



Improbable

*A Visual Journey to the
World's Most Unusual Libraries*

Alex Johnson

Libraries

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A Visual Journey to the World's Most Unusual Libraries

Alex Johnson

How do you use your local library? Does it arrive at your door on the back of an elephant? Can it float down the river to you? Or does it occupy a phone booth by the side of the road?

Public libraries are a cornerstone of modern civilization, yet like the books in them, libraries face an uncertain future in an increasingly digital world. Undaunted, librarians around the globe are thinking up astonishing ways of reaching those in reading need, whether by bike in Chicago, boat in Laos, or donkey in Colombia. *Improbable Libraries* showcases a wide range of unforgettable, never-before-seen images and interviews with librarians who are overcoming geographic, economic, and political difficulties to bring the written word to an eager audience. Alex Johnson charts the changing face of library architecture, as temporary pop-ups rub shoulders with monumental brick-and-mortar structures, and many libraries expand their mission to function as true community centers. To take just one example: the

open-air Garden Library in Tel Aviv, located in a park near the city's main bus station, supports asylum seekers and migrant workers with a stock of 3,500 volumes in sixteen different languages.

Beautifully illustrated with two hundred and fifty color photographs, *Improbable Libraries* offers a breathtaking tour of the places that bring us together and provide education, entertainment, culture, and so much more. From the rise of the egalitarian Little Free Library movement to the growth in luxury hotel libraries, the communal book revolution means you'll never be far from the perfect next read.

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INTRODUCTION

DOES YOUR LIBRARY arrive at your home on an elephant? Perhaps it floats down the river? Is it in your local telephone box, rail station, park – or even in your own back garden?

Librarians have a long history of overcoming geographic, economic and political challenges to bring the written word to an eager audience, they continue to live up to that reputation today, despite the rapid, sweeping changes in how we read and share books in the 21st century. *Improbable Libraries* explores this new library revolution, along with the work of the many architects, designers, educators, artists and activists who are breaking the mould to bring the written word to people everywhere.

Part of the change is architectural. Instead of the stately monolithic structure in the centre of town with which we are most familiar, your local library might now be anything from a temporary pop-up to an imaginative architectural masterpiece resembling a shelf of books or the inside of an iceberg. Meanwhile, ingenious architects and designers are transforming private home and hotel libraries with outdoor seating, flat-pack technology – and even hammocks.

The shift is also technological, reflecting the increased use of mobile apps and digital technology to bring books to a wired world, although many of the libraries in this book still rely on people lugging traditional print books around. But there is also a sense that the very concept of a library is evolving: many of these libraries operate on principles that differ fundamentally from the workings of most traditional public and university libraries. Some, for example, have no membership or

BiblioTaptap

The third bookmobile in the BiblioTaptap project in Haiti was paid for via a crowdfunding campaign. The project name comes from Haiti's 'taptaps', the ubiquitous shared taxis.

The simple truth is that, like Roald Dahl's character Matilda, people just like going to libraries. Indeed, going to the library is like getting a pay rise, according to a survey conducted in 2014 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the UK. The survey, which attempted to quantify how happy various different activities make us, showed that while dancing and swimming nearly always cheer us up, so does going to the library. So much, in fact, that the uplift it gives people is apparently equivalent to getting a £1,359 pay rise!

This book is a celebration of the fact that libraries still enjoy a central place in our society, and that 'librarians' will always beat the odds to bring books to readers. From the rise of the egalitarian international Little Free Library movement (motto: 'Take a book, return a book') to the growth in luxury hotel libraries; whether you're at a subway station in Chile, on a riverboat in Laos, in a yurt in Mongolia, or without ever leaving home at all – you can still, happily, find just the right book waiting to be read.

Occupy library

The People's Library, set up in New York City as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, was destroyed in a police raid but has inspired similar libraries at other 'Occupy' protests in the US and Europe.





Library at the Station

The Haarlem train station library, aimed at commuters, is partly inspired by similar library projects on Dutch beaches. The goal of organizers ProBiblio is to extend the concept to ten stations across the national railway network.



Passport to literacy

Jennifer Donsky, the Philadelphia Free Library's public technology coordinator, describes the library at the Philadelphia International Airport as a 'passport to literacy, learning and inspiration', whatever its readers' final destinations.



Camel

The Mongolian Children's Mobile Library carries books to nomadic herding communities and remote areas of the Gobi desert. Founder Jambyn Dashdondog has written more than 70 children's books. The project also advises parents in encouraging a love of reading in the children.



While some telephone boxes have been turned into libraries, this Little Free Library in Texas takes the opposite approach.



Like Dr Who's Tardis, this Little Free Library in Illinois holds far more on the inside than appears from the outside.

OPPOSITE
Although most Little Free Libraries are installed in front gardens, others are placed in public spaces, such as this example in a park in Iowa.





From the ground up

This library for deaf children in Muyinga, northern Burundi, was constructed from local vernacular materials such as pressed-earth bricks made on site. The continuous cross-ventilation in the elevated interior helps to guide the humid and hot air away.



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE

Among its most striking features are huge hammocks made of hand-knotted sisal rope, the product of one of many local micro-industries that bloomed during the project. An elder in Muyinga who was an expert in traditional rope-making harvested, twisted and wove the local sisal plants on site, and taught four other workers these skills; they now use them to earn a living.



The University of Aberdeen library serves 14,000 students, and houses more than 250,000 books and manuscripts. Its 15,500 m² (51,000 ft²) of floor space offer 1,200 reading areas, as well as archives, historical collections and a rare-books reading room.





Tree house, Tea House

The Tea House, a private residence in the back garden of Archi-Union's Shanghai offices, features a first-floor library with a triangular balcony built around a mature tree, and an angled window that gracefully accommodates its jutting branches.

Tucson Bookbike

The Bookbike, operated by Pima County Public Library in Tucson, Arizona, has many different regular stopping points, including farmers' markets, women's shelters and a soup kitchen.

