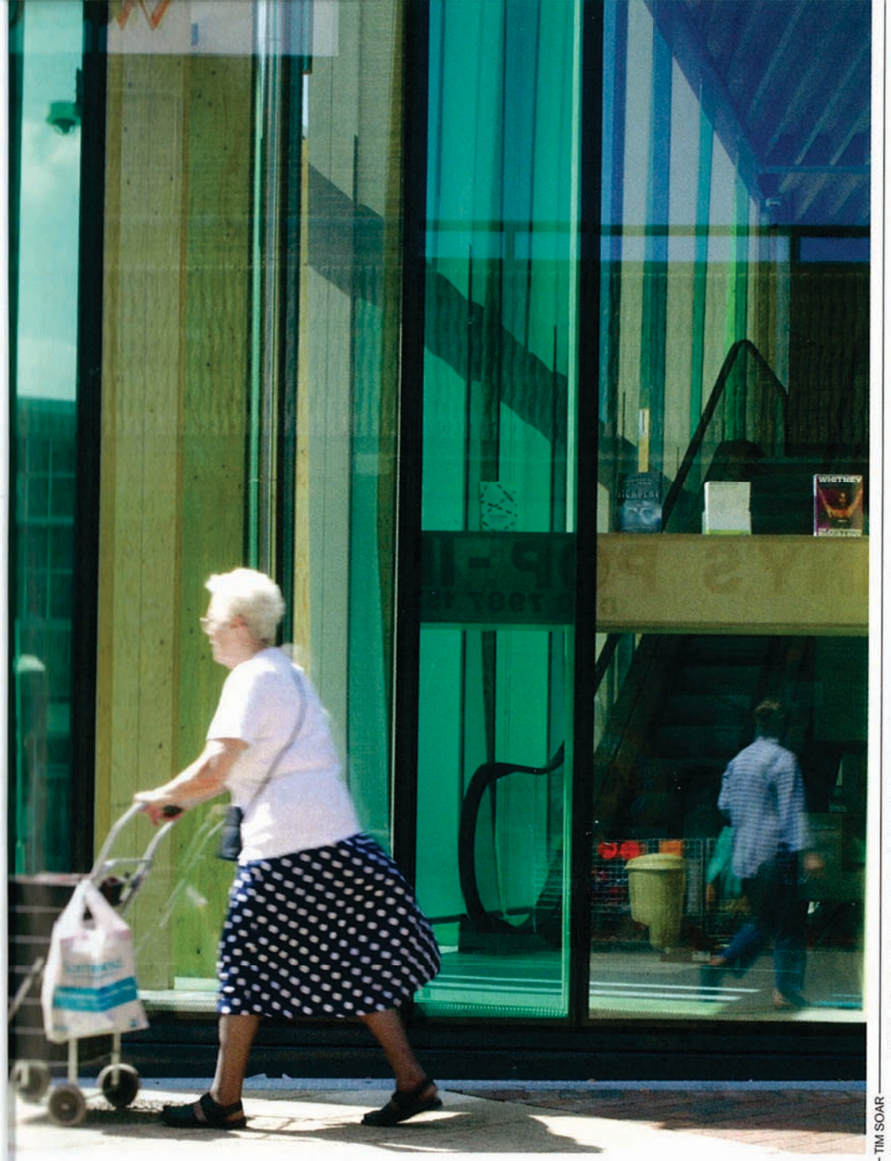
AJ WRITING PRIZE RUNNER UP

REVISITING THE IDEA STORES

HANA LOFTUS

Walking down Whitechapel High Street, you have enough to do in dodging the stallholders and shoppers in one of the capital's busiest street markets. The market crowd reflects the density of inhabitation in the surrounding streets; generations – largely Bangladeshi – crammed together into subdivided terraced houses and council flats.

This density continues for miles to the east, and it hardly needs mentioning that it comes with severe deprivation – a New Labour term that, with 'social exclusion' and it's cousin 'social mobility', attempted to refocus the poverty debate. The architecture along the way recalls previous eras of civic building in an area that has always been marked by social ills. Watney Street Market and the Lansbury Estate are just two of the early welfare state projects whose quality can still be sensed, despite years of neglect. Passmore Edwards Libraries, the name proudly inscribed on their terracotta frontages, are epitaphs to the improving philanthropic ideals of the Victorian age.



TIM SOAR

In a moment of revived self-belief around the new millennium, the state conceived a new role for the public library as the central institution to pull people out of exclusion and into mobility. It would be a hub for the delivery of services and information, to pay your council tax, claim benefits or find a job, but also a place for children to study, the under-skilled to remedy their inadequate education, the immigrant to find an English language class, the overweight to be encouraged into exercise classes or healthy eating groups. Tower Hamlets, the most deprived of the London boroughs, seized the concept with enthusiasm, and the 'Idea Store' was born.

The 1999 strategy brims with optimism. 'The Idea Stores will be the first place that people will go to for information about any aspect of their lives… a focus for the local community, a place where people can come for a coffee, to meet friends, to take a break from shopping and to enjoy the many facilities. They will be attractive to look at and pleasant to be in, using the best of modern architectural and graphic design.'

The choice of sites was critical: in the heart of shopping streets, they were to occupy prime real estate. Focus groups concluded, 'people wanted them on the high street, where they could pop in while shopping', and one of the project's commissioners said, 'It aimed to use architecture as a tool to build new malls of learning among high street brands.' This blend of culture, commerce, and coffee in a sleek architectural wrap epitomise the urban renaissance strategies of the time, and in David Adjaye, a young rising star who described his practice as 'the Robin Hood of architecture – we make things grittier for rich people and glossier for poor people,' Tower Hamlets found their ideal match.

Adjaye perfectly absorbed the rhetoric of the Idea Store, describing the building as a 'marketplace' and 'a glamorous place that's open to everybody; an accessible civic building.' He said: 'There is no front and there is no back. It's like a billboard: it projects, it has electronic messaging, it has video walls. It has an egalitarian facade. If they decide to go and read a book, then I'm really thrilled. But if they decide to go and play a computer game, I'm thrilled too.' The Idea Stores he designed for Whitechapel High Street and Chrisp Street Market in Poplar, east London, opened in 2004 and 2005 in a blaze of publicity and awards.

Back on Whitechapel High Street, a jutting cliff of coloured glass hangs over the market. The glass is stained in greens and blues, not quite translucent enough to see into from outside, but polished and perfect above the ramshackle stalls whose tarpaulins share its colour palette. The Idea Store logotype, a sadly clunky piece of graphic design, can be read from a distance, but nothing else betrays what may be within. The store is higher and strikingly different than the jerry-built Victoriana around it. Its full-height glazing recalls the corporate world of the City down the road, but the colour shifts this visual reference to something new. Adjaye said 'I wanted the Idea Store to be architecture that people drive into town for; or like a mall, clean and glass and glossy.' >>

Above The Idea Store's brightly coloured facade

An escalator rises from the pavement into the belly of the overhanging glass facade. A deliberate reference to a shopping centre or department store, it presents the ultimate route out of deprivation and wet pavement into the fold of a success culture; the social aspirant not required to walk or climb, or even open a door. Effortlessly, perhaps almost accidentally ('but I thought this was New Look!') you would be transported into a world where everything was possible. Where the Victorian library's message was of hard study to reach a higher plane of civilisation, here, as in Tate Modern, the escalator makes learning as accessible as a shop, tube station or airport lounge.

Inside, the glass is supported by deep timber framing, lacquered to retain its yellow-orange glow. The combination of timber and seamless glass embodies a fusion of the corporate and the community – the Idea Store concept translated into texture. The interior lacks the grandiosity suggested by the scale of the external facades. Relatively low ceilings and a compact floor plan with an efficient central core means that floor plates appear subdivided, with the narrower areas given over to computer terminals. Floors are rubber – not terrazzo, as the Victorian or 1950s library might be – and furniture is plywood or dark stained MDF. Exposed concrete beams and stairs complete a toned-down punk aesthetic, now the norm for community interiors.

The Chrisp Street Store is a variant on the theme. It is a pavilion, rather than part of a street frontage as the Whitechapel store is, a two-storey building in the centre of the shopping square of the Lansbury estate. The tinted glass is a welcome slickness among the jumble of shopfronts along the battered concrete frames of the estate. The main floor lies on top of an existing single storey of shops, while cladding wraps the structure to maintain an illusion of a continuous two-storey building. It has a strong presence on Commercial Road, the artery running to the south of the site.

> The stores now appear more corporate than when they opened

Where does the Idea Store project stand eight years on? In the 'refreshed' vision for the Idea Stores produced by Tower Hamlets in 2009, the sweeping statements are replaced with pages of evidence post-justifying a shrunken remit. Of the seven anticipated stores, it is now accepted that the completed four will only be supplemented by secondary provision on a small scale. Even the vision for the Whitechapel Store has not been completed. There is no video wall projecting the cultural content into the public realm, let alone the second £1 million billboard envisaged for the Royal London hospital facade opposite.

Revisited, Adjaye's Idea Stores are still good buildings. Despite their reference to corporate architecture, they are civic landmarks to which locals refer with pride, and their smooth, prismatic forms have kept their sheen and sense of quality, even beauty. The richness of the coloured glass stands out from subsequent, lesser imitations of Adjaye's language; the endless barcode buildings clad in contrived arrangements of solid and glazed panels. The overhang of the Whitechapel Store is a confident element of the street scene, dominant in a way that civic buildings should be.

But some elements no longer work. Most poignantly, the escalator – emblem of the mobility that the Idea Store was intended to enable – is boarded off for security reasons. You have to enter on the ground floor, as the disabled or those with pushchairs always had to do, and wait for a lift or climb the (slightly pokey) stairs. The interior shows evidence of wear and tear; the building has, to the credit of the concept and the design, been heavily used.

ABOUT THE IDEA STORE

Whitechapel Idea Store opened in 2005 and was nominated for the 2006 Stirling Prize. The Chrisp Street Idea Store opened in 2004. Both were designed by David Adjaye.

Buildings always outlive the spirit of the time in which they were created and the Idea Stores represent a moment where the market and the state seemed able to work together to regenerate impoverished inner cities. The architecture of the Idea Stores fused the civic and the commercial, but their imitators are almost all in the commercial rather than the public sector. In borrowing so heavily from the glass-clad corporate language in order to stand apart from civic styles of previous eras, Adjaye's motifs would always be translated too easily back to the commercial realm, but it is disappointing that the state's moment as an architectural patron proved so short-lived.

The stores now suffer from this co-opting of their visual language, and appear more corporate now than when they were first created. Perversely, in today's climate it may be that civic and corporate architecture can no longer draw so close and the failure of the market may mean that the civic needs to be much further differentiated, oppositional rather than aligned.

Architecture doesn't, alone, solve social problems and the idea that a facade can be 'egalitarian' shows a confusion between form and content. But the visual language of public buildings is an important statement on the value that the state places in a community. In today's context of austerity, a belief in the value of good civic architecture is in short supply. The Idea Stores should be celebrated for their bold contribution to the public realm, and as physical reminders that beauty can and should be fostered in the most difficult of places.

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