

Swiss Cottage Library Oral History Summary

Interviewee: Jan

Interview Location: Architect

Interviewer: Claire. Summariser: William Fowler

Jan was the architect for the 2024 redesign of the children's library section of Swiss Cottage Library.

Jan greatly appreciates the original design of the SCL, calling it fantastic and describing it as a very uplifting building. It functions very well and has a generosity of space, he says. He says more consideration would be given now to people with different access needs.

He explains how the redesign came about and what the thinking had been behind his ideas. SCL received an endowment from the USA enabling them to approach him with the brief of creating of a new children's library for the 21st and 22nd century. He says libraries are not just about books and he took various factors into consideration when approaching the work.

Children were invited to make models of what they thought a perfect library would look like. He spoke to a local special needs school to see what they needed. He and his colleagues created a project brief which took these aspects into consideration whilst also factoring in what might be needed in the future. They refitted an old juke box with talking books and got costumes and a props trolley so that children could experience story telling in different ways. He took the teenage section into the adult part of the library to enable greater differentiation from the children's books. Adults also like the comfort and look of the section and have been frequently asked to move.

Thinking about the future, he thought the library would continue to need to respond to climate change and would be important in managing crises around lack of trust in the news and information and threats to democracy. The potential for increased inequality and the need for community provision would also be important.

A feel for the real was important when it came to the redesign of the children's library. Materials were shown as real – real wood, a cork flooring, for example. Many elements were put on wheels to enable flexible use in the future.