

From Manuscripts to Digital Archives: Evolution of Mananchira Library As A Cultural Hub

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The evolution of public libraries as a cultural hub reflects a tremendous change from the pattern of information storage to the disposition of communal intellectual exploration within the digital space. The space that libraries provide supports and prompts learning, interaction, and involvement in a cultural context. As a space where values and social networks are nurtured, the Kozhikode Public Library plays a significant role in strengthening civil society by fostering shared values and community-centered learning. The growing digital landscape has introduced both opportunities and challenges, compelling libraries to transition from traditional models to digitized, accessible platforms. Situating the library within the broader intellectual and socio-cultural history of the region, the study traces its origins in a manuscript-based knowledge system that preserved literary, historical, and religious texts, and analyzes the gradual institutionalization of reading practices and public access to knowledge. The paper explores how the library functioned as a crucial space for scholarly engagement, civic discourse, and the dissemination of modern ideas during different historical phases, particularly in the context of colonial modernity and postcolonial cultural development.

Keywords: Public Library, Digital Archives, Mananchira Library, Cultural Hub, Public Access.

Public Libraries have always been conceptualized as invaluable institutions that preserve and disseminate the intellectual heritage of the communities they serve. The evolution of public libraries as a cultural hub reflects a tremendous change from the pattern of information storage to the disposition of communal intellectual exploration within the digital space. The space that libraries provide supports and prompts learning, interaction, and involvement in a cultural context. By allowing people to come together to access, share, create, and appreciate cultural resources and materials, libraries connect communities and foster the amalgamation of culture. Libraries sustain cultural literacy and enable communal engagement through activities such as book clubs, storytelling sessions, literary festivals, creative writing workshops, and author talks. These involvements make people build cultural competencies and deepen their understanding of diverse perspectives.

Apart from traditional practices, public libraries now started to employ innovative strategies to widen the possibilities and strengthen their impact on civil society. From digital storytelling projects to interactive art installations and multimedia exhibitions, libraries are finding new ways to enrich cultural experiences and attract wider, more diverse audiences. By embracing technology, such as virtual author events and online reading platforms, libraries extend their reach, making cultural participation more inclusive and accessible for people of all ages, backgrounds, and locations. In doing so, public libraries serve as dynamic hubs of cultural growth and learning, adapting to changing community needs while preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

As a space where values and social networks are nurtured, the Kozhikode Public Library plays a significant role in strengthening civil society by fostering shared values and community-centered learning.

With the dawn of new technology, however, reading habits and information consumption have evolved, pushing libraries to reimagine their services and adapt to the demands of the digital age. The growing digital landscape has introduced both opportunities and challenges, compelling libraries to transition from traditional models to digitized, accessible platforms. This shift not only preserves the physical integrity of irreplaceable materials but also expands their accessibility, enabling individuals near and far to connect with Kerala's heritage and knowledge repository.

Historical Roots of Kozhikode Public Library and Research Centre

The District Central Library was established in 1979 under the Local Library Authority (LLA) and initially functioned in a 30-cent building allocated by the Government. Thereafter, the library was moved to the Motor Vehicle Department building at Chevayur for the renovation of the old building. An advisory committee was formed in 1992 under the chairmanship of the then Collector Amitabh Kant and a sub-committee in 1993 to supervise the construction of the new library facility. This committee has prominent literary figures like MT Vasudevan Nair, Thikotian and MM Basheer, renowned journalists like P. Damodaran of Malayalam Manorama, and local officials including Deputy Collectors, Mayors, Members of Parliament (MPs), members of Member of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Chairman of Calicut Development Authority.

Further developments took place with the expansion and reformation of the library

infrastructure. In 1996, as part of a major renovation initiative in the Mananchira area, the old library building was demolished and replaced with a new structure.



Fig. 1 Memorial stone in Mananchira Public Library and Research Centre

To generate income for the library's operations, the government has decided to lease out a portion of the proposed building to commercial establishments. The money for the construction of the building was raised using the advance amount received from these institutions. After completion, it was officially registered under the Library Societies Registration Act and a research center was established in the same premises.

In 1995, the government cancelled the allotment of land to LLA citing irregularities in the construction process. State and district library councils filed a legal challenge in the High Court against this. The court ruled in favour of the library council in a landmark decision confirming that under the Kerala Public Libraries Act, 1989, all assets of the LLA should be transferred to the District Library Council (DLC). In 2010, the government issued an order directing the Collector to hand over the ownership of the public library and related properties to the

DLC. However, the governing body members sought a stay from the High Court to suspend the implementation of the proposal. In 2017, a petition was filed in the High Court, asserting that the LLA's assets should legally belong to the State Library Council. The court ruled in favor of the State Library Council, officially transferring ownership of these assets. Consequently, from 2017 onward, the library became part of the State Library Council's network. In 2019, the District Central Library merged with the former Central Library near Malabar Christian College, consolidating its status and expanding its role as the State Central Library, thereby cementing its place as a pivotal cultural and academic institution in Kerala.

Transition to Digital Archives

The transformation and adaptation of libraries in the advanced age of the digital landscape are remarkable because of the conversion of physical repositories to easily accessible digital archives. As a space for safeguarding the collective wisdom of thinkers of past and present, libraries changed from bookshelves to digital files and printing presses to databases. This gradual transformation reflects the expansion of human intellectual pursuits in a cultural context and the progression of the technological revolution. Embracing innovation never compromised the commitment to knowledge dissemination of libraries. It furnishes a new method of converting card catalogues to online databases and virtual archives.

Digital archiving has greatly expanded the accessibility and scope of library resources, making rare and invaluable materials easily available to a wider audience. By enabling efficient data retrieval and digital documentation, this process has improved the preservation of resources that are vulnerable to physical degradation, loss or damage over time. In the modern era, the integration of digital archives within libraries has transformed traditional methods of information storage, retrieval, and dissemination, particularly within culturally rich institutions like the Mananchira Public Library. The library's transition to digital archives represents a significant move toward expanding accessibility, promoting preservation, and fostering inclusivity for diverse user demographics, including students, researchers, and the general public. Since the inauguration of the digital section in 2022, officiated by Minister Mohammed Riyas, the library has strategically leveraged technology to digitize and document collections, thereby safeguarding against the degradation of physical materials.



Fig. 2 Digital Reference Centre in Mananchira Public Library and Research Centre

The transformation from the traditional card catalogue system to a digital catalogue at Mananchira Library represents a significant advancement in library management and user accessibility. A card catalogue, traditionally used in libraries worldwide, consists of drawers filled with individual cards, each containing bibliographic information about a specific book, including title, author, subject, and classification details.



Fig. 3 Card Catalogue Drawers in Mananchira Library

Users would manually browse through these cards, organized by author, title, or subject, to locate and retrieve books. This method, while systematic, often required extensive time and effort, especially in larger libraries. The shift to a digital catalogue at Mananchira Library has revolutionized this process, making it far more efficient and user-friendly. Members can now search for books instantly by entering relevant keywords or filters into the digital catalogue interface, streamlining the retrieval process and enhancing the accessibility of resources. This digital system not only reduces the physical

limitations and maintenance challenges associated with card catalogues but also supports advanced search functions, empowering users to navigate the library's collection with ease and precision.

The archival process serves a dual role: preserving cultural memory and expanding the boundaries of public access. Key additions to the digital archive include a handwritten copy of the Indian Constitution, signed by its framers, a treasure trove of immense cultural value. Plans to exhibit this document soon underscore the library's commitment to sharing national heritage with a broader audience.

The digital section now boasts an ICT training room with a capacity for 40 individuals and 20 computer systems, offering public access to digital tools and research facilities. Additionally, a specialized research area is under development to further enhance academic engagement, equipped with 10 systems for advanced study. Members and the public can access this digital reference section for a nominal fee, making the space both accessible and conducive to diverse forms of scholarly engagement. This expansion affirms the library's role as an inclusive, community-oriented institution where resources are available across geographic and socioeconomic boundaries, embodying the principles of the public digital archive movement. Architectural and Spatial Evolution

The architectural evolution of the Mananchira Library reflects its adaptability and responsiveness to both functional demands and community needs. Since its

founding in 1927 as the Kozhikode Municipal Library, the space has undergone significant transformations, from a small local facility to a complex, multi-functional building serving as a cultural and academic hub. Originally situated in a 30-cent building, the library eventually relocated to the Motor Vehicle Department premises at Chevayur to accommodate renovations, until its current premises were constructed as part of a larger modernization initiative.



Fig. 4 Front view of the Mananchira Public Library

The recent developments incorporate Kerala's architectural style, with sloping tiled roofs and an inviting façade that harmonizes with the surrounding Mananchira Square's historical character. The exterior structure features a sloped, multi-tiered tiled roof, reflecting Kerala's indigenous architectural style and providing effective rainwater drainage, which is well-suited for the region's monsoon climate. This design element not only enhances the building's aesthetic appeal but also connects it to Kerala's architectural heritage.



Fig.5 Reading Space in Mananchira Public Library

The reading space shown in the images demonstrates an open, shaded area with a tiled roof supported by a robust metal framework. This setup, which offers ample natural light and ventilation, creates an inviting space for readers to enjoy newspapers and magazines. The seating is organized in a communal style, promoting a sense of shared space and intellectual engagement.



Fig. 6 Reading Space inside Mananchira Public Library

The library also includes a modern entrance with glass doors, emphasizing accessibility and openness. This combination of traditional and contemporary architectural

features reflects the library's commitment to preserving cultural values while adapting to modern needs.



Fig. 7 Reference Section in Mananchira Public Library

The library's spatial reconfiguration, such as the provision of a reference floor on the third level with a seating capacity of 150, caters to youth preparing for competitive exams, making it a critical educational space for the community. The addition of a seminar hall, which hosts both library programs and public events, further enhances its role as a civic space that fosters communal interaction.

In 2024, the Mananchira Library took a significant step toward fostering early literacy and a love for reading by introducing a dedicated reading area for children. This new section was established in response to requests from parents who recognized the library's potential as a nurturing environment for their children's intellectual and creative growth.



Fig. 8 Children's Reading Corner in Mananchira Public Library

Designed with young readers in mind, the children's section is vibrant and welcoming, featuring comfortable bean bags scattered across a soft, green grass carpet that creates an engaging and playful atmosphere.

The space is thoughtfully organized, with low, specially designed shelves stocked with picture books, children's literature, and age-appropriate resources that stimulate creativity and curiosity. These easy-to-access shelves encourage children to explore and select books on their own, fostering independence and a sense of discovery. The library has curated its collection to include a variety of genres and themes, aimed at developing reading habits and sparking a lifelong interest in learning from an early age.



Fig. 9 Shelves for Children's Books

Children predominantly visit this section during school vacations and after 4 p.m., allowing them time to relax and immerse themselves in stories outside of their academic schedules. The inclusion of this child-friendly space underscores the library's dedication to supporting community needs and cultivating a future generation of avid readers.

The recent establishment of the Uroob Museum at the Mananchira Public Library has added an enriching cultural dimension to the library's offerings, providing a unique archival experience that intertwines literature, history, and Kerala's cultural heritage. Dedicated to P.C. Kuttikrishnan, the celebrated Malayalam writer known by his pen name "Uroob," the museum offers a glimpse into the life and legacy of one of Kerala's most revered literary figures. Uroob's personal belongings, including his clothing and iconic umbrella, are preserved alongside rare photographs, manuscripts, and letters, providing visitors with a tangible connection to the writer's life and times.



Fig. 10 Uroob Museum at the Mananchira Public Library

The museum also features an impressive collection of his literary works, including original film scripts and paintings inspired by the characters he brought to life, offering an immersive experience into the narrative worlds he crafted. Displayed here are his notable achievements, such as the prestigious Kendra Sahitya Akademi Awards, which recognize his significant contributions to Malayalam literature. The museum's opening marks a milestone in commemorating Uroob's 40th death anniversary, as it brings renewed recognition to his influence on Malayalam literature. This dedicated space within the library not only celebrates his literary achievements but also serves as an educational resource that fosters an appreciation for regional literature, inspiring visitors to explore and engage with the cultural identity and literary heritage of Kerala.

The Library as a Community Hub

According to Kerslake and Kinnelle (1998), social impact is defined as "the meaning of the public library to the communities in which they work," encompassing two primary

levels of influence. At the immediate level, this impact pertains to community development and skills enhancement relevant to the labour market, while at the cumulative level, it addresses aspects of citizenship and social inclusiveness.

The District Central Library has actively embraced its role as a community anchor, offering an extensive range of programs, clubs, and resources that foster social interaction and cultural engagement. At the heart of these efforts is the library's Reading Club, which has transformed from small, monthly meetings held on-site to larger gatherings at Sarovaram Bio Park, driven by growing interest and engagement. Now supported by the popular "Streets of Calicut" Instagram page, the club attracts both members and the wider public, thus reinforcing the library's presence within the community and enhancing its social impact.

Another notable initiative is the library's film club, which organizes regular screenings to promote cinematic culture and stimulate community discourse on film-related themes. Additionally, the library offers a specialized training program for library science graduates, providing participants with a stipend of 7,500 INR per month. This program offers an in-depth introduction to library management, contributing to skill development and facilitating professional advancement within the field. The library's internship program, which accepts individuals from a variety of academic backgrounds, further broadens its inclusivity, consolidating its position as an educational resource.

With an average daily footfall of approximately 900 visitors, of whom 200 to 300 are young adults under 30, the library has established itself as a prominent knowledge hub for the youth. It offers a dedicated reference section for competitive exam preparation, complemented by amenities such as free Wi-Fi, water, and a lunch area, thus creating a conducive environment for focused study. Additionally, the library employs both manual and digital systems for data collection, using a scanner at the entrance for member identification and maintaining a manual registry for non-members accessing newspapers and magazines, thereby underscoring its commitment to inclusive access.

In collaboration with the District Library Council, the library offers librarian training and professional workshops, further enhancing its role as a site for professional learning. Currently, it supports a staff of 12 along with 5 council employees and maintains a robust collection of 180 magazines, including 20 geared toward students, as well as 20 newspapers. These efforts align with Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital, as the library facilitates the intellectual and social resources that contribute to the community's collective knowledge and cultural literacy.

Through these multifaceted initiatives, the District Central Library transcends its traditional function as a mere repository of books, emerging as a dynamic, multi-functional community space that promotes learning, cultural preservation, and public engagement. Its evolving initiatives, flexible spaces, and digital integration illustrate how

contemporary libraries can serve as anchors of community identity and intellectual development, accessible to all members of society.

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