



Showing the Green Way - Advocating green values and image in the Vallila Library: Helsinki, Finland

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Abstract:

Libraries are quite “green” in that the basic activities consist of information retrieval, circulating the collections, and offering a public space. For this reason it is challenging to develop greener ways of acting when the foundation is already environmentally sustainable. This is a lesson we at Vallila Library learned when we were the first public institution to seek and receive the EcoCompass environmental label.

Vallila library joined the environmental project in 2009 and during the following year we created our own environmental strategies and policies, and reviewed such activities as recirculation and recycling. However, it turned out such that there were not too many options for us to save more energy. For example, during cold winters buildings have to be heated. The Vallila library is also a part of a greater building complex and therefore cannot decide alone what kind of greener actions should be adopted. Furthermore, the City of Helsinki has its own regulations concerning for example, the switching off of computers.

Since acting in an even greener fashion presented challenges, it seemed that the best option was to show others the road to becoming green. The fact that the library had joined an environmental project received a very positive reception from our clients, who themselves appreciate our green values. As one of the clients put it, “I’m proud that my local library acts responsibly on these green issues”. This showed us that green values are important in enhancing our image. However, it is not enough just to “be green”. One has to say it aloud, or better yet to shout it from the rooftops!

Our commitment to environmental responsibility means that we are showing a greener way. We acknowledge that, as a library, we consider green values to be important. In a way we

also serve as an example and encourage others to follow. A part of this is includes us offering easy access to information on ecological issues.

Showing a greener way presumes some new activities and ideas. Vallila library has an emphasis on events and the library arranges several author visits and discussions on current issues. Now some events have been arranged that focus on environmental questions. In the spring of 2010 there was a discussion on climate change and in 2011 on water policies. Leading experts have welcomed the possibility to share their expertise with a broader audience. Vallila library also cooperates with Kuinoma, an organization whose members lend out their own possessions, like skies and cameras, to strangers. One can pick up and return the items to the library. Moreover, the library collaborates with Taidelainaamo, an artist association in Helsinki which enables one to borrow artwork from the library. These are some new ideas of how to broaden the idea of circulation, which libraries already do with their own collections, and to promote the importance of green values.

The Vallila Library belongs to the Helsinki City Library. We are medium-sized library in the Vallila district of Helsinki. I shall tell you about the environmental program in Vallila Library and what could it mean to “showing the green way”.

Environmentally friendly foundation

Libraries are quite “green” in that the basic activities consist of information retrieval, circulating the collections, as well as offering an open, public space. None of our activities are harmful to environment. This is fine, but it means that it is challenging to develop greener ways of acting. The foundation is already environmentally sustainable. This is a lesson we at Vallila Library learned when we were the first public institution to seek and receive the EcoCompass environmental label. We received the label this spring, along with some 30 small business companies as well as the Finnish National Opera. The eco-label is granted by the Helsinki City Environmental Center.

EcoCompass is an eco-label with a little lighter, streamlined environmental system. It is created for smaller companies and this was the first time the same requirements were applied to a public sector actor. Vallila library joined the environmental project in early 2010 and during that year we created our own environmental strategies and policies, and reviewed such activities as recirculation and recycling.

Our environmental policy is in line with the policy of the Helsinki City Library, which is based on the efficient circulation of collections, preserving the cultural heritage, preventing alienation, increasing consciousness concerning environmental issues and decreasing environmental strain. All this is quite abstract and does not have much to do with the everyday work in a small library. However, the Helsinki City Library has been very active in this respect and we have some more practical practices. We have a network of ecological support staff, one in almost every library. These persons take care of environmental issues in libraries and keep the rest of the staff informed.

This is a good start, but it is only a beginning. The environmental project led us to think and rethink environmental questions. We had to make clear for ourselves what does it mean to be an environmentally friendly library.

Recirculation, saving energy and procurements

Recirculation, environmentally friendly purchases and saving energy are at the core of being environmentally friendly. Usually libraries do not have great problems here. However, some points can be made.

Some years ago, we thought that computers would make us environmentally friendly. However, as far as I can see, the use of paper has not decreased. All too often I have to admit that accidents happen. At times I intend to print a short message when in fact three pages get printed.

At the same time, many have begun to calculate how much waste and scrap computers bring. High Tech is not particularly high longevity and equipment is changed and updated frequently. Computers and other technical equipment also require electricity. In Vallila Library, we have calculated that the easiest way to save energy would be to switch off all computers for the night. However, this practice was restricted as all program updates took place during nighttime hours. This rule has only recently changed due to environmental reasons.

This was our first important discovery. As a municipal library, we are dependent on many other actors and we have to follow the general rules given by the City. We cannot make independent decisions like small businesses can. So unfortunately, easy solutions are sometimes out of the equation. Sometimes it just requires time.

We have faced this fact quite a few times. Vallila library is a part of greater building complex and therefore it cannot decide alone what kind of greener actions shall be adopted. For example, we share waste containers with a daycare facility. Our interests in waste management are quite different than theirs and consequently compromises are often necessary. The same holds true with procurements. Helsinki City has a special office that handles procurements; they select distributors and arrange the tendering of prices. In this way our purchases are guided and we cannot advance our own criterion. At the city level it is not always the case that environmental considerations have weight.

Nevertheless, our environmental strategy presumed for some actions and savings. Thus we had to think where we could save, and how to measure the savings. Here comes our second discovery. One has to be careful about what is measured. According to the simple model, we should decrease the use of electricity and energy used for warming. This is usually an assumption behind environmental projects. The goal is continuous decrease. Is this always possible in principle or in practice? During cold winters buildings have to be heated. In Finland, the temperature may stay below 20 degrees Celsius for months.

Moreover, there exists a paradox. It seems that more is less. Now, the easiest way to save energy would be to decrease opening hours, keep the library closed, switch off lights and take the computers away. However, we are trying to do the opposite. We attempt to keep

the library open as much as possible and to offer a common space for reading, working, gathering together or just to pass the time. This is why we have the lights on whereas elsewhere lights can be switched off. Another example is that we try and offer sufficient amounts of computers so that everybody does not need to buy their own computer. Hence the paradoxical conclusion is that we may successfully decrease the total use of electricity by increasing our own use of electricity.

Showing the green way: an example and contributor of knowledge

Since acting in an even greener fashion presented challenges, it seemed that the best option was to show others the road to becoming green. To show a greener way means that we express our commitment to environmental issues to our clients and other actors. We also show examples and encourage others to take the same road. Receiving an eco-label was an important part of this process. It tells about our values but also states that we have taken actions. We consider environmental issues so important that we have struggled to reach the standards to receive the label. Our first step was to let our clients know about our environmental project. One can find some information about our environmental project from our web pages.

The second step was that we attempted to offer easy access to information concerning environmental issues. Now as the amount of information grows, it becomes more and more difficult to find relevant and reliable knowledge. Unfortunately, the classification system used in libraries does not make it easier to find information on ecological subjects. Books about recycling, climate change and energy efficient building methods are scattered around the library, as they belong in different categories. In Vallila, we gathered all eco-related books onto one shelf. Here you can also find some brochures made by the environmental center. The collection may be quite small, but our clients have already found it.

There is also another important point here. We did not accept the suggested requirement that we should grow the eco-collection. Why? The easiest way to grow the collection would be to not delete anything from it. However, it is important that we discard all information that does not hold true anymore. It is better to have a small but reliable collection of eco-books than a vast and unreliable one.

Our third step was to arrange events on environmental questions. In spring 2010 there was a discussion on climate change, and in 2011 on issues related with water. Leading experts have welcomed the possibility to share their expertise with a broader audience. For this reason we are planning to arrange a series of events on ecological topics in cooperation with environmental organizations.

Finally, our fourth step has been to show an example for other libraries. We have presented our environment project for other libraries in Helsinki and beginning this spring, we shall take the same role to the national level. We have joined a national environmental project. To a large extent our function is to share our experiences and to awake discussion.

New ideas

However, the actions mentioned above are not enough. Showing a greener way presumes some new activities and ideas. In the Helsinki City Library we have already tried quite a few new ideas. Our libraries lend out traditional library collections, but many libraries also offer electricity gauges or sport equipment. Some of these items are owned by other municipal offices, like the Sports and Recreation Department. Some items are owned by libraries themselves. The problem is someone has to buy all these items and libraries have to be able to store them.

In Vallila, we are testing a slightly different way to lend out and re-circulate things. The library cooperates with the private organization Kuinoma. This organization was founded to enable a new kind of loaning. Members lend out their own possessions, like skies and cameras, to strangers. The owner of the item and the borrower agree on the details of the loan and thereafter the owner brings the item to the library for the borrower to pick up. After use the item is returned to the library. The library operates by acting as a mediator, loaning out the items with the help of a code number. There may be a nominal fee involved between the two parties, but library does not participate in that transaction.

The advantage of this activity is that the library does not buy any of these items, we only mediate the exchange. The only thing which is needed is willing people who want to lend out their own items for the benefit of strangers. Surprisingly enough there are willing people!

The motive of this activity is to repress consumption. If you need a drilling machine for a couple of days, say after having moved to a new apartment, you may see if someone has such a machine and would be willing to lend it. You do not need to buy everything. This is in fact the same idea as when libraries lend out books or allow clients to use computers or other technical equipments free of charge. These are some new ideas of how to broaden the idea of circulation, which libraries already do, and to promote the importance of green values.

Green image and the marketing of libraries

In a way libraries have always been green. However, it has been typical for libraries to remain quiet about that fact. This is a pity. It is not enough to just “be green”. One has to say it aloud, or better still to shout it from the rooftops! In other words, we have to tell people that we are environmentally friendly. We have to have a green image.

Having a green image does not change anything. Image does not prevent climate change. The value of image is in marketing the library. And this is a point where libraries have traditionally been quite shy. However, we should learn marketing and pay more attention to our image. If libraries wish to have sufficient or more resources from the city, libraries must take care that those who make decisions agree that libraries are indeed worth it. The same holds for the media and clients. They should recognize that libraries are needed and do important work; that libraries are responsible actors and advocate valuable issues. Having an eco-label and an environmentally friendly image are a way to do this.

In Vallila, we realized this quite soon. The fact that the library had joined an environmental project received a very positive reception. Our users appreciated our green values. As one of our users put it, "I'm proud that my local library acts responsibly on these green issues". This showed us that green values are important in creating our image. We were also surprised to realize that the media was interested in our environmental project. Two different television channels and the biggest newspaper all reported on our cooperation with Kuinoma and the conferral of the EcoCompass label.

Now the media has become more interested in us, because of their surprise that we do not only lend out books. Well we have already been doing this for a long time, but it seems that nobody noticed it. So one of the benefits of our environmental project has been that I have been able to present our library to reporters, and received the opportunity to tell them what libraries are about today.

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