

Reimagining our Library Spaces

With the average price of a cup of coffee around €3.65, society is in need of a consumer cost-neutral space and there is the potential for the 330 public libraries around Ireland to meet this need of our communities.

The concept of a 'third space' is the utilisation and personalisation of places outside the workplace and the home. In Ireland, the pub was historically our nation's third space of choice but the home is now the most frequently reported location for alcohol consumption among Irish adults.

We have seen the rise in popularity of Irish cafe culture, but with the CSO's consumer price index reporting that the cost of coffee is rising and with companies such as Starbucks making a profit of €5.87bn last year, an increase of 27% from 2022, price is factoring into people's ability to partake in these third spaces.

With 765,000 registered members, Irish libraries are still cherished widely but people tend to view visiting a library as an individualistic experience - popping in to borrow a book or use the IT facilities. But reimagining space within our libraries could mean allocating a place for locals to chat, meet, and interact - all key requirements for a thriving society.

Libraries are so much more than just a place to borrow the latest Claire Keegan novel - they are a learning hub for immigrants looking to learn English, an outreach space for the elderly, even a sensory haven for neurodiverse people who can make use of sensory rooms in many refurbished libraries. Libraries are one of the last free spaces left - giving teenagers a place to spend a rainy afternoon or those who live alone a place to connect with others.

Twenty years ago, we never could have imagined the range of electronic resources available today, so it should encourage us to be imaginative now - seeing beyond the approaches we have always taken to library spaces.

A reimagining of our library spaces could mean creating places where it would be encouraged to gather in groups, meeting friends and neighbours, as coffee shops are places where money is required and time is limited.

As well as meaning 'book', the Latin root of the word 'library' also means 'free' - so investment by the new government could mean a broader offering and a new way we view these beloved buildings.

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