

Development Mode of Urban Grassroots Libraries under the Background of Lifelong Learning: Inspiration from Idea Stores in London

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Abstract The urban grass-roots library is an important part of the public cultural service system, and also a place to carry out national reading and lifelong learning, which is of great significance to the construction of a learning society. In this paper, the development and evolution of urban grassroots libraries in China are reviewed, and the current situation and usage issues of grassroots libraries in Beijing are analyzed. Moreover, the development strategy of idea stores in London, UK is studied, and characteristics are summarized, and possible references are sought. In the new era, urban grassroots libraries should integrate into communities with multiple functions and play a more sufficient role in public education, learning and training, and other aspects.

Keywords Grassroots library, Grassroots cultural facilities, Idea store, Lifelong learning

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Grassroots library is an important component of grassroots cultural facilities in China, closely related to residents' daily lives. It not only provides basic reading, education, and publicity services for residents, but also serves as venues for grassroots cultural activities. In the library system, grassroots libraries mainly refer to public libraries below the county (district) level, including public libraries in streets and towns, libraries in communities and villages, and district library branches. From the actual planning and construction situation, the construction models of grassroots libraries are diverse, which can be built independently or merged with other grassroots cultural facilities to form a comprehensive grassroots cultural center.

The development of grassroots libraries in China started relatively late, and it was once a weak link in public cultural services. After 2000, China has gradually built a learning society of national lifelong learning. Grassroots libraries are important places to carry out national reading activities and lifelong learning, and the number and scale also gradually increase. At present, grassroots libraries in the central urban areas of major cities in China have basically achieved full coverage of streets and communities. At the same time, the problems existing in urban grassroots libraries are also very obvious. On the one hand, due to the development of modern network information technology, digital reading has changed traditional reading methods, causing grassroots libraries to face development difficulties. On the other hand, urban grassroots libraries, especially community libraries, generally face problems such as poor environmental quality and insufficient quality, low efficiency in use, and obvious idle status. Therefore, how to

improve the use efficiency of urban grassroots libraries and leverage their role in the cultural service system is of great research significance. In this paper, by sorting out the development and construction process, current situation, and problems of grassroots libraries in China, and taking the idea stores in London, UK as a research case, the new significance and value of urban grassroots libraries in a learning society are explored.

1 Development and construction course of urban grassroots libraries

The development of urban grassroots libraries in China is synchronized with the promotion of grassroots cultural construction, and is closely integrated with the planning and configuration of grassroots cultural facilities. In this paper, it is divided into preliminary exploration period, rapid development period, and improvement and optimization period.

1.1 Preliminary exploration period

The policy on building grassroots libraries was first seen in the report of the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, which proposed to improve community culture, implement spiritual civilization at the grassroots level in urban and rural areas, and incorporate corresponding facilities into the overall urban construction plan. Afterwards, China began to carry out grassroots cultural construction, and urban grassroots cultural facilities were improved to a certain extent. In 2002, the Ministry of Culture, the National Planning Commission, and the Ministry of Finance formulated the *Guiding Opinions on further Strengthening Grassroots Cultural*

Construction, which further clarified the type of grassroots cultural facilities, emphasized the construction of community cultural facilities, and included grassroots libraries in the key construction plan. In 2007, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Several Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of the Public Cultural Service System*, which defined the two-level system of grass-roots cultural facilities, namely street/township comprehensive cultural centers and community/village cultural centers. Grassroots libraries have gradually emerged with the construction of basic cultural facilities.

1.2 Rapid development period

In 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to improve the lifelong education system, and build a learning society. The construction of a modern public cultural service system was gradually accelerated, and grassroots library, as a component of the public cultural service system, has also been vigorously developed. In 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China explicitly proposed the integration of grassroots propaganda culture, party member education, science popularization, sports and fitness facilities, and the construction of a comprehensive cultural service center. In 2015, the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of a Modern Public Cultural Service System*, which clearly defined the development goal of establishing a standard system of basic public cultural services. At the

same time, the *Guiding Standards for National Basic Public Cultural Services* (2015–2020), China's first national level guiding standard for basic public cultural services, was issued. These two documents have made comprehensive arrangements for building a modern public cultural service system, and proposed standards, methods, and strategies for the construction of comprehensive cultural facilities at the grassroots level. During this period, the construction speed of urban grassroots libraries gradually accelerated. As of the end of 2014, there were 3,117 public libraries at or above the county level in China^[1].

1.3 Improvement and optimization period

During the “13th Five-year Plan” period, the construction of the modern public cultural system was highly valued by the state. China has successively promulgated a series of laws and regulations, such as the *Community Library Service Specification* (2016), the *Public Cultural Service Guarantee Law* (2016), and the *Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China* (2018). The construction of urban grassroots libraries has been constantly standardized and improved. At the same time, in order to deal with the problems existing in the actual use of grassroots libraries, some cities have also adjusted and optimized the adaptability of grassroots libraries in terms of spatial layout, functional configuration, environmental design, and operation management, etc., and excellent library cases have emerged, such as U · Library in Luohu District of Shenzhen, Panjiayuan Subdistrict Library in Chaoyang District of Beijing, etc.

2 Current situation and problems of urban grassroots libraries: a case study of Xicheng District of Beijing City

2.1 Overview of Beijing grassroots libraries

The construction of grassroots libraries in Beijing is closely integrated with national policies. In 2002, the Beijing Municipal Government issued the *Opinions of the Beijing Municipal People's Government on further Strengthening Grassroots Cultural Construction* and the *Beijing Library Regulations*, which clearly defined the definition and basic construction standards of grassroots libraries. In order to implement the spirit of the 18th National Congress and the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, the Beijing Municipal Government issued the “1+3” public cultural

policy documents in 2015, where “1” refers to the *Opinions of the Beijing Municipal People's Government on further Strengthening the Construction of Grassroots Public Culture* and “3” refers to three supporting documents: the *Plan for the Creation of the Capital Public Cultural Service Demonstration Zone*, the *Standards for the Construction of Grassroots Public Cultural Facilities in Beijing*, and the *Standards for the Service of Grassroots Public Cultural Facilities in Beijing*. These documents constituted the basic framework of Beijing's public cultural service system, and jointly promoted the development of grassroots public cultural services. As of 2021, there are a total of 337 street/township level libraries in Beijing, and the communities under each street are also equipped with community libraries^[2].

2.2 Current situation and problems of grassroots libraries

Taking Xicheng District of Beijing as an example, the current situation and problems of the use of urban grassroots libraries are studied and analyzed. Xicheng District is located in the central urban area of Beijing and belongs to the core functional area of the capital. It has jurisdiction over 15 streets, 263 communities, and a land area of 50.7 km². By 2022, there were 1.104 million permanent residents. At present, there are 20 street level libraries and 210 community libraries in Xicheng District. From the perspective of spatial layout, each street is equipped with street level libraries, with a relatively dense distribution in the southern region. From the perspective of location, most street level libraries are located in public service functional clusters in residential areas, with a few located in commercial office areas. There are fewer independent libraries, which are often combined with other functions and have a total construction area of around 1,000–2,000 m². Their functions mainly include book reading, exhibitions, and cultural activities (Fig.1). The community library is mainly located in the community cultural room, with a relatively uniform spatial distribution, covering 85% of the community (Fig.2). The building area is around 100–300 m², and the larger community cultural room can reach 500 m². The main functions of the building include a book reading area and an activity room.

From the perspective of usage, the overall frequency of residents using grassroots libraries is not high. According to a survey questionnaire of 200 residents, only 30% of them have visited grassroots libraries. Among them, due to the relatively rich collection of books, diverse

functions and good indoor environment, the street level library has a high degree of satisfaction with the use of residents. However, the usage of community libraries is not good, with nearly two-thirds being idle and unoccupied.

Overall, grassroots libraries have not yet played an adequate role, mainly due to the following issues. ① Grassroots libraries are mainly defined as small public libraries, and their community attributes are not fully understood, and the educational significance of grassroots libraries for community residents is not fully reflected^[3]. ② The book resources of grassroots libraries are limited, making it difficult to meet the reading and learning needs of different residents. ③ The functions of grassroots libraries, especially community libraries, are relatively single, with poor indoor space and environment, lacking attractiveness to residents, and residents' participation in grassroots cultural activities is also low.

3 Development and characteristics of idea stores in London

The UK is the earliest country in the world to establish a public library system. In 1850, the Parliament of the United Kingdom promulgated the *Public Library Act*, which was the first national public library act in the world, and gradually established a perfect library system. Community libraries are the institutions closest to community residents and providing public education for communities. Idea store is a kind of characteristic library, which was proposed by Tower Hamlets in Greater London in 1999. Its purpose is to improve the traditional library functions and integrate library services with lifelong education, vocational training, leisure and entertainment for community residents. In 2008, the UK experienced a “library crisis”, with phenomena such as reduced library funding and library closures^[4]. In 2013, the British government released the *Future Library Plan*, which launched reforms and made “strengthening integration with community residents” as one of the tasks of libraries. As a result, the concept of London idea stores has been widely borrowed and has become the main model of community libraries in the UK to this day.

3.1 Origin of idea stores in London

Greater London is the capital of the United Kingdom, with the administrative scope covering City of London and 32 other autonomous cities. Tower Hamlets is a autonomous city located in Inner London (Fig.3). Since the 19th century, as the trade and shipping center of London,

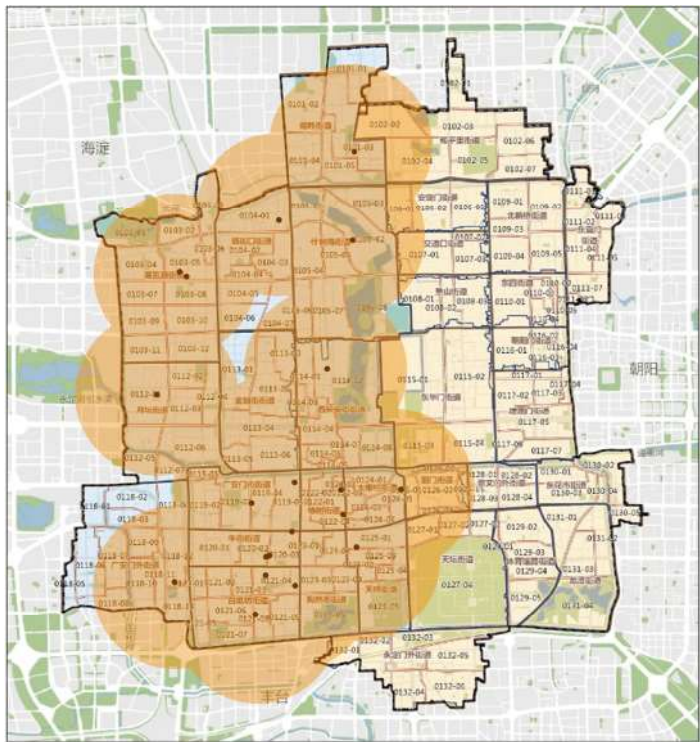


Fig.1 Buffer zone analysis of street library in Xicheng District (walk for 5 min)

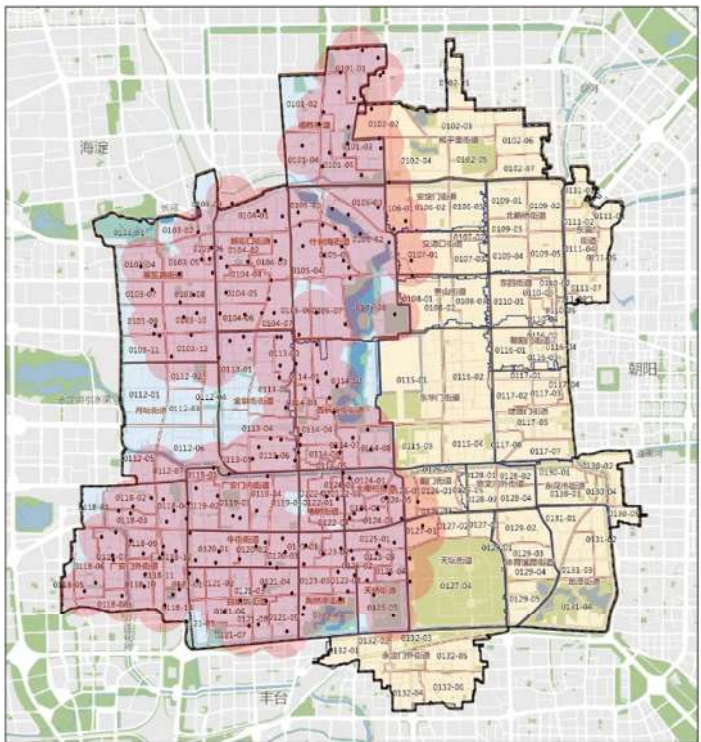


Fig.2 Buffer zone analysis of community library in Xicheng District (walk for 5 min)

Tower Hamlets has built huge docks and also had a certain industrial foundation. But at the same time, Tower Hamlets is also the most densely populated area in London, with high poverty and unemployment rates. According to the statistics in 2011, the unemployed residents in Tower Hamlets accounted for 6.7% of the total population, higher than the average unemployment rate in Greater London and the United Kingdom. The proportion of long-term sick and disabled people was 4.5%, which was also higher than the average level of Greater London and the United Kingdom. Residents have low levels of education, backward vocational skills, and a high crime rate. In this context, its library services are also very backward. The library facilities are outdated, and the utilization rate is the lowest among all libraries in London.

To this end, the local government conducted a questionnaire survey on residents to understand their understanding and needs for libraries. The survey showed that people are unwilling to visit a library specifically for a book and prefer to provide multiple services. Therefore, local governments considered the design strategy of new libraries from two attributes: “function” and “location”. In 1999, the local government released a report entitled *Development Strategy of Library and Lifelong*

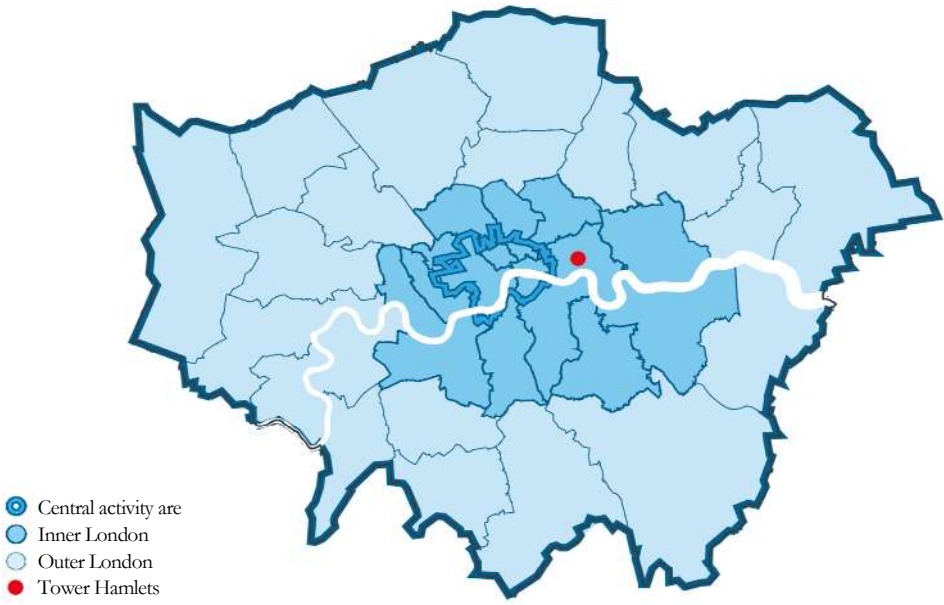


Fig.3 Location of Tower Hamlets^[5]

Learning in Tower Hamlets, which explained the concept of idea stores. Idea store is a place where community residents can obtain life information and skills. It will provide books and lifelong learning services in a comprehensive way and become the center of the community^[6]. In 2002, the first idea store in Tower Hamlets opened, and currently there are 9 idea stores (Table 1).

3.2 Construction goals of idea stores

The idea store strengthens the connection with the community, expands the traditional library services, and introduces the functions of education and training, career support, information services, art leisure, etc. into the library. The purpose is supporting the lifelong learning of community residents, improving health, promoting local employment and

economic growth, and strengthening the cohesion of the community in a diversified social background (Fig.4).

3.3 Construction characteristics of idea stores

(1) In terms of functional space, as a new type of library, idea stores provide various services and are places for community residents to exchange, learn, relax, and entertain. It provides a friendly and comfortable environment, as well as social education courses, information resources, and training opportunities. Its functional space mainly consists of the following parts. ① Book area: including book and magazine borrowing, information inquiry, children's library, audiovisual product borrowing, local information and archive inquiry. ② Exhibition and conference areas: regularly holding community themed activities or exhibitions. ③ Education and learning area: highlighting the social education and training functions of libraries, providing vocational training and interest learning for community residents, and also including student homework rooms, preschool children's daycare centers, etc. ④ Entertainment area: mainly including coffee shops, supermarket stores, etc. In addition, the concept store also provides digital services, and community residents can use the digital library to search for relevant information.

(2) In terms of spatial layout, idea stores emphasize close integration with community life and are close to residents. Therefore, the location of idea stores should be combined with local shopping centers or supermarkets. Its spatial distribution is even, and residents can reach a idea store within 15 min of walking (Fig.5).










(3) In terms of architectural design, the design strategy of idea stores is to change the stereotypical impression of traditional libraries and adopt modern, concise, and fashionable design methods to attract residents.

The construction of idea stores greatly increases the use frequency of residents. According to the *Idea Store Strategy* issued by local governments in 2009, the overall number of library visitors increased fourfold from 560,000 in 1999–2000 to 2.06 million in 2007–2008^[9].

4 Conclusions

Grassroots libraries, as a component of the grassroots cultural service system, should play a more full role in the current context of creating a learning society in China. The number, scale, and spatial layout of grassroots libraries in major cities in China have basically met the

Table 1 Overview of idea stores in Tower Hamlets

Name	Main activities and functions	Architectural form
Idea Store Bow	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club; adult activities: book clubs, English reading groups, online communication clubs	
Bethnal Green Library	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club; adult activities: refugee group friendship group	
Idea Store Canary Wharf	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club; adult activities: book club	
Cubitt Town Library	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club; adult activities: weekly gatherings, book clubs, entrepreneurial assistants	
Idea Store Chrisp Street	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club; adult activities: exchange clubs, free legal consulting firms, free internet access, and citizen consultation services	
Idea Store Watney Market	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club	
Local History Library	Library, exhibition room	
Idea Store Whitechapel	Children's activities: story time, homework club, art club; adult activities: mayor consultation, free internet access, free legal consultation clinic, exchange meeting	
Shadwell Centre	Study rooms, meeting rooms, fitness facilities, ceramic studios, printing studios	

requirements of relevant design standards, but further improvement is needed in terms of functional services, spatial environment, and operation. ① From a functional perspective,

libraries, as a social function, can integrate into the community in more ways and serve for residents. Through the empowerment of diverse social functions and the implementation of

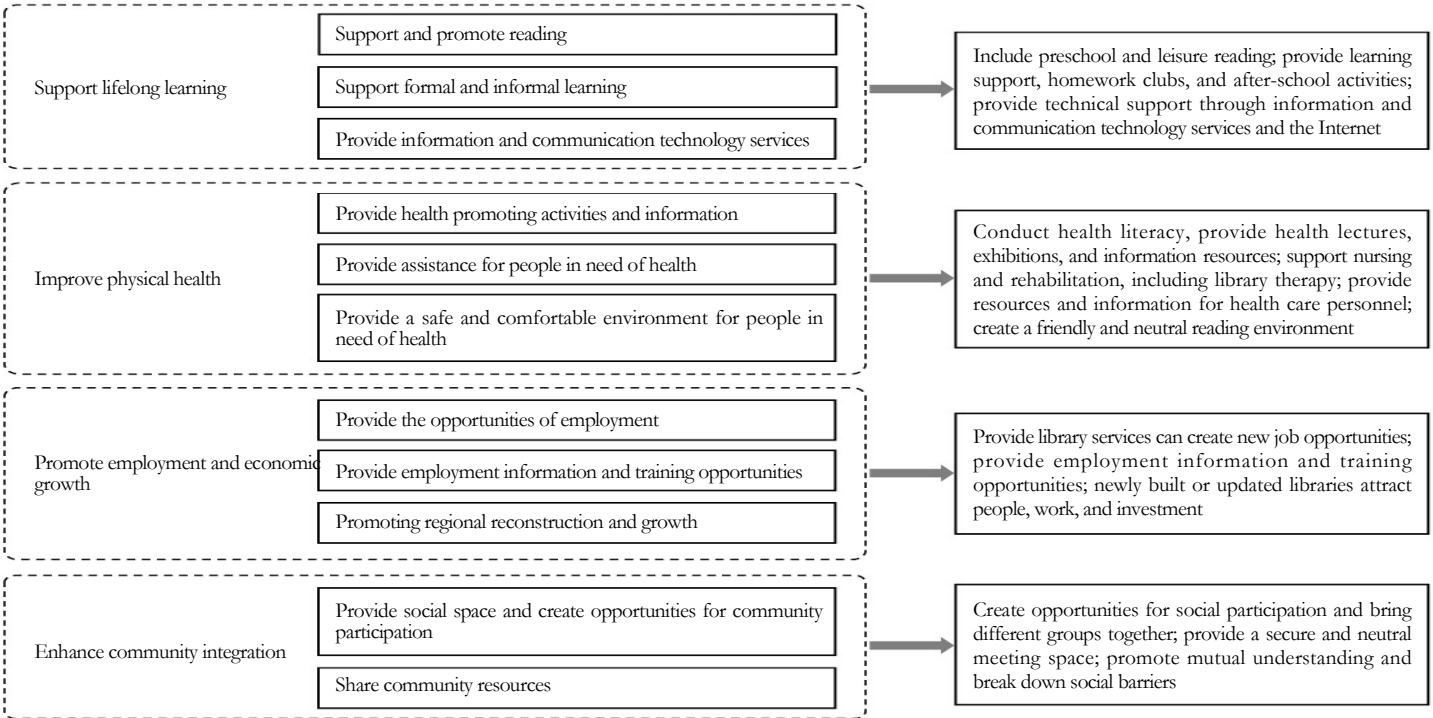


Fig.4 Goals and functions of the idea store/library in Tower Hamlets^[7]

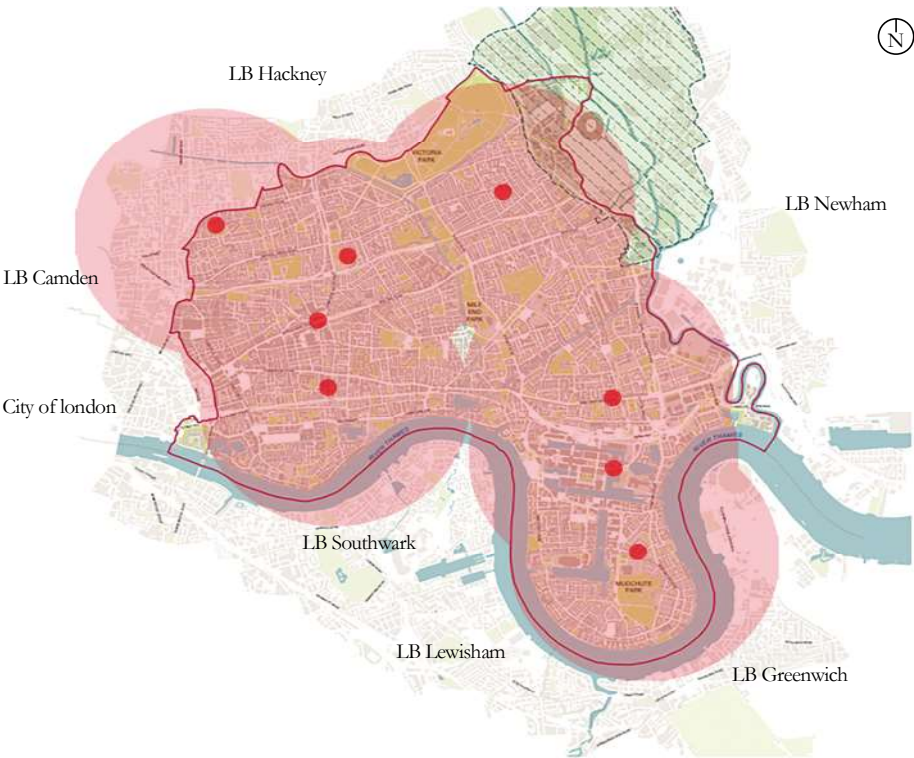


Fig.5 Buffer zone analysis of idea store^[8] (walk for 15 min)

various cultural activities, grassroots libraries can become the center of community life, playing an important role and value. ② In terms of spatial layout, grassroots libraries can be integrated with other street and community public facilities. By constructing street public activity centers and

community public activity centers, the frequency of residents' use of libraries is increased. ③ In terms of operation, grassroots libraries can collaborate with social organizations or cultural enterprises to organize various types of cultural activities, such as lectures, exhibitions, training,

interest learning, etc., to enhance the library's social service function.

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