historic styles lent themselves was seen as the most important ingredient of architecture, modernists decried over-elaboration, superfluous trappings, and indulgent encrustations. Nineteenth-century architecture, said Le Corbusier, was “stifled by custom,” its styles being “a lie,” a gigantic deception (Norberg-Schulz, 2000, p. 9). Ebullient ornamentation was replaced by functionalism (although the use of this word in connection with modernism can detract from the latter’s aesthetic qualities) (R. Banham, 1980, p. 325).4 Secondly, design was ordered through regularity and repetition rather than symmetry. Uniformity, reflective of a desire for social universalism and egalitarianism, characterized the modernist plan. Enthusiasm for this component of modernism was symbolized by the mass provision of tower-block, high-rise public housing, or “streets in the sky”; the pioneer of this being the elegant 1950s Roehampton Estate in South-West London; set in green landscape and thus representing, essentially, a “vertical” Garden City (Pepper, 1988; Powers, 2007, p. 63).5 Thirdly, there was an emphasis on volume as opposed to mass; space was enclosed by thin planes (for example, expanses of glass) rather than barriers evocative of solidity. Clean lines, minimalism, and the open plan came to dominate. “Less is more,” became the new orthodoxy.

The open-plan design (sometimes called “free plan” or “fluid plan”) was a new vision of architectural space born at the beginning of the twentieth century (although with roots also in the late nineteenth-century vogue for Japanese design). Architects, especially those engaged in housing design, began to break free from traditional spatial constraints. The open plan was a key element in Frank Lloyd Wright’s prairie houses (e.g., his Robie House, 1910). The elimination of self-contained rooms was also a feature of Le Corbusier’s work—for example, in his Villa Savoye (Les Heures Claires) (1929). Free-flowing floor plans were later combined with large expanses of glass wall that replaced windows and had the effect of blurring the distinction between inside and outside (Zion, 2002). After the Second World War, in addition to the context of the home, the open plan was also incorporated into the designs of large office blocks. Postwar modernism saw the emergence of the “open office” with floor space broken up by fabric-covered screens, desks, filing cabinets, plants, and other “barrier” devices. Layout was defined by the desired flow of people and activities through the building rather than by rigidly defined work hierarchies (Massey, 2001, p. 146). The open-plan concept also had an effect on the design of furniture and fixtures. In keeping with architectural modernism, heavy, “boxy” furniture was replaced by designs with
light, elongated lines; in the home, free-standing, easily-moveable, and sometimes double-sided, units with shelves and cupboards were used to divide space, such as that between the kitchen and living room (J. Banham, 1997, p. 905). Similar devices were also employed in 1960s libraries. Moveable barriers—whether in the form of furniture, shelving, glass or nontransparent panels—were often employed in connection with modular, rectangular spaces, the corners of which were formed by narrow but strong structural columns. This arrangement detracted from the purity of the open plan, but also complemented it in terms of the aim of flexibility that was at its heart.

The emergence of modernism in Britain was both a “complex and contradictory” process (Powers, 2005, p. 29); its roots being not only multiple but also intertwined (R. Banham, 1980). As noted above, its deeper roots were to be found in apparently alien, historic architectural styles. Its more immediate lineage was also diverse. Even though, astonishingly, Le Corbusier never designed a structure of any kind in Britain, he succeeded in firing the imagination of British architects and architectural students (Murray, 2009). Le Corbusier was, in many ways, “Britain’s gateway to modern architecture.” In fact, the first appearance of the modern style in Britain, it has been argued, was in the form of villas in the tradition of Le Corbusier’s house designs (Maxwell, 2004, p. 1360).

After 1945, British architects were often attracted to, and influenced by, the United States, which offered Britain examples of the modernist creed that were readily absorbed—from the business and science park to the high-rise office block and hotel. Designers and urban planners in the United States also influenced the modernist “new towns” movement. If the historic roots of the “new town” lay in the British Garden City movement, one of its immediate informing sources was the 1929 Radburn (New Jersey) project, which was dubbed “the town for the motor age,” with separation of car and pedestrian and accommodation for cars in front of homes (houses in new towns like Harlow, Stevenage, and Milton Keynes were described as being in the Radburn style) (Fraser, 2007). Finally, the work of Frank Lloyd Wright was enthusiastically publicized in Britain, receiving more attention, it has been argued, than in the United States itself (Shand, 1935).

The Modernization of the Library Profession and Library Services

Modernist libraries of the 1960s owed as much to modernization in the library profession as to modern ideas in architecture generally. Without the shift to a more progressive outlook among librarians, the take-up of modernism in library circles would have been slower and less emphatic. In 1959, the head of the National Central Library, S. P. L. Filon, predicted that the decade of the 1960s would be “a new era for libraries” (“New
era,” 1939). “When the next chapter in the history of the library service comes to be written,” predicted the editor of the Library Association Record at the time, “the present decade will surely rank as one of the most democratic” (“Editorial,” 1964). Both were to be proved correct. As James Ollé observed retrospectively: “The 1960s was a notable decade in British library history. . . . For the first time in more than a hundred years . . . it had become common, rather than exceptional, for public libraries to be both resourceful and attractive, offering appropriate services to all ages and many specialized interests” (Ollé, 1999, p. 55). The 1960s was a time of considerable change in the public library profession and the services it provided.

A new Public Libraries Act was passed in 1964. It compelled—rather than simply allowed, as had been the case since the first Public Libraries Act in 1850—local authorities to provide what was termed in the legislation a “comprehensive and efficient” library service. The act also formally permitted public libraries to provide nonbook formats and services. Here was a cultural embodiment of the universalism that characterized welfare provision, prompting the common observation that the post-1964 public library network served as a “national health service for books” (Marwick, 1982, p. 140). In this regard, it is noteworthy that continuing and accelerating a trend begun in the interwar years, a significant number of 1960s public libraries were constructed in association with health centers, while others formed part of public housing projects. The 1964 act unquestionably opened the way, as the Guardian newspaper noted at the time, for a “stronger library service” (“Stronger public library,” 1964, p. 1).

The postwar years saw an expansion in public library borrowing, and this trend continued into the 1960s despite competition from new leisure opportunities and the growth of the mass media, most notably television. In Edinburgh, for example, the number of items issued to the public increased from 4.5 million in 1953–54 to 5.4 million in 1957–58; by 1964–65, issues had risen to 6 million (all these figures include nonbook items such as gramophone records) (Edinburgh Libraries, 1957–58; “Record year,” 1965). To meet increasing demand, Luton Public Library doubled its staff between 1962 and 1969 (Gardner, 1969, p. 14). The 1960s also saw a large increase in public library use by students whose own college facilities had not been modernized or expanded nearly enough to match the massive development in further and higher education (Library Association, July 1961). To cater for increased demand there was a dramatic expansion in the training of librarians: the number attending library schools rose from just under 300 in 1960 to around 2,000 in 1966 (Bebbington, 1967, p. 31).

Part of the modernization of the library network was the imposition of national standards of service. Standardization was discussed energetically and became the focus of a government inquiry in 1962 (Ministry of Edu-
cation, 1962), a necessary prelude to the 1964 act. Standardization was also brought about by the creation of much larger library authorities and a move toward computerization. Local government reorganization in 1965 in London (in the mid-1970s elsewhere in the country) resulted in the eradication of the existing multiplicity of small local government units and in their absorption into larger entities. Mapping onto these larger units, library authorities consequently grew in size also. Economies of scale were achieved, as well as greater standardization in library services within authorities. Standardization was also furthered by the computerization of, initially, catalogs, and of the circulation of materials in the second instance. Computers in libraries made sense: the new technology lent itself well to the repetitive, routine tasks characteristic of library work. The development of computerized catalogs was hastened by the amalgamation of London library authorities noted above; for computerization was an attractive proposition for those seeking to combine the catalogs of previously separate library systems. An earlier computerization of catalogs had not been an option. Librarians had to wait for technology to develop to the stage where it could accommodate full typographical capacity in catalogs: different fonts, upper and lower case, punctuation, italics, accents, non-Latin alphabets, and so on (Francis, 1966).

Despite this pattern of standardization, however, public library work also underwent a process of specialization. The idea of planning buildings according to specialized subjects had been a feature of early twentieth-century public library development in the United States (Rayward, 1982, pp. 291–292). Brooklyn Public Library after the Second World War had separate rooms for children; young adults; language and literature; history, biography and travel; social sciences; science and industry; art and music; and film (Gardner, 1955). These ideas were transmitted to librarians in Britain where the 1960s saw the rapid growth of specialist services—beyond the basic categorization of lending and reference—in areas of business; commerce and technology; arts and humanities; social sciences; pure sciences; music and gramophone; popular lending; and children’s work (Overington, 1969). This resulted in the emergence in the 1960s, in some of the country’s larger libraries, of subject departments. The erection of a new central library in Bradford (1967) enabled ideas on subject specialization to be showcased (Duckett, 1985). The arrangement of services in Bradford Central Library was as follows: stack and archives collection (basement); spacious foyer, information desks, children’s (and later a teenagers’) library, popular library, library theater (ground floor); fine art library, exhibition space, music library (first floor); meeting rooms, cafeteria (second floor); commercial, science, and technology collections (third floor); patents collection (fourth floor); social science, language, literature, history, geography, and travel collections (fifth floor); local
history service, and philosophy and religious collections (sixth floor); cataloging and bibliographical departments (seventh floor); staff room and offices (eighth floor). The style of the building was pure modernism. Externally, the library had the look of a small concrete and glass skyscraper (fig. 2). Internally, the building was flooded with light from rows of large windows. The height of the building made the upper floors particularly bright during daylight hours. Said to be especially pleasing was the glass-fronted entrance hall with its elegant canopy. The interior of the hall was described as “spacious and its marble floor, walls and columns, together with pendant clusters of tubular lights, all help to make it an aesthetic delight” (“Paradise,” 1967).

Librarians began to recognize the importance of good PR (public relations) and publicity beyond the beneficial links that had always existed with local newspapers (the aforementioned K. C. Harrison was a leading advocate of, and practitioner in, library publicity) (Harrison, 1973). They acknowledged that libraries were not only newsworthy as they always had been, given their civic foundations—at the local level. The Library Association noted that, “outstanding local activities are reported on occasions at national [my emphasis] level through either television, radio or press. . . . Various innovations in library service have received wide notice from time to time” (Library Association, November 1960). In 1961 a list of librarians prepared by the Library Association was given to the BBC’s news department and to ITN (Independent Television News) (Library Association, October 1961). Aware of their “cloistered” public image, librarians were keen to stress their engagement with local communities and the institutions of the welfare state. A survey in 1960 by the Library Association’s London and Home Counties Branch found many librarians doubling as officers in Citizens Advice Bureaux, civil defense officers, food officers, civic information and PR officers, editors of civic news publications, authors of town guides, and givers of talks to local organizations (Library Association, November 1960). Finally, it was increasingly recognized that part of the job of being a good communicator was to help design libraries that the public would appreciate. As the librarian and library-design enthusiast J. D. Reynolds wrote: “Librarians forget all too often they are in the communication business. Once you begin to see your job as being the communication of knowledge, ideas about the location, size and shape of the buildings you plan undergo considerable change” (London and Home Counties Branch of the Library Association, 1968, p. 24).

The 1960s laid the ground for a much more “democratic” form of librarianship, one that aimed, as one radical Edinburgh librarian put it in the early 1970s, “to phase out the old, staid image of the library and give . . . readers an informal atmosphere”; it became fashionable to “give readers what they want” and declare that libraries should stop being “stuffy”
and lower their tone” (Wright, 1974). There was a growing awareness of the need to be connected with the real world. Sensing this change of philosophy, the sociologist Peter Worsley (1967, p. 16) told librarians that “the library should be a place of activity, in the market place, in the shopping centre and not a middle-class monastic retreat. It should also link up with other cultural activities.” In 1968 an extension for teenagers was opened in Lincoln Central Library; it was reported that the “no talking” notices were taken down and “the sounds of Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney, among many others, dominate the garish atmosphere” (“Pop,” 1968).

The modernization of library services fed through into library design. As one commentator explained in 1967, “There is a pressure on librarians to make their buildings less archives of literature and learning and more centres of communal activity. . . . In fact, this liberating process is still going on, and is inevitably reflected in the design of the buildings” (Platts 1967, p. 474). It seemed highly appropriate, moreover, to clothe a modernizing public library world in the modernist styles prevalent at the time.

Public Library Buildings of the 1960s: Replenishment and Design
The postwar public library service in Britain was to a large degree conditioned—or restricted, to be more precise—by an inherited stock of aging
buildings dating from before the pre–Second World War, including many erected before the First World War. In 1959 the Library Association initiated a study of Britain’s public library buildings. The association noted that whereas the use of public libraries had increased 75 percent since 1939, the provision of new library buildings and the extension and improvement of existing premises had been virtually at a standstill. Over 75 percent of buildings were over 50 years old and had been built to hold a fifth of the books held by libraries in 1959, as well as cater for far fewer readers. In particular, notwithstanding the shortage of fit-for-purpose central libraries, a large number of new branches were needed to serve the three million new homes, many in new housing estates, that had been built since the war (Library Association, May 1959). The government, too, noted the urgent need for investment in the public library system. A Ministry of Education report in 1959 called not only for more specialist and trained staff and higher salaries but also urged that a high priority should be given as soon as possible by the central and local authorities to capital expenditure on library buildings (pp. 22–23).

The record after 1960 was a vast improvement on that achieved before that date. By the end of the 1950s, over 200 new service points had appeared since the war, but the vast majority were “re-builds” (e.g., Plymouth Central Library, 1956) or renovated premises (Dewe 1996, p. 95). Severe restrictions had been placed on the building of libraries because, quite simply, the building of houses, schools, and hospitals took priority. But in the 1960s, the pace quickened markedly, and over 350 new service points opened between 1960 and 1965 (Berriman & Harrison, 1966, p. 18). Whereas, before 1960 the majority of new buildings were renovations or conversions, the reverse was true after that date. Prominent new central buildings included those in Kensington (1960); Holborn (1960); Guildford (1962); Luton (1962); Norwich (1962); Eastbourne (1964); Hampstead (1964); Canterbury (Kent County Headquarters, 1964); Hornsey (1965); Crewe (1967); Bradford (1968); Doncaster (1969); Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1969). Progress in the provision of small libraries was if anything more impressive, leaving some to call in the early 1970s, despite the appearance of a number of new city-center libraries, for a “determined attack on the problem of the central libraries” (Harrison, 1972, p. 192).

In recognition of their importance, some of the new crop of library buildings were given the type of VIP-opening reminiscent of earlier times. Such was the status given to libraries in the 1960s—perhaps by virtue, to a degree, of their innovative design—that as before the war but unlike today, they were fairly often opened by major royal figures. For example, the Queen opened Luton Public Library in 1962, and Hampstead Public Library in 1964; in 1960 the Queen Mother opened Holborn Central Library (as well as the classical Kensington Central Library); Bradford Central Library was opened by Princess Alexandra in 1967; and Princess
Anne, the Queen’s daughter, opened the new library at St. Pancras in 1971.

Just as modernism generally did not explode, unannounced, onto the architectural scene after 1945, so also in library design its evolution can be traced back to before the war. Marylebone Central Library, opened in 1940, was designed (as an extension to the town hall) in a strident classical style. However, the lack of a newsroom and the large amount of space given over to lending and children’s libraries was a sign of approaching modern times (Dewe, 1996, p. 95). The country’s first modular library—Manor Branch, Sheffield—was opened in 1953, although the plan went back to 1939 (Dewe, 1996, p. 94). Modular planning as a means of delivering flexibility was first discussed in the 1950s (Thompson, A. 1963a, p. 268). Angus Snead Macdonald claims to have invented the term “modular library” in 1945—wrongly, given the prewar Manor Branch, Sheffield plan—and praised modular construction as “compact, economical, adaptable, and expansible” (Macdonald, 1956, pp. 155, 157). However, modularization did not become a widespread feature of libraries until the 1960s. In the modular approach, strength was given to the structure by deploying multiple internal columns instead of load-supporting interior walls that made for permanent divisions of space; space between the columns formed a “module,” permitting the interchangeable use of any area for bookstack, reading space, staff enclosure, or other purpose (Ro-neo Limited, 1950, p. 15). Where columns were absent, less well-defined modules could also be formed by positioning furniture and fittings appropriately. In the Manor Branch Library, each module was 13 ft. 6 in. square, a length chosen because of its suitability for alcoves. Glass screens and armor-plate glass doors were used between all public departments. It was deemed desirable that, although the departments were kept separate, readers could see in an instant each department’s existence and functions. Moreover, it was judged that as practically the whole building could be seen from any one point, the onlooker had a sense of the buildings “spaciousness and dignity” (Sheffield City Libraries, 1953, p. 2); and despite the reader enjoying an open-plan experience, no one department could disturb the other: the whole interior could be “seen and not heard” (Thompson, A. 1963b, p. 115; fig. 3). The uptake of the open plan is further discussed below.

Branch library design in the 1930s had perhaps been a little more adventurous than that of central libraries, with some showing a tendency toward modern styles, as in the case of the Low Hill Circus Branch in Wolverhampton (1930), with its combination of classical, arts and crafts, and modern devices; or in reduced neo-Georgian branches at Southfields in Leicester (1939); Wilbraham in Manchester (1932); and Becontree, Dagenham (1937) (Black, Pepper, & Bagshaw, 2009, p. 16, pp. 190–193). This said, at a distance, the library designs of the 1930s, even if certain continuities
can be identified, were in a different category stylistically to those that sprang up in the 1960s. Frank Gardner was thus correct in likening the typical interior of interwar public library building, such as those in Sheffield and Manchester, to “a sort of petrified forest” (1969, p. 11).

In addition to factors already discussed, Scandinavia was an important influence after the war on both architectural modernism and librarianship in Britain. Interest in Scandinavian design had been evident in Britain even before the war. For example, the Finnish designer Alvor Alto had exhibited his furniture in London in 1934. The success of modernism in Sweden showed that its adoption didn’t have to be painful (Powers, 2005, p. 23). Postwar British architects were strongly influenced and impressed by developments in Sweden, which had remained neutral in the Second World War and had continued to build. Designs in Sweden—often in “a romantic Modernist manner, sensitive to nature rather than formally rigorous”—were realized by good construction skills, deep democratic impulses, and the operation of a powerful welfare state (Powers, 2005, p. 231). Thomas Paulsson’s pioneering _Scandinavian Architecture_ was published in Britain in 1958. In the postwar years, at a time of austerity and imperial decline, monumental expression in architecture appeared out of place. Slimline, uncomplicated modernism, in contrast, seemed to

Figure 3. Manor Branch Library, Sheffield (1953), reference area. Reproduced with permission of Picture Sheffield, Sheffield Local Studies and Archives.
better fit the spirit of the age. The more “democratic” look of modernism also complemented the move to a welfare state, a socioeconomic arrangement that had been long-established in Sweden, which had long before adopted the contemporary style as its official architecture (Frampton, 1985, p. 262; Mattson & Wallenstein, 2010).

Design in Sweden, and Scandinavia more generally, also attracted interest from British librarians who, to their credit, had a close liaison with colleagues in Europe, and elsewhere, including the United States, to discover the latest developments in library design (Lionel McColvin, for example, prepared the IFLA standards on public library buildings in the 1950s) (Library Association, November 1959). The first volume of Bengt Hjelmqvist’s Swedish Public Libraries in Pictures was made available in English in 1956. Its reviewer in the Library Association Record was impressed by the evidence in the book of “lightness everywhere. . . . These libraries are modern and functional, but they are made pleasant and welcoming by a warm, homely touch” (Curwen, 1957). A second volume of Swedish Public Libraries in Pictures, covering libraries in medium-sized cities, was published in 1964 and made a big impact on the librarian Michael Dewe (1966, p. 318) as well as others, no doubt. British librarians also expressed an admiration for Danish libraries and library work (Dyrbye, 2008) as well as Scandinavian library systems more generally. Ottervik, Möhlenbrock, and Andersson’s Libraries and Archives in Sweden (1954) and Kirkegaard’s Public Libraries in Denmark (1950) were both brought to the attention of the readers of the Library Association Record (Library Association, 1955, pp. 255–245). Frank Gardner, Luton’s librarian, travelled to Sweden in 1953 to attend the first Anglo-Scandinavian Library Conference, held in Halmstad. He returned to write a glowing account of the interior design of the town’s new public library:

From the basement lecture rooms to the spacious Lending Library, with its stack free floor and wide gallery, from the electric fittings to the design of chairs and tables, there is hardly a feature that one could criticize from the point of view of comfort of the reader or labour-saving to staff and cleaners. To the stranger, it is like all modern Swedish libraries, free from that excessive “woodiness,” the sense of being in a menacing forest of bookstacks and furniture, that so disfigures British libraries. A periodical rack in Sweden is not the overpowering piece of petrified oak that it is in England; it is four light shelves bracketed to the wall—simple, cheap, and effective. Of course, the wall behind the shelves does not get dirty as it would in Britain. in Sweden you can have white walls, white surrounds to all the doors, bright curtains, gay chair coverings, in the certain knowledge that the walls will not be disfigured by dirty finger marks round the electric switches, the curtains will not need cleaning for ten years, and the chairs will not get greasy and stained. One is forced to the conclusion that the Swedes do not merely breathe a dirt-free atmosphere, there is less dirt around to get transferred to their clothes and hands. But even then—there is a les-
son in that at the side of every Swedish lending counter, there is a role of brown paper on a stand for readers to wrap their books. (Gardner, 1953, p. 354)

Three years later, Elizabeth Bowen gave readers of the Library Association Record an even fuller account of Halmstad Public Library, prefacing her description with the comment that “magnificent library buildings have been erected [in Sweden] in the last five years” (1956, p. 218). In 1966, Michael Dewe informed followers of the Library World that once there was a time “when the Swedes were busy learning from our enterprise and experiences . . . [but] now the position is reversed and we are eager to profit from them” (p. 315).

K. C. Harrison, along with many others, became a fan of the modern administrative systems and architectural lines of Scandinavian libraries. When librarian of Hendon, in 1959, he joined other librarians on a tour of Swedish libraries. He and his colleagues left Sweden with an overwhelmingly positive view of the libraries there. On his return, Harrison told the Times that Scandinavia had so much to show and teach us, with their adventurous architecture and the colourful, yet studied, informality of their interiors” (1960). Forty years later, in his memoirs, Harrison recalled how he and the other librarians who had joined him on the tour “had all been vastly impressed by the buildings we had seen, particularly by their interior planning and design. We left one city full of admiration for their library buildings, only to be even more impressed by the next example we saw” (Harrison, 2000, p. 126).

A similar tour was undertaken the following year, this time to Denmark where libraries seemed to him to be equally impressive. Back in Britain, Harrison wrote and spoke enthusiastically about the Scandinavian libraries he had seen. He even gave a talk for BBC Radio on the subject. In his British Public Library Buildings (1966), coauthored with S. G. Berriman, he stated that in library design, “Sweden continues to forge ahead. . . . Most of the Swedish structures are noted for their spaciousness and clever layout, while all of them attract through the genius of their design”; the Danes, he adds, “have shown a special interest in the need for flexibility in planning and, more than most, they have followed the American lead in this respect” (p. 17).

Harrison’s book Libraries in Scandinavia was published in 1961. A second edition was published in 1969, improved by the many further visits he had made to Scandinavia during the course of the 1960s (Harrison, 2000, pp. 123–135). The new edition included a trip to see the new public library in Gothenburg, opened in 1968 (Harrison, 1968b). Harrison’s Libraries in Scandinavia (1969) is a detailed account of library provision in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland. It is by no means confined to public libraries, nor their design. However, he does present many descriptions of new public libraries, which he considers to be innovative
and attractive, “unsurpassable in their charm, taste and variety” (p. 246). He reserves particular praise for Finnish public libraries, with their “half-gallery type of construction . . . graceful staircases up to the galleries, and . . . clever . . . employment of murals” (p. 247). For examples of the finest library buildings in Scandinavia, librarians there generally looked to Finland for the best examples, Harrison argues; moreover, he states that in this matter, Finland had given an “inspiring lead to the rest of the world” (p. 247).

The attraction that many librarians felt in the 1950s and 1960s toward Scandinavian libraries represented, in essence, a new orthodoxy in library design (Dewe, 1996). Their clean lines, uncluttered spaces, functional minimalism, and well-lit premises provided environments that seemed like a world apart from the tired Victorian, Edwardian and even interwar libraries that littered Britain’s urban landscapes, despite the efforts of the Luftwaffe to reduce their numbers. The influence of Scandinavian design was crucial to the development of public libraries—as well as a sense of renewal in the library movement more generally—in the 1960s. For example, the idea of the large gallery (as seen at Luton, Camden, and many other places), which unlike the nineteenth-century gallery, led somewhere, was imported essentially from Scandinavia and directly aped the plan of the Fredericksberg library in Copenhagen (Gardner 1969, p. 15). The widespread use of wood in library interiors—as at Eastbourne Central Library where Tasmanian oak was used in panelling and where columns were faced in sycamore (“Eastbourne’s,” 1964)—aped the naturalistic approach to interior design found in Scandinavia. A new public library, with many features illustrating a Nordic influence, including a mezzanine gallery housing a music library, was opened in Grimsby in 1968. Its Librarian, E. H. Trevitt, was said to be “a keen student of Scandinavian public library design” (Harrison, 1972, p. 196). Interest in Scandinavian architecture continued throughout the 1960s, as seen in the arrangement of Anglo-Scandinavian meetings and in the publication by the Library Association in 1971 of an English translation of library building plans and standards operating in Denmark (Plovgaard, 1971).

The need for change in library design, in keeping with lessons that could be learned from Scandinavia, was recognized not only by leading librarians of the day but also by their professional association, through which librarians began to consult the architectural profession more closely. In 1961 a joint committee was set up between the City and Borough Architects’ Society and a subcommittee of the Library Association (Library Association, March 1961). In the late 1950s, the Library Association began work on detailing public library building standards and requirements (Library Association, May 1959); and these were eventually published in a glossy booklet titled Public Library Buildings: The Way Ahead (Library Association, 1960). The advice it
gave was shot through with modernist credentials. Emphasis was laid on the importance of function: “Plan your interior first, and only when that is sure to function satisfactorily bother about the outside or the style.” Every building should have its own character and “not look like Woolworths or Littlewoods [retail stores] or the parish hall or the meat market or a big house that no one wanted to live in any longer or even like any other library but like its own self.” Interiors should exhibit “cleanliness, lightness, airiness, space,” and be “streamlined” and “efficient.” Both central and branch libraries should be sited where most people meet, in shopping areas and “traffic centres,” and where people could see them. Shops grew in value if a library was nearby, it was argued. Avoid “pompous facades” and flights of external steps. Open space—a courtyard, lawn, garden, in front and/or alongside will “add distinction and help to make the building stand out from its neighbours and improves the access of light and air.” Have plenty of large windows. Avoid point-lighting as this handicaps rearrangement; artificial lighting should be general. Any library building should “permit of re-arrangement of function internally,” and be capable of expansion in at least one direction (Library Association, May 1959; November 1959).

Generally speaking, these principles were adhered to in the flood of buildings that followed. The new designs were publicized en masse in the library press. Periodically, the Library Association Record devoted large amounts of space to new library buildings. In addition, a battery of books advertised the subject, for example: Berriman and Harrison’s British Public Library Buildings (1966); Ward’s Better Library Buildings (1969); Reynolds’ The Future of Library Buildings (1968); and Berriman’s Library Buildings 1967–1968 (1969). The London and Home Counties Branch of the Library Association, through the work of Herbert Ward (librarian of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets) in particular, was especially active in promoting new ideas in library design, as seen in its conferences and publications throughout the decade: Design in the Library (1960); Library Buildings: Design & Fulfilment (1967); New London Libraries (1969); and Barnard’s Library Buildings (1967). This publicity activity continued into the 1970s and beyond (e.g., Harrison 1987; Harrison 1990; Ward 1976; Ward & Odd 1973).

The new libraries of the 1960s were, according to Harrison “all attractive in their various ways” (1968a, p. 13). He celebrated the end of “the institutional look” and its replacement by “the clean, colourful and welcoming library, softened by carpeted browsing areas, curtains, plants and flowers, and by comfortable upholstery.” The heavy, cluttered feel of the pre-war public library interior was swept away by a new emphasis on greater space. Book stacks were spaced further apart to allow people to sit at tables or in easy chairs while browsing, giving libraries a “resi-
“NEW BEAUTIES”/BLACK

dential air” (Thompson, G. 1967, p. 47). Plastic tiles were an upgrade from the linoleum of yesteryear. Some libraries sported hardwood floors, although these could be noisy. The widespread use of plastic, transparent book covers allowed the new vibrantly colored dust jackets on hardcover books and the covers on paperbacks to be seen, thereby ridding libraries of the depressingly dull seas of shelving made up of mono-colored cloth or leather bindings (Kelly, 1977, p. 375). Libraries began to open coffee bars; thereby reviving the poly-purpose, social- and cultural-center tradition that had emerged in library design in the Victorian age. Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central Library, built in the late 1960s, was advertised as nothing less than a reflection of “the space age.” The Bourne Hall Library, Museum and Social Centre, in the London Borough of Epsom and Ewell, designed in the round, was said to be futuristic due to its resemblance to a flying saucer (Ward & Odd, 1973, pp. 25–27).

The car was a big influence on the planning of libraries, branch libraries in particular. Car and van ownership increased exponentially: 3.9 million in 1955; 5.6 million in 1960; 9.1 million in 1965; 11.8 million in 1970 (Marwick, 1982, p. 121). Public library readers were increasingly car owners who could travel several miles to the nearest service point. This meant that an area could be served by a smaller number of large branch libraries. This provided economies of scale for the library authority. A number of new branches were thus provided with car parking space; while the siting of service points near existing parking facilities was another option (a bonus being derived if these car parks also served shops, offices, or community services) (Longworth, 1972, p. 207). Efforts were also made to set branch libraries, in particular, in green settings (Thompson, G. 1967, p. 46). Increasingly, libraries were placed in complexes that housed other institutions of the welfare state. A children’s library in Pimlico, London, was opened in 1960 at the base of a seven-story block of public apartments. The Regents Park Library, North London, formed part of an estate of public apartment blocks built in 1967. These library-housing projects were undertaken in the knowledge that similar provision had been tested elsewhere. In the reconstructed Hansa quarter of Berlin in 1959, a low-rise library was built to counter the recently constructed high-rise apartment blocks. Its “intimacy of scale and horizontality of line . . . [was a ] welcome foil” to the tower blocks nearby. The library, designed by Werner Düttmann, was linked by a covered way to the local underground railway station and offered its readers an outside courtyard replete with deck-chairs, pools, plants, and sculptures (“Reconstructed Hansa Quarter,” 1959).

Borrowing from the area of operations research, librarians assisting in the design of libraries in the 1960s began to use flow charts to forecast the movements of staff, public, and materials; to estimate the size of areas required; and to reveal the relationships between these areas (Gardner,
In some quarters the library, in all its aspects, was seen as a “system” that could be planned according to systems-engineering principles (Flood, 1964). In an era of rapidly increasing use, it became apparent to librarians that buildings had to have “expandable and divisible spaces” (EDSSs), as in a factory or large department store (Gardner, 1969, p. 14).

Whereas some new, large, city-center public libraries were designed, or altered, to accommodate the move to subject specialization, there was a parallel move, especially in medium and small libraries, toward open-plan layouts, bringing down the barriers between the compartmentalized spaces of the past. Although the open plan had been developing generally in architecture for decades, in the library context the influence of Scandinavia, notwithstanding the example set by Sheffield’s Manor Branch Library noted above, was again important. Enthusiasm for open-plan libraries was strong in Scandinavia where, as the Danish librarian Sven Plovgaard explained on a visit to Britain in 1960, it was believed that sharply defined departments gave an impression of a heavily institutional library (though in very large libraries, he admitted, some departmentalization was inevitable). By contrast, argued Plovgaard, open interiors made for an informal, flexible, and efficient plan, any separate spacing needed being manufactured by careful arrangement of furniture and various moveable barriers (Plovgaard, 1960, pp. 20–21). When a new central library for Birmingham was being planned in the 1960s, the open-plan system was advocated because it was thought that it would “give the building a longer useful life by making it possible to adapt and re-distribute space to meet changes in requirements and activities as the years go by” (“£21/4 million,” 1963, p. 10). One of the most visible changes wrought by open plan was the erosion of barriers between adult and children’s services. Imaginative designing gave children at Eastbourne’s new central library “a distinct library of their own but [one] which is not actually separated from the main library”; the transition was said to have been “effected naturally and with the minimum of break” (“Eastbourne,” 1964, p. 520).

In terms of style, the new libraries of the 1960s, whether branch or central, were styled with an uncompromisingly modernist brush; or were “aggressively ‘modern’ in appearance,” to use Geoffrey Thompson’s phrase (1967, p. 44). For example, Blackhall Branch Library in Edinburgh (like many other small libraries of the 1960s, Seacroft Public Library on the outskirts of Leeds being another example) bore a striking resemblance to Mies van der Rohe’s German Pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona Exposition as well as his 1951 Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois (he went on, of course, to design the famous Martin Luther King Public Library in Washington DC, 1969) (figs. 4 and 5). Thompson divided the modernist libraries he’d seen into two groups: “square, white concrete and glass or transitional with some brick and more subtle use of windows” (1967, p. 45). In truth, there was greater variety than this, but also an overriding homogeneity
in the way that as a group most modernist libraries amounted to a major break from the past.

Modernist libraries often found themselves set alongside buildings clothed in historic styles. At the time, unlike in later years, there was little comment regarding any incongruity between modernist structures and the older buildings that surrounded them. The 1960s was full of modernist designs set in environments of great age and beauty. Such buildings in effect consciously subordinated themselves to historical circumstances, new designs deferring to existing structures but without surrendering their modernist credentials. A classic example of this was the siting of a new choir school immediately alongside St. Paul’s Cathedral in London (Webb, 1969, pp. 238–247). Writing with the experience of the 1960s fresh in his mind, Hugh Casson observed that: “Buildings . . . live together like people, with occasional quarrels, mild bickerings, constant compromise, respect for individuals, plus the odd flight of passion and fancy” (1976, p. 151).

A particularly striking new library design implanted into a highly traditional setting was that deployed in Jesmond, a Victorian suburb of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in 1963. The architect, Henry Faulkner Brown, presented a circular ground-floor lending library cut into a two-story block; to the rear were a reading room and staff areas. The steel-framed drum was set on a corner site surrounded by nineteenth-century, working-class terraced houses. The library’s main feature was a saw-toothed facade, the angles filled alternatively with ceiling-height windows and granite sets. This arrangement afforded both large quantities of natural light and increased shelf space. Overall, form and function were “subtly interwoven”; the library was said to have the appearance of being “outwardly a book supermarket, inwardly a well lit and attractive place to browse” (Webb, 1969, p. 192). The experience of the 1960s shows us today that old and new can exist in harmony, that the popular proposition that modern styles are alien to historic settings is overreactive; for there is a long tradition in Britain—not least the past insertion of Classical buildings alongside existing Gothic structures—of new styles being juxtaposed with previous styles (Warren, Worthington, & Taylor, 1998). As the Swedish diplomat Gunnar Hagglof, having served in London in the 1920s, wrote in 1972: “In England all past centuries are alive together with the present. In France people would be shocked if an eighteenth-century mansion was enlarged by a wing in modern style. In England they have never hesitated to mix styles” (p. 42).

Another library planned in historic surroundings was Coventry Central Library. The emphasis is on the word “planned” because Coventry Central Library, as conceptualized in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was never built. It was envisioned as part of the large-scale rebuilding of the center of Coventry, which had been devastated by a German air raid in November 1941. In April 1959, Coventry Corporation announced its plan
to build an innovative elliptically shaped central library at the cost of £390,000, and a model of the library and the regenerated square in which it was to be located was prepared by the City Architect’s Department (fig. 6). In the design, narrow vertical windows stretched the full height of the structure, from the ground to the flat roof. Polished aluminium mullions extended above the roof parapet, while above the ground floor, panes of glass sloped outward and inward, following the shape of the mullions. Inside, lit by circular roof lights, a ramp giving access to all departments spiralled around an open well (fig. 7), a device seen in structures as far apart geographically and culturally as the Vatican Museum in Rome (1932) and the Seattle Public Library (2004), but highly innovative at the time in the context of the previous history of the public library in Britain.

The proposed Coventry Central Library was depicted as the centerpiece of a revived city square. The square was also to include the new cathedral, designed by Basil Spence, eventually opened in 1962, which was set alongside the ruins of the cathedral raised to the ground in the 1941 air raid (“Unusual Library,” 1959). Controversially, Spence’s design was uncompromisingly modern. Moreover, he raised eyebrows in using the
ruins of the medieval church as a forecourt to his design (Rykwert, 1988, p. 262). Described as “unusual,” it was nonetheless predicted that the new modernist library, like Spence’s modernist cathedral, would give “shape and dignity” to the city square (“Unusual Library,” 1959). Other buildings in the square were a mix of old and new: the late Victorian, neo-Jacobean town hall; a new art gallery; and new offices housed in “an admirably workmanlike example of the modern, medium-sized office building” (“Coventry’s,” 1960). This clutch of buildings represented a bold attempt to create a new civic and cultural zone in the center of Coventry, but it ultimately proved overambitious and most of it was never built.13 The 1959 plan for a new Coventry Central Library, including the historic setting in which the structure was to be set, was bold and imaginative. Moreover, it is intriguing that the plan for it was unveiled at a time when Spence was finishing his design for the new Coventry Cathedral; for the design of Coventry’s “library that never was” bears a remarkably close resemblance to his design for Hampstead (now Swiss Cottage) Public Library, North London, opened in 1964.
Throughout the 1960s, librarians continued to push for improvements to the physical spaces in which they delivered their services. In 1968 the London and Home Counties Branch of the Library Association prepared a feasibility study on the future of library buildings (London and Home Counties Branch of the Library Association, 1968). The study advised the establishment of a £40,000 research program, funded by central government, to “examine and evaluate the trends which may influence future development of the various library services and formulate criteria that will be of assistance to those who may be responsible for the planning and design of the buildings that would be needed to accommodate such services.” It also suggested the establishment of a Library Buildings Information Centre “through which information on all matters relating to the planning and design of library buildings could be disseminated.” However, partly due to a downturn in the economy in the late 1960s, no such research program of information center materialized (A. S. Gann [Department of Education] to H. D. Barry, personal communication, March 27, 1969).

CASE STUDY: HOLBORN CENTRAL LIBRARY
At the end of the 1950s, although containing enclaves of deprivation, Holborn was a prosperous area of central London. The London Borough of
Holborn (later, in 1965, absorbed into the larger, new London Borough of Camden) was one of the wealthiest local authorities in the country, its coffers swelled by the taxes charged on thriving local businesses, many in the financial and legal service sectors. The borough contained a large number of commercial and government offices (which brought thousands of commuting workers into the area each day) as well as the historic Inns of Court where lawyers practiced and trained in large numbers. Library provision to the west of the borough, where these institutions and day visitors were situated, was inadequate to meet the demands of what was a relatively large and sophisticated readership. The Holborn library authority was the last library authority in England to abandon closed-access, in 1947. This conservatism is ironic, given the fact that the new central library, which the borough began planning in the mid-1950s and which it opened in 1960, became one of the most forward-looking, iconic, and influential library designs of the 1960s. Holborn Central Library inaugurated what was to become the major period of postwar planning in library buildings. Even before it was built, the Scandinavian-influenced Holborn Central Library attracted a great deal of interest, one example of its impact being the use made of its design as the basis for the new central library in Exeter (Games, 1979, p. 483).

Holborn Central Library’s architect was Sydney Cook. In 1937 he had joined the Architectural Department at Luton Borough Council and during the war had been given the responsibility for repairing bomb damage. In 1945 he took control of housing at the Bournville Trust in Birming-
ham. Two years later, at only thirty-seven, he was appointed architect and
director of housing for Holborn Borough Council. When Camden Bor-
ough Council was formed in 1965, he became its chief architect. While
in this position, he oversaw the construction of a large number of un-
compromisingly modern buildings. These included—as an antidote to
the modernist tower block—small-scale, low-rise, staggered-level, white-
rendered, public-housing estates, which attracted considerable interna-
tional attention, as did his design for Holborn Central Library (Games,
1979). Before devising the Holborn design, Cook spent time in Sweden,
which he knew had some of the best modern libraries in Europe. He later
adapted ideas he found there to British requirements. Cook travelled to
Sweden in 1957 and noted how despite the impressive monumentality
of Asplund’s Stockholm Public Library (1931), it was Alvo Alto’s Viipuri
Library (Finland 1934) that had made the biggest impact on Scandina-
vian, and especially Swedish, library design (Cook, 1969, p. 42). After this,
“the way ahead became much clearer.” Cook recalled in 1969 that “one
certainly became clearly and immediately aware that the central theme of
the library [building type] was concerned with books and the flexible use
of space, not self-conscious detailing of the building, mingled with gifts of
furniture, memorial busts, etc.—gone were the days of tiptoeing and whis-
kers. These were real places which had to be experienced” (Cook, 1969,
p. 43).

Holborn Central Library, built and equipped at a cost of £250,000 and
covering over 39,000 square feet, incorporated many new ideas in library
planning.15 As noted above, the library’s catchment area was no backwa-
ter, serving as it did, in addition to a residential population of 22,000,
an extremely large daytime “influx population” of around a quarter of a
million commuters. So the new library had to be large, functional, and
attractive. Unusual, Holborn Central Library was housed on four floors,
a feature of the design conditioned by the narrowness of the space—a
vacant bomb-damaged site—available for building. Public elevators were
thus an essential ingredient in the design. The library was flanked on
both sides by party walls of existing buildings. To the rear of the site was a
borough assembly hall, to which access needed to be given even when the
library was closed. The foyer entrance that gave access to both the lend-
ing department and the upper floors was thus fitted with a metal grill that
could be lowered outside of library hours; while the locking of the door at
the top of the stairs leading down to the basement children’s department
could similarly secure that part of the library.

The rear elevation was stepped in accordance with residential “day-
lighting” regulations, protecting access to light in the buildings nearby.
The library had a rear public aspect, from the mews behind the building.
However, it was the front elevation, on the busy thoroughfare of Theo-
balds Road and opposite the green space of Gray’s Inn, that captured the
greater part of the public gaze (fig. 8). At ground-floor level the facade of Holborn Central Library was not particularly open—windows were placed above the shelves inside, aping the arrangement in the Viipuri children’s department—but this complemented the rustication of the ground floor of the Georgian houses next door, and generally, in terms of lines and window positions, there was “compliance with Georgian architectural proportions” (Sidwell, 1967, p. 29). Lack of openness in the lower facade was to a degree compensated by a pleasant and inviting entrance. A canopy over the entrance steps and door sloped upward in a jaunty fashion; it was flanked by blue microtiled columns, and above it glass bricks were installed to provide natural light in the entrance hall. Entry to the library was gained up a low flight of steps, in accordance with the raised entries to the Georgian houses, a device that facilitated the construction of a half basement. The library too had extensive basement space.

The entrance hall was illuminated by display cases on the party wall. The opposite wall was formed by a glass screen, which offered a view of a small interior garden and the lending space beyond. The lending collection of 50,000 books was accommodated on the ground floor and in a spacious mezzanine gallery (fig. 9). Easy chairs and low tables encouraged browsing. A readers’ adviser desk was centrally located. The circulation desk was fitted with automatic key punches for the punched-card system of book issue and return. This would speed up processing at the busy lunch-time period when hundreds of office workers (mostly) descended on the library in only a short period of time. Natural and artificial light were amply supplied, as was the case throughout the library. The front wall of reinforced concrete was non-load-bearing and was cantilevered out from the first row of internal rectangular columns, which although infringing the purity of the lending library’s open plan, introduced an interesting profile to the ceiling of the lending room, in the form of nontraditional caps, and to the shelving, with each decoratively microtiled column acting as the end of book presses placed at right-angles to the front wall in the tradition of the collegiate and cathedral library (it seemed that the modern reader could be trusted to occupy the resultant alcoves without “supervision”). The columns and bookstack alcoves were continued in the same fashion in the reference library above. The use of columns represented a modular solution to space allocation. In addition, counters and all staff enclosures were constructed on a modular basis and so were easily readjustable (Sidwell, 1967, p. 33).

The split-level reference library occupied the entire accommodation on the first floor. The entrance was fitted with a photoelectric cell to record the number of people using the reference services. The room was furnished with seventy-three individual study tables, each with its individual reading lamp, and nine self-contained study carrels. The only immediately recognized blemish in the design was the height of the reference
room’s reading desks, which were three inches higher than the British Standard; meaning that readers were not as comfortable in their reading and writing positions as they might have been. The areas around desks were carpeted to reduce noise. In further efforts to reduce noise, the quick-reference collection was housed in the reference room’s entrance foyer, and floor-to-ceiling double-glazed windows were fitted on the south side of the room to reduce sound emanating from the busy Theobalds Road below. To reduce glare, the view of the green expanse of Gray’s Inn Garden through these windows was to a degree compromised by the hanging of see-through nylon curtains, although these could be opened and closed speedily by means of electrical, mechanical control. Photocopy machines and microfilm readers were supplied. The reference stock amounted to 13,000 volumes including a specialist business and economics collection (of 3,000 volumes and over a hundred periodicals) housed on a sublevel room off the reference room. This sublevel also housed the local-studies collection.

As a throwback to the Victorian age, the children’s library was located in the basement. Innovatively, however, it featured an aquarium and a small theater for storytelling and other children’s activities. Colored, upholstered stools supplemented the appropriately sized chairs and tables. Adjoining the children’s library was the periodicals room, with easy chairs
and low tables for newspaper readers (over thirty newspapers and more than eighty periodicals were provided).

A gramophone library, equipped with the kind of listening cubicle popular in record shops, was housed on the second floor (gramophone records were not at first made available to all, only to local groups organizing recitals). The second floor also housed various staff workrooms. On the third floor a spacious hall, capable of accommodating 250, was provided for gramophone recitals, lectures, and other cultural activities. Off the hall could be found a tea bar and an exhibition space of works by local artists. The size of the hall could be reduced to the required size by the operation of a mechanical screen with folding wings. French windows punctuating entirely glazed north and south walls of the hall allowed access to terraces, which the public could use during intervals or on other appropriate occasions.

Great attention to detail was paid in making the running of the library efficient. The architect designed special trolleys that would carry the books from the circulation desk back to the shelves. The trolleys were given removable trays that could fit beneath the ledges of the control desk. Returned books were placed on the trays, which were then placed on the trolleys. Fitments, furniture, and space were designed with the maximum flexibility in mind. All shelves and partitions were demountable, and underfloor heating, replacing radiators, both saved space and allowed for the freer positioning of furniture. The architect recognized
that flexibility was essential as the premises would eventually need to be extended, while changes in library administration and patron would inevitably necessitate new layouts. The flexibility of the Holborn design was demonstrated when in 1965 the Borough of Holborn was absorbed into the new Borough of Camden, and the need for administrative accommodation disappeared overnight; the spaces freed were turned into a large music department for the new borough simply by taking down demountable office partitions, the only clue to the transformation being tell-tale marks on lino-tiles, and unusually placed light switches and electrical sockets (Sidwell, 1969, p. 38).

Like the book trolleys, the bookshelves—in wood and metal and with adjustable heights and built-in lighting—were designed by the architect (he also custom designed the catalog cabinets, though these soon fell redundant after the introduction of a computer-generated bound paper catalog in April 1965). Each book press had white plastic shelf facings and white facia boards against which the raised black plastic lettering used for guides stood out clearly; and each was fitted with a fluorescent strip light. A large amount of effort went into the custom design of the bookshelves. Many visits were made to see “mock-ups” in companies tendering for the shelving contract. Detailed thought went into deciding on the optimum spacing between shelves and between stacks, the look of title and classification label holders, appropriate artificial lighting, and how to make them portable (Cook, 1969, p. 43). This attention to detail belies the image of modernist designs as cheap and shoddy. Indeed, materials used at Holborn were far from tacky. For example, walls of the public stairwell were finished in light wood paneling, while the use of teak treads on the stairs, though requiring regular resealing, gave “a welcome sense of warmth” to even a confined, functional area (Sidwell, 1967, p. 32). Indeed, the building has stood the test of time, even if some of its services (most notably the substantial reference service) have been relocated to other service points and a degree of physical renovation is required. Holborn Central Library was an important departure in public library design in the UK—the first of its kind. To use a horse breeding analogy, its pedigree was by modernizing social and economic and library planners out of elegant and functional Scandinavian architecture.

Conclusion

Just as the 1960s was not confined to the years 1960–69—for its zeitgeist began to form well before the decade commenced and continued well after it finished—the roots of 1960s public library buildings can be found in the 1950s and their legacy can be felt even today. The long 1960s was a watershed for public library design in Britain. The styles employed marked a distinct break with the historic styles that characterized public library
design before 1939. The modernism of 1960s libraries resulted from a variety of library and nonlibrary factors. Library influences included ideas extracted from Scandinavian library design and the progressive ideas on library services that many librarians began to readily embrace. Nonlibrary influences included the gathering enthusiasm for modernism in connection with virtually all building types. They also included the wider changes with which the 1960s have been associated. The abiding changes of the decade might be seen, on the one hand, as social: the emergence of an antiestablishment hedonism and permissiveness, as well as cultural openness and experimentation. On the other hand, primacy might be given to the 1960s as essentially an age of economic, technological, and welfarist optimism and modernization.

A spectrum can thus be envisaged, ranging, it might be suggested, from hippy culture at one extreme, to sober, technocratic management and planning at the other. Now, if one were asked to place the decade’s new public library buildings at a point on this spectrum, then that point would certainly be closer to the spectrum’s “serious” end. This is because the historic technical, bureaucratic, and “scientific management: nature of librarianship, which combined naturally with the enduring notion of the library “as machine,” made the fashionable architectural modernism of the day the ideal vehicle for shaping a progressive postwar public library. But this is not to say that a marriage seemingly made in heaven—between functional architecture and the technocratic and mechanical dimension of library work—was not intruded upon by cultural and social factors; for the opening up of social mores and significant cultural change surely found deep reflection in the revolutionary designs employed for public libraries. Public libraries of the 1960s were not “hippie libraries,” but in their radically different look they did somehow chime with the radical cultural shifts of the decade.16

That library planners bought into modernism so readily is not a surprise: it was the aesthetic orthodoxy of the day. In 1940, the architect J. M. Richards argued that nineteenth-century architecture had largely been “an academic exercise in applied ornament” (p. 9). Architects bent on historicism, he went on, had “got out of touch with life”; whereas modern architecture attempted to reflect real needs (p. 10). In 1963 the social commentator Harry Hopkins described how in the 1950s, with the advent of new leisure opportunities like the un-English espresso bar, the “fog” of social and cultural conservatism began to lift. The aesthetic regeneration of the urban landscape was vivid and impressive: “A new streetscape was shaping. Everywhere one looked the new architectural language, patiently a language as universal as blue jeans and the juke-box and ballistic missiles, asserted its idiom, stark and strong, over time-honoured observances of cornice and moulding, pediment and column” (Hopkins, 1963, p. 459).
However, the triumph of high modernism was to be short-lived. Negative reactions to it were inevitable. They began with the Betjemanesque conservation movement, and proceeded through to the era of postmodernity. As early as 1963, some were viewing the “much vaunted new architectural materials, the vast gleaming curtain-walls of glass and aluminium, the alloys and the plastics, bright, sterile, precision machined . . . [as] at the best ungentlemanly, at the worst brutal and shameless” (Hopkins, 1963, pp. 472–473). By the mid-1970s, if not earlier, there was a crisis of confidence in modernist architecture and its architects. Technical and aesthetic criticisms of modernism were plentiful: the inadequacy of flat roofs, not conducive to weatherproofing in a British climate; dampness generated by the massing of concrete; poor insulation arising from the large-scale use of glass; the in-built dangers in terms of fire risk; high alumina cement failures; and the overplay of New Brutalism (Blake, 1974, 1977; Elwall, 1996; MacEwen, 1974). A major turning point was the collapse in 1968 of an entire corner of Ronan Point, a high-rise public housing tower block in London’s East End (even though pure modernists disowned such prefabricated, “system-built” structures).

Modernism still receives a bad press. This also applies to modernist public libraries. In a recent study of public library buildings commissioned by the author and undertaken by the Mass-Observation Archive, modernist designs of the long-1960s came in for strong criticism from ordinary members of the public. Concrete and glass libraries of the 1960s were seen by various contributors to the study as “soulless” and “boring and functional.” Basil Spence’s 1964 iconic, modernist Swiss Cottage library in North London was seen as interesting but “anonymous” (Mass-Observation Archive, 2006).

An alternative view of 1960s libraries was supplied by the historian of libraries and adult education Thomas Kelly who believed that “not all were aesthetically pleasing, but some achieved real elegance and distinction” (1977, p. 370). Prefacing a review of a new library building in his journal in 1960, the editor of the Library Association Record announced that “at last, it seems, the library service of this country is going to have room to breathe.” He praised the “new insistence on informality” encapsulated in new library designs and was thankful that the “plague of the 1930s,” represented by “polished natural oak . . . [and] hard chairs and display units built like battleships” had been eradicated (“Editorial,” 1960). New public library buildings in 1960s Britain, beginning with the groundbreaking Holborn Central Library, were a fresh departure, emblematic of a time of social, cultural, economic, and technological hope. Moreover, aspects of their modernism have been influential beyond the period of the long-1960s and into the postmodern era: not least in terms of the open plan, the modular arrangement of space, the widespread use of glass (technically now more conducive to efficient insulation), and a lighter feel to
interiors. However, perhaps the most important legacy of 1960s modernist libraries is their social symbolism. Architectural modernism was intrinsically a social architecture. Social emancipation was implicit in modernism, the aim of which was to build the “just city” (Powers, 2007, p. 53). Emancipation and social justice, along with universalism and equality of opportunity that the welfare state promised, were also at the heart of the postwar public library as it worked to throw off its stifling and controlling Victorian heritage and image.

NOTES
1. A photograph of the demonstration is held in the Local Studies Department of Kensington Central Library.
2. Marwick (1998) examined the cultural revolution of the “long 1960s,” from the late ‘50s to the early ‘70s, and itemizes (pp. 16–20) its key characteristics: the formation of new subcultures and movements, and their widespread toleration; an outburst of cultural individualism and entrepreneurialism (from the impulse to “do one’s own thing” to the opening of trendy cafes, bookshops, boutiques, and restaurants); a vibrant youth culture; advances in communication and other technologies (from satellite telephone and television transmission to the long-playing record); unprecedented international exchange and travel; massive improvements in material life (the “mod con” society); upheavals in class and family relationships, and the beginnings of a multicultural society; sexual permissiveness and greater openness in personal relationships; new modes of self-presentation, and emancipation from old canons of fashion; a participatory and uninhibited popular culture (fronted by rock music); original and striking developments in intellectual thoughts (from Foucault to pop art); new concerns of civil liberties.
4. The concept of architectural functionalism appeared in the interwar years, its first consequential use, according to Banham (1980, p. 320), being in Alberto Sartoris’s Gli elementi dell’architettura funzionale (1932).
5. Pepper was drawing here on Le Corbusier’s description and appreciation of the apartment blocks Highpoint I and II, Highgate, North London, designed in the 1930s by Berthold Lubetkin’s firm Tecton. The design was applied to early high-rise housing in Britain after 1945 (Simon Pepper, personal communication, January 4, 2011).
6. Although the Queen’s opening of Newcastle-upon-Tyne’s new central library in 2009 should be noted.
7. Glass screens and plate glass doors enabling readers “to see at a glance all the services the library offers” was also employed in the Castlemilk District Library in Glasgow in the early 1960s (Glasgow Libraries Department, 1961).
8. This admiration was ongoing throughout the 1960s; see Jones and Medlock (1970).
9. However, as early as the late 1950s, it was argued that galleries were underused and so lending facilities should simply operate on one floor; see A. Thompson (1963a, p. 270).
10. Libraries in Luton, Doncaster and many other places were indeed sited in or next to shopping centers, a trend also seen in the United States; see “Shopping for books,” 1959.
11. For example, see the following issues and sections of the Library Association Record: 62(11) (November 1960), 345–366; 64(12) (December 1962), 455–486; 65(12) (December 1963), 439–529; 66(12) (December 1964), 501–573.
14. My thanks to Andrew Mealey, Senior Librarian, Coventry Heritage and Arts for his correspondence of 1 July 2010 on this issue.
15. The design of the library was presented and discussed in a variety of architectural, library, and popular journals. The commentary that follows is based on the following: “Bright for bibliophiles,” 1961; “Fabulous fact and fiction,” 1965; “Holborn Central Library,” 1960,

16. My thanks to Mary Carroll for suggesting the term “hippie libraries.”

17. The term “New Brutalism” was first coined in 1953 as a description of the work of Peter and Alison Smithson, and in particular their design for Smithdon Secondary School in Hunstanton, Norfolk. The design made use of heavy, black-painted steel; glass was set against steel without subframes, in defiance of thermal prudence; and plumbing and other services were exposed, almost as a form of decoration. See Powers (2007, p. 98).

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