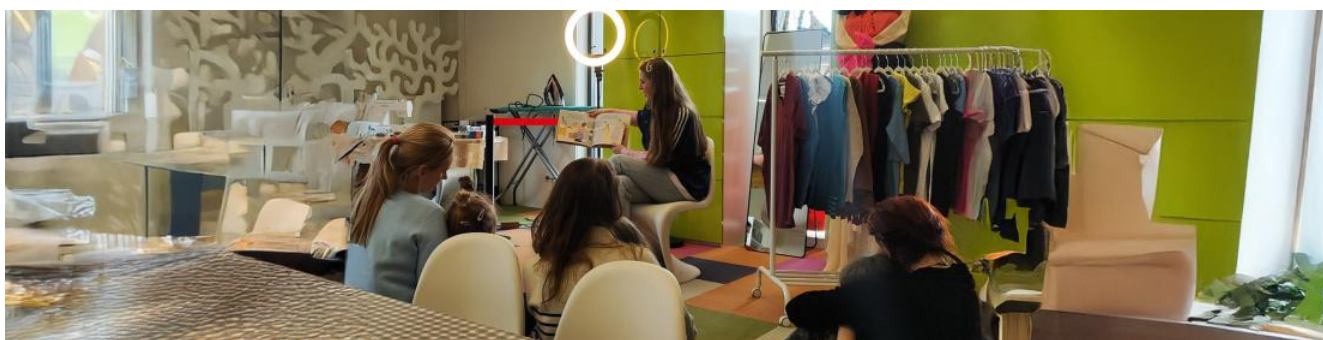




Europe's libraries look beyond books as they reimagine their role

Across Europe, libraries are being reimaged as community hubs and creative spaces for the digital age, as researchers join forces with local communities and creatives.

25 May 2026 - By HANNAH DOCTER-LOEB

More than 2 000 years ago, the Library of Alexandria in Egypt stood as a symbol of knowledge and discovery in the ancient world. But it was never just a place to store scrolls. It was a meeting point, a place where scholars gathered, debated ideas and built new knowledge together.

Today, libraries across Europe are once again being reimaged – not as quiet repositories of books, but as dynamic public spaces that respond to changing social needs.

Barbara Kieslinger, a senior scientist at the Centre for Social Innovation in Vienna, has a particular interest in citizen science, community innovation and the ways people come together to share knowledge and ideas.

Part of her work looks at makerspaces and how digital tools can help create more collaborative public spaces. She has observed how expectations around libraries are beginning to shift.

“Libraries are realising that it’s not enough to just lend books or videos anymore,” she said. “They want to offer new kinds of experiences.”

With support from EU funding, Kieslinger is now helping lead a research initiative called make-a-thek. Running from 2025 to 2028, the make-a-thek team is working with libraries across Europe to explore how they can take on new roles in society.

The researchers are focussing on transforming libraries into what Kieslinger calls “third spaces” – a concept that describes places beyond home and work where people can meet, create and connect freely.

A new role for libraries

This shift comes at a time when libraries are under pressure to stay relevant in an increasingly digital world. While access to information has never been easier, the need for trusted, inclusive public spaces remains strong.

“We’re seeing growing demand for spaces that feel like a community living room,” said Kieslinger. “Places that are open, welcoming and accessible to everyone.”

She and her team are working directly with libraries of all sizes to experiment with new formats. One key idea is the introduction of “makerspaces” – areas where visitors can learn practical skills, collaborate with others and explore creative projects.

A particular focus is on sustainable and circular fashion and crafts. Rather than simply offering equipment, these spaces are co-designed to bring together workshops, peer learning and community exchange under one roof.

The approach looks very different depending on the setting. In Helsinki, Finland, the Central Library Oodi already has an extensive makerspace infrastructure, including a dedicated floor for creative work. There, make-a-thek is helping tailor activities to specific groups and communities.

In contrast, smaller libraries are just beginning this journey. In the Polish city of Opole, for example, the municipal public library launched its first makerspace workshops this spring.

“It’s not like a café, which is about consumption,” said Patrycja Przybylska, who serves as the library’s accessibility and project coordinator and organises the initiative locally. “This is about access to knowledge and the opportunity to create something yourself.”

From users to co-creators

While Kieslinger’s work focuses on hands-on creativity, another EU-funded initiative took a different angle. The LibraiN project, which ran from 2021 to 2025, examined how libraries can become more collaborative and community-driven as they reinvent themselves, and how citizens can shape that process.

Anna Triantafyllou, director of the Innovation Lab at Athens Technology Centre, Greece, led the LibraiN team which explored how libraries can move beyond simply providing services to actively co-creating them with citizens.

“It’s a shift from ‘collections’ to ‘connections’,” she said. “The value of libraries today lies not just in what they offer, but in how they engage with people and support collaboration.”

The LibraiN researchers built one of the largest European evidence bases on library innovation, bringing together 38 case studies and survey responses from over 1 200 public and academic libraries.

Their research highlights how libraries are evolving across three key areas: digital transformation, community experimentation and social entrepreneurship.

In practice, this can take many forms. Some national libraries are using AI to improve access to their collections through automated indexing.

Others, particularly in countries like Denmark and Finland, are developing “living labs” – spaces where new services are designed and tested together with users in real-life settings.

Elsewhere, libraries are partnering with local organisations to address community needs, for example by hosting repair cafés or supporting grassroots initiatives.

“Libraries are increasingly becoming platforms where communities, institutions and policymakers work together to address real societal challenges,” Triantafillou said.

Sharing knowledge across borders

A key strength of both initiatives is their European scope. By connecting libraries across countries, researchers are helping them learn from each other and adapt successful ideas to their own contexts.

“Bringing together experiences from different countries allows libraries to reflect on their own practices in a more structured way,” Triantafillou said.

This cross-border exchange matters at a time when many libraries face similar pressures: limited funding, staff shortages and the need to develop new skills.

Changing mindsets can also be difficult. Some stakeholders still see libraries primarily as places to borrow books, rather than as active community spaces.

“There can be resistance, especially from those who fund libraries,” Kieslinger noted. “But expectations are changing, and libraries need to evolve with them.”

Taking innovation on the road

To extend their impact beyond partner institutions, both project teams have developed practical tools and outreach activities.

The LibraIN team created an online toolkit that allows libraries to explore real-life examples, compare approaches and find inspiration for their own initiatives.

The make-a-thek team, meanwhile, is preparing a small bus to tour around Europe, loaded with tools, materials and workshop kits. The mobile unit will visit rural and underserved areas, offering hands-on activities to show local communities what a reimagined library can look like and do.

They will also have a digital toolkit to help libraries to build their own make-a-theks, coming in July 2026.

Reimagining a timeless institution

Despite the technological and social changes shaping their evolution, the core mission of libraries remains strikingly familiar.

“Libraries have always been about sharing knowledge and bringing people together,” said Przybylska. “That hasn’t changed.”

What is changing is how that mission is delivered. From makerspaces and co-creation workshops to digital services and community partnerships, libraries are expanding their role in society and, in many cases, finding new audiences in the process.

“With the right support, libraries can play a central role in addressing major societal challenges, from digital inclusion to democratic participation,” said Triantafillou.

In many ways, the transformation underway today echoes the spirit of the Library of Alexandria: not just a place of knowledge, but a space where ideas are exchanged, communities are built and new possibilities take shape.

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- [make-a-thek project website](#)
- [LibrarIN \(CORDIS\)](#)
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- [EU research in cultural heritage and cultural and creative industries \(CCIs\)](#)
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