

Past, Present, Futures:  
The Portico Library

The Portico Library is located on Mosley Street in central Manchester. It is a Grade II\* listed Greek Revival style building that was completed in 1806, boasting a saucer dome and dramatic portico entrance. An extensive collection of 19th century literature is held in the library, but the organisation behind the building is very much looking toward the future. Aware of the colonial ideals reflected in many of its volumes, in recent years The Portico has placed a focus on reflection and progression by striving to involve a wider range of people in heritage. By reflecting the city's diversity while confronting its complex past, the library strives to become the most accessible, sustainable and dynamic historic library, where past, present and future are unlocked through creativity and collaboration.

While the library's program of exhibitions, talks and activities are strongly aligned with the welcoming, creative and equitable values of the organisation, the building they inhabit is not. With support from the National Lottery Heritage fund and others, they intend to make a series of architectural interventions in order to allow their 19th century home to better embody their 21st century ideals. It is important to the library that these interventions make the building both physically accessible and emotionally welcoming, breaking down the archaic barriers between the imposing building and the local community. This will allow the library to fully realise their vision of a revitalised, fully accessible venue for reading, writing, learning, and history in the heart of the city.

This report functions as a brief for the prospective redevelopment of The Portico Library, through exploring the past, present and potential futures of the space. The report sits alongside The Portico Libraries 'Brick by Brick: Architectures of Potential' exhibition, which challenges traditional forms and explores future possibilities for the library and for architecture more widely. Exhibited items include books, maps, plans and illustrations from as early as 1664 alongside the creativity of modern artists, researchers and the next generation of architects. The exhibition also begins to ask visitors what they would like to see from the revitalised library - ideas which have been included within this report. Models, drawings, and films featured in the exhibition are by Thu Le Ha, Andy Broadey, Johanna Just, Tianzhou Yang, Sam Coulton, Camille Dunlop, Natalia Da Silva Costa Dale, Qingyuan Zhou, Daniel Elms, Horace Lindezey, Jess Taylor and Darren Gallagher. Brick by Brick: Architectures of potential was curated by Emma Morley and James Moss with Apapat Jai-in Glynn. With thanks to all the Portico Library's staff and volunteers.

The potential futures presented here were born not only from collecting feedback from exhibition visitors, analysing historical plans and critiquing the current layout of the building, but from two community engagement workshops. Therefore as well as a brief for redevelopment, this report also functions as a documentation of these workshops - a written statement to distil ideas initially communicated through conversation, drawing and modelling. By engaging with local communities from the inception of the project The Portico Library will be more effective in creating a venue in which Manchester's diverse communities and visitors can explore, share, and celebrate their stories, alongside the city's literary and global heritage.

## Who We Are

Who we are: A word from Emma Morley at The Portico Library. “The Portico Library has begun an ambitious development process to share its heritage and collection with all of the city’s residents and visitors. With support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and others, we intend to reunite all floors of the original Grade II\* listed building, creating a revitalised, fully accessible venue for reading, writing, learning, and history in the heart of the city. We have invited our visitors and our community to join the discussion about how we can make The Portico Library more accessible and inclusive. We want to make sustainable choices and reach those who experience barriers to participation. It was a joy to work with Editional Studio and Venture Arts and connect directly with members of the community. This workshop was a vital exercise in learning their opinions and priorities. Their feedback has helped inform the Library’s future, and their creative ideas are featured in the public exhibition.”



Emma Morley speaking at The Portico Library Members Social, 2022.

Who we are: **Venture Arts** is a charity based in Hulme, Manchester. They support people with learning disabilities to reach their full potential through visual arts and culture. Illustrator, textile artist and ceramicist **Sally Hirst** lead the community workshops - utilising her wealth of knowledge about hosting accessible, engaging workshops gained through her time at Venture Arts. Much of Sally's practice is inspired by themes of climate change and her love of animals. Her work has been exhibited at The Lowry and Manchester Central Library.



'Starry Night Weave' (detail), wool (some hand spun), 2020, Sally Hirst

**Editional Studio** are a Manchester-based architecture studio that celebrates sustainable, considered design. They work from a high-street shop, promoting approachable and useful design directly to the community. Their recent work includes 'Decarbonise Your House Now!' an exhibition and publication explains ways to reduce the environmental impact of our homes and explores the creative architectural potential of how it might be done. Often utilising modelling as part of their design process, Editional Studio created a model of The Portico Library to be utilised in community engagement workshops, as well as assisting throughout the project.



'Decarbonise Your House Now!' Exhibition at Editional Studio, 2021

Past



The Portico Library was the product of Mancunian ambitions to have a combined library, newsroom and club for the city, having been inspired by a similar arrangement at the Athenaeum in Liverpool. With the support of 400 subscribers construction of the library began in 1802, following plans to house a newsroom on the ground floor and members library on a first floor gallery. The designs of architect Thomas Harrison include a saucer dome, barrel vaulted ceilings, segmental arches and access through a portico. This created a suitably grand space for members, who at this time were the richest and most educated men in Manchester. Notable members of The Portico Library include twice prime minister Sir Robert Peel and author of the 1852 'Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases' Peter Mark Roget.



The library provided a place for men with a range of political views to study - from Radical and Liberal abolitionists and anti-poverty campaigners to exploitative factory owners and textile traders. Women, however, did not become active subscribers of the library until after the 'Married Women's Property Act' of 1870 came into place. Evidence from the Libraries archives suggests that it wasn't until after the Second World War that single women became members in their own right. The library amassed a collection reflective of both the innovations and the inequalities of its time. As the library was built with wealth derived from the Industrial Revolution, British empire-building, and colonial expansion these were the attitudes held in much of its collection, despite the wide ranging beliefs of its members.

Photographs: interior of the library pre 1920 (page 11), interior of the library in the 20th C (12), plans of the building pre 1920 (14,15), exterior of the building pre 1920 (16,17)





# Present



At the start of the 20th century the library found itself under significant financial pressure. The decision was made to construct a ceiling, first in glass and then later made solid, to separate the ground and first floors. This would allow the ground floor unit be let to raise funds. The original occupier of this space was the Bank of Athens. Today the two floors of the building still serve disparate purposes with the ground floor being occupied by 'The Bank' pub. This arrangement has prevented the library retaining access through the street facing portico and requires members and visitors to enter through a discrete doorway on a side street. The physical separation and contrasting uses of the two floors leaves the building feeling disconnected and intimidating, as well as presenting several accessibility issues.

At present The Portico Library is actively challenging the colonial attitudes expressed in much of its 19th century collection by hosting eclectic and imaginative events, exhibitions, and learning programmes. While it still functions as a members library, the public are welcome into the space for free, five days a week and efforts are made to involve a diverse range of people in the libraries activity.

Photographs: an event at the Portico open to the public (page 19), interior of the library before and after the construction of a first floor (22,23), ground floor unit as a bank and in its current form as a pub (24,25)



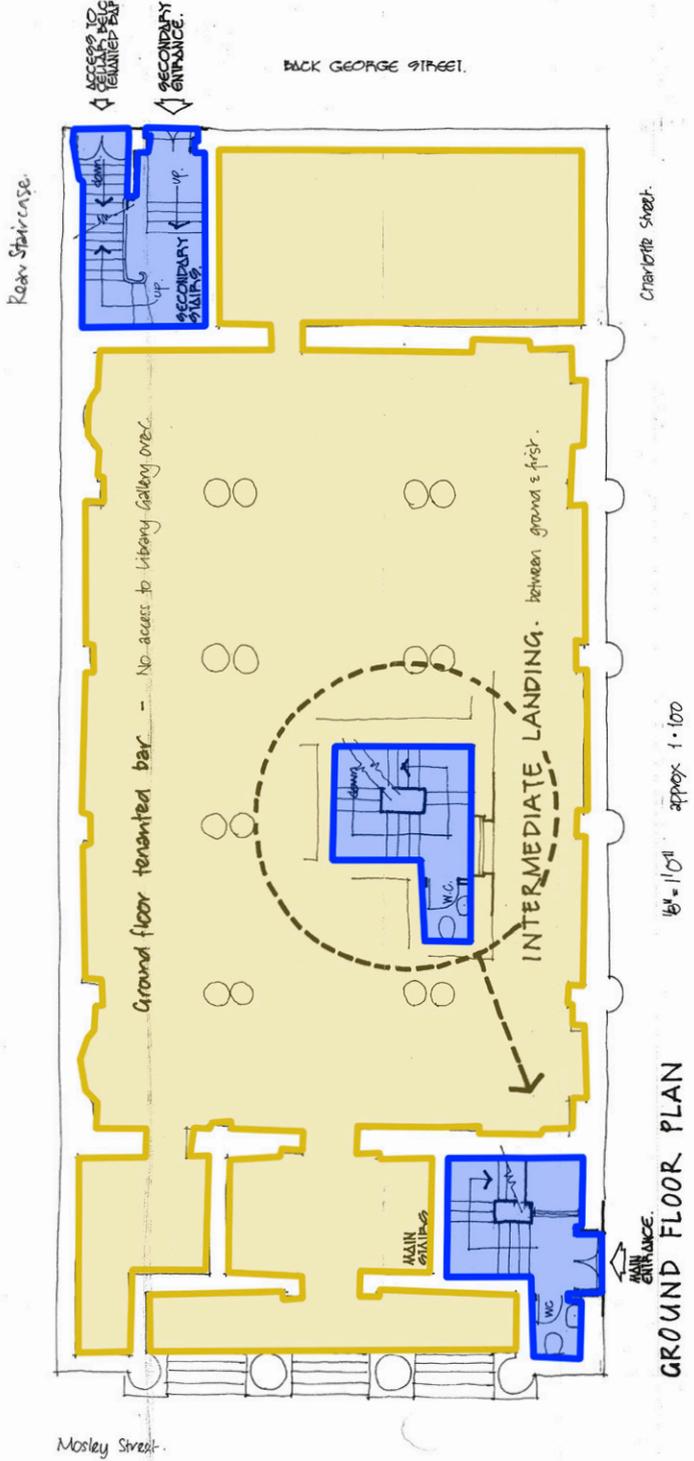


While The Portico Library as a charity places a heavy focus on becoming as accessible and inclusive as possible, the current layout of the building presents an obstacle to this ambition.

A visitor to the library is required to locate a small side door, use an intercom and climb a lengthy staircase in order to access the library. Chairs provided at every landing on the staircase attempt to make the journey more accessible - but ultimately visitors who use wheelchairs, or those who would be unable to speak into or hear a response from an intercom, the library is inaccessible. The discrete door also leaves the library feeling intimidating and exclusive, perhaps deterring those who haven't been historically represented in heritage spaces. The reduction in available space as a result of the separation of the building is also limiting the libraries accessibility potential by preventing an expansion of facilities. Over a single floor there is not only an extensive collection of books, but a kitchen, cafe seating and gallery space. This leaves little space for an expansion of their programme in pursuit of developing the local communities knowledge of heritage, providing opportunities for skill development and boosting the local and economy.

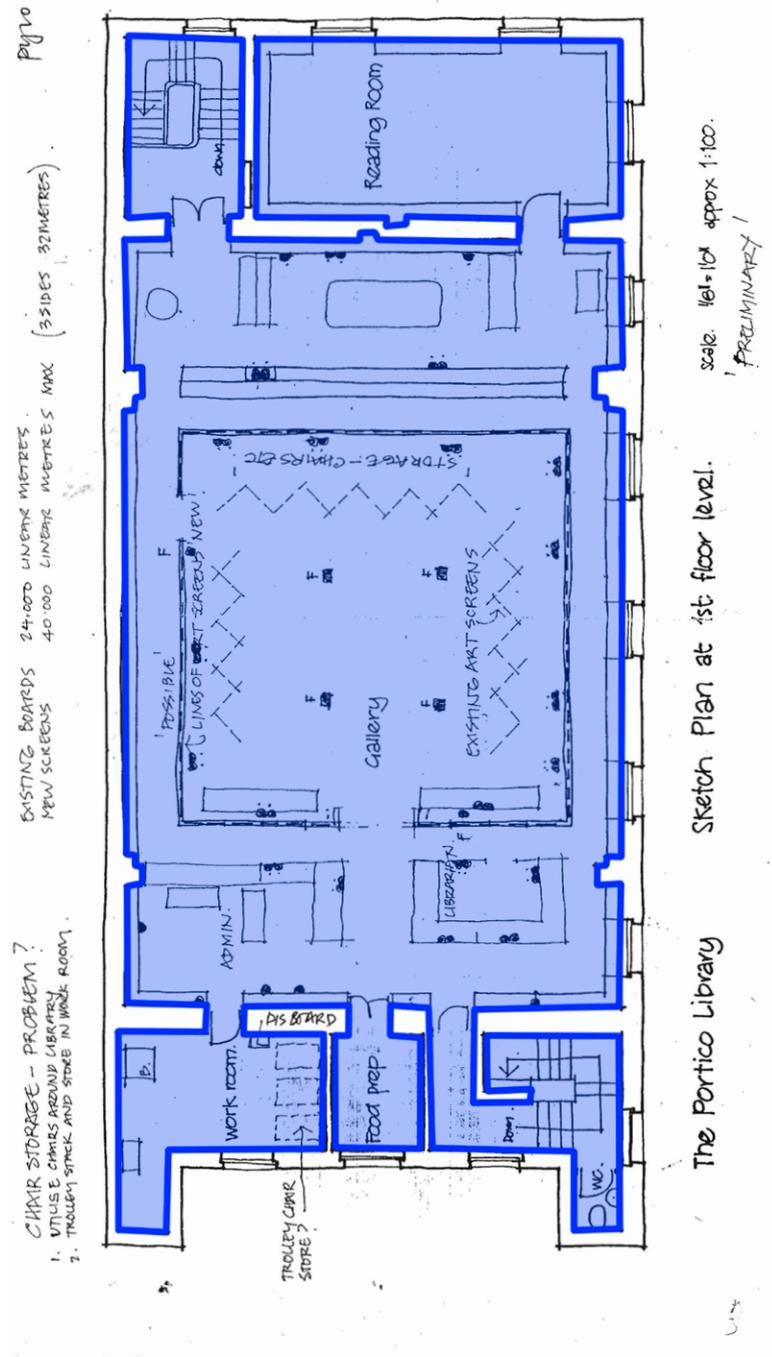


Photographs: doorway to the library (page 26), annotated plans showing the current layout of the library (28,29)



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

1/4" = 10' approx 1:100



The Portico Library

Sketch Plan at 1st floor level.

scale 1/4" = 10' approx 1:100  
PRELIMINARY!

CHAIR STORAGE - PROBLEM?  
1. UTILISE CHAIRS AROUND LIBRARY.  
2. TROLLEY STACK AND STORE IN WORK ROOM.

EXISTING BOARDS 24,000 LINEAR METRES  
NEW SCREENS 40,000 LINEAR METRES MAX (3 SIDES 32 METRES)

P1/10

# Futures



With support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and others, The Portico Library intends to reunite all floors of the original Grade II\* listed building, creating a revitalised, fully accessible venue for reading, writing, learning, and history in the heart of the city. This ambition forms the basis for refurbishment plans.

The library has a strong vision for its future involving the creation of a caring and safe environment where everyone can feel at home, learn about heritage and develop their skills. The library was also aware that in order to become truly equitable - by improving access, inclusion and distributive decision making - they would have to value collaboration throughout the redevelopment process. With such an emphasis on community, The Portico Library chose to engage with visitors as early as possible through their 'Brick by Brick: Architectures of Potential' exhibition, in order to ensure their interventions serve the community. The exhibition has prompted discussion about the future of accessible, inclusive, environmental design at the Portico alongside more wide ranging discussion about what makes a space accessible. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to express their thoughts on these subjects, gathering ideas from those who are already aware of the library about how they would improve the space.

Photographs: model of the library after workshops (page 31), notes giving suggestions for the future of the library from the 'Brick by Brick' exhibition (34)

Labelling suitable  
for people with  
varying ranges of  
sight

Big cafe  
a lots of different  
food from different  
cultures

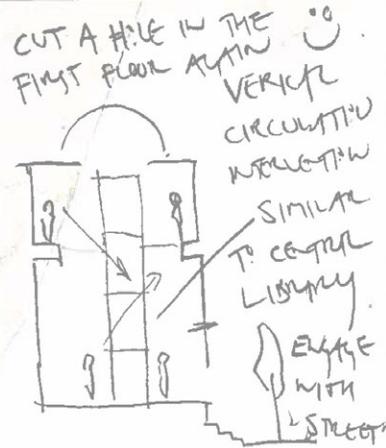
NO  
MUSIC!

Sensory  
room &  
Quiet area

Need  
Spotlights  
for  
reading!

I love being  
able to see the  
history of the Portico  
stain glass window  
reflected in the

don't lose  
what  
makes  
the portico  
what it is  
a manchester institution



People who look  
and sound like  
me, who I can  
belong with

LOVE IT!  
can't wait to  
visit when you  
have all 3  
floors back  
perhaps a solution  
for wheelchairs -  
not easy.

glance of the new  
and old works  
below. A beautiful  
space and beautiful  
ideas!

HISTORY → FUTURE  
INFORMS



collections from  
Manchester's  
different  
communities  
& history.

easy read  
translations  
of some of  
the books

A LIFT



of which's model  
of lift at Deansgate  
vicinity

In order to engage members of the wider community who may not already be aware of The Portico Library, nor represented in its past contributors or visitors, two workshops were held. The more individuals with specific experiences that are given the opportunity to contribute their thoughts, the more likely that the redevelopment of The Portico Library will function for a wider range of people in Manchester. This is imperative if the future of The Portico Library is to be welcoming, creative, equitable and collaborative. The first workshop was with St. John Vianney RC School, a Catholic day school for pupils with autism, learning difficulties and complex needs, and the second with Women Asylum Seekers Together, a charity and grassroots network campaigning for the rights of women seeking asylum in the UK.

Based on historical plans of the space Editorial Studio prepared a model of The Portico Library for the workshops. The use of reclaimed cardboard created an approachable work-in-progress style model that encourages adaptation and creativity. This model functioned as both a tool to introduce people to the form of the building and an empty canvas to be worked into. The intended output of the workshop was an adapted version of this model reflecting desired adaptations and new services that the local community would like to see in the revitalised library. Sally, from Venture Arts, also created materials for the workshop. Her ceramic accessibility signs and hand drawn prompt cards were made to start conversations about differing experiences of the world, and what each might require from the library.

Photographs: model of the library before workshops (pages 38- 39), prompt cards made by Sally Hirst (40), ceramic signs made by Sally Hirst (41)



Daisy is a teenager



Charlie is non binary



Aseel is still learning English



Kate is 3 years old



Izzy is a wheelchair user



Bob is walking impaired



Steve is visually impaired or blind



Bella is pregnant



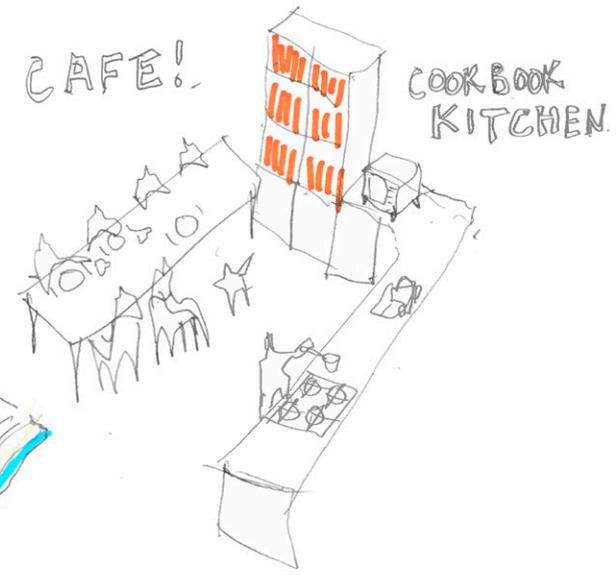
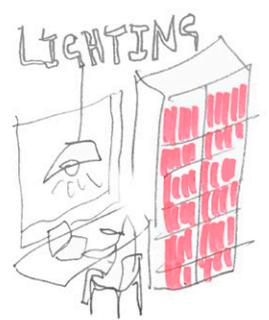
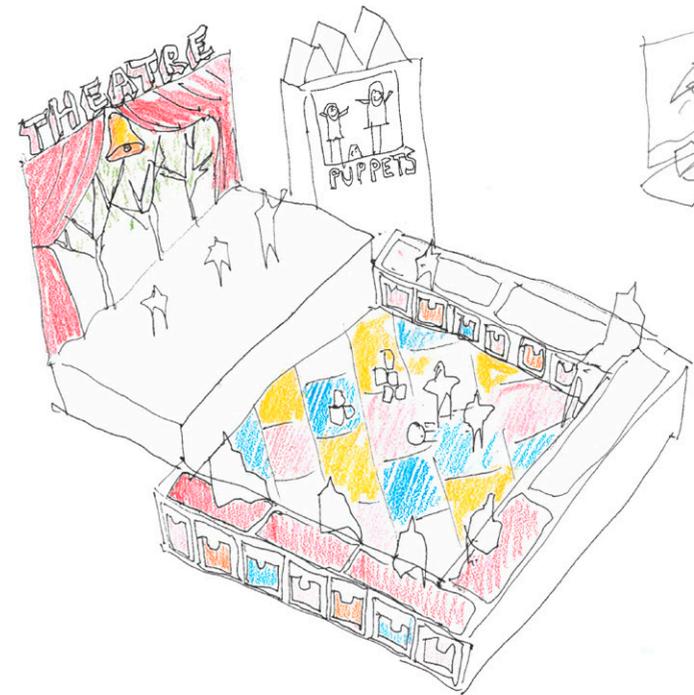
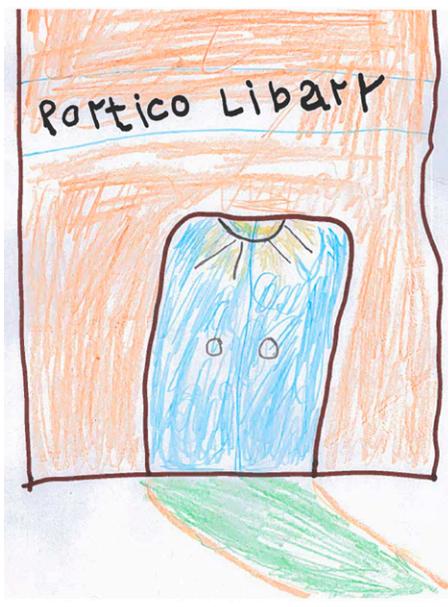
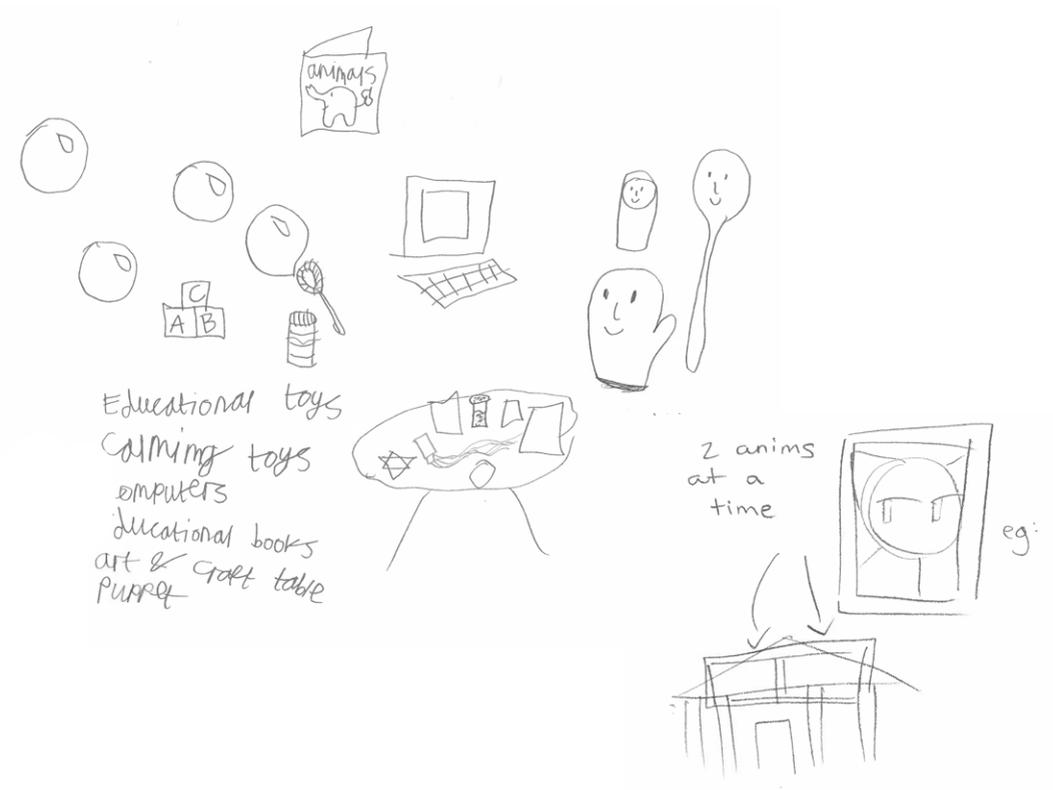
David is learning disabled and autistic



During the workshops Sally's ceramics and prompt cards along with various precedents were useful tools to spark discussion. The workshop was structured to encourage participants to produce a small model that could be added into the large cardboard model of the library - making a physical intervention into the space. While some participants were reluctant to create a physical model using clay, most were immediately confident in expressing their ideas through conversation. Providing pens for people to draw out their ideas before modeling them proved useful as a confidence builder.

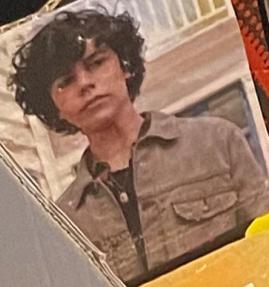
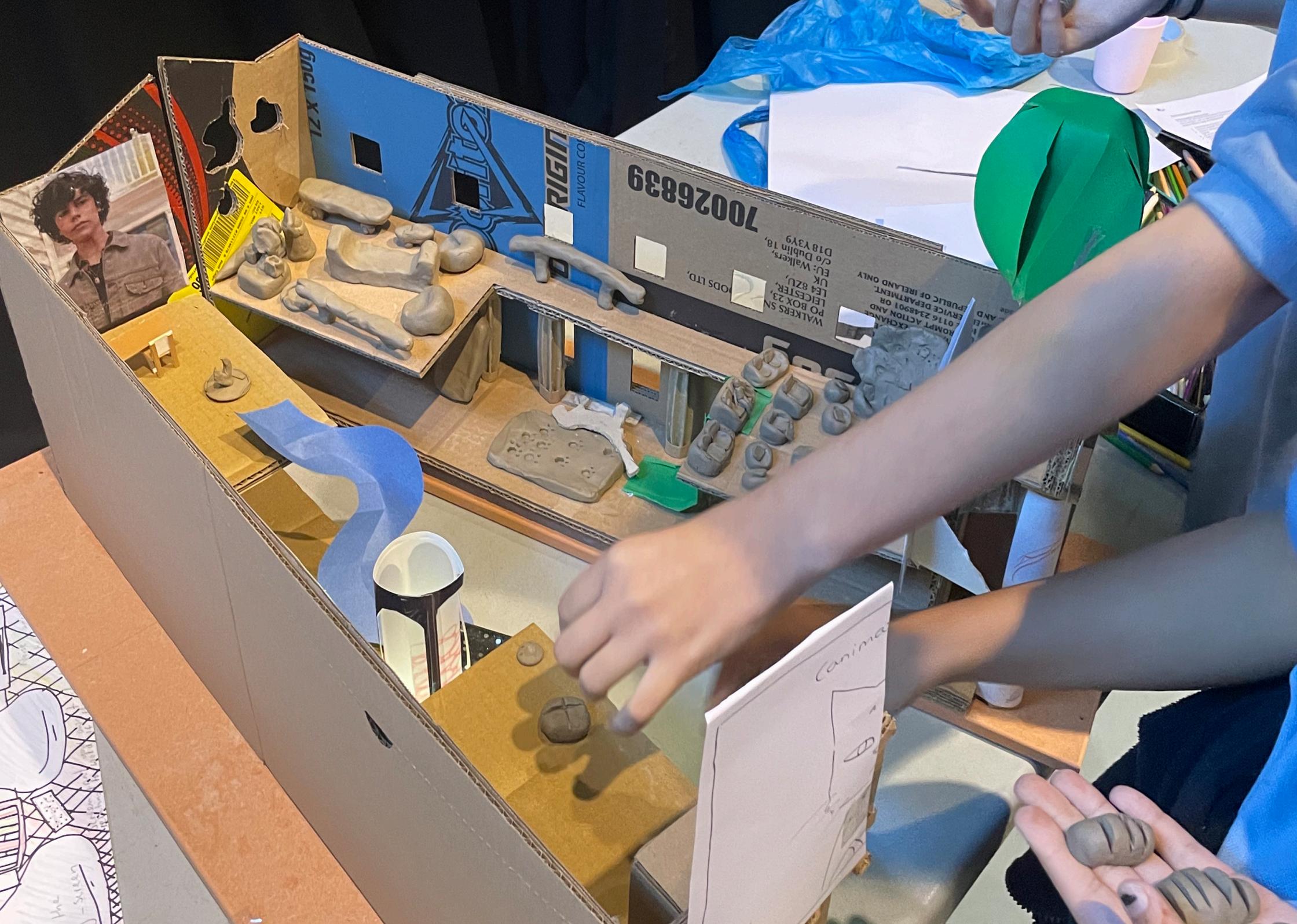
Changes to access, programmes of events and additional facilities were all proposed with the intention of making The Portico Library more accessible. The children at St John Vianney RC School were keen to propose a range of additional facilities that would make the space more welcoming for people with autism and learning difficulties, like sensory rooms, quiet spaces and facilities for support animals. This would allow a wider range of people to be involved in heritage. Students also discussed the future of the libraries gallery spaces could become more creative, curious and challenging with digital exhibitions and public art outside the building. A more diverse range of exhibitions would improve the local area, and provide further interesting ways for people to learn about heritage. The women from Women Asylum Seekers Together were very keen to expand the libraries existing cooking facilities into a community kitchen for the sharing of knowledge across cultures, alongside a cook book library. They also shared that they value spaces of education across the city and would enjoy computer literacy courses that would allow people to develop skills together.

Photographs: drawings from the workshops (page 44,45), clay models at the end of the workshops (46,47), students from St. John Vianney RC School during the workshop (48, 49), students at St. John Vianney adding their creations to the larger model (50,51), Sally Hirst and Daniel Elms at Editional Studio refining the model after the workshops (52,53)









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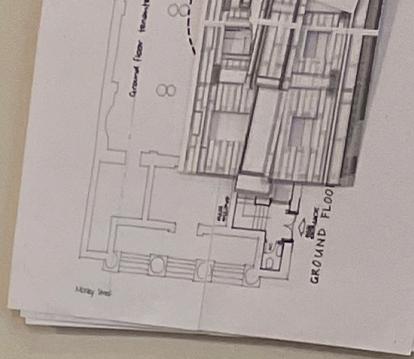
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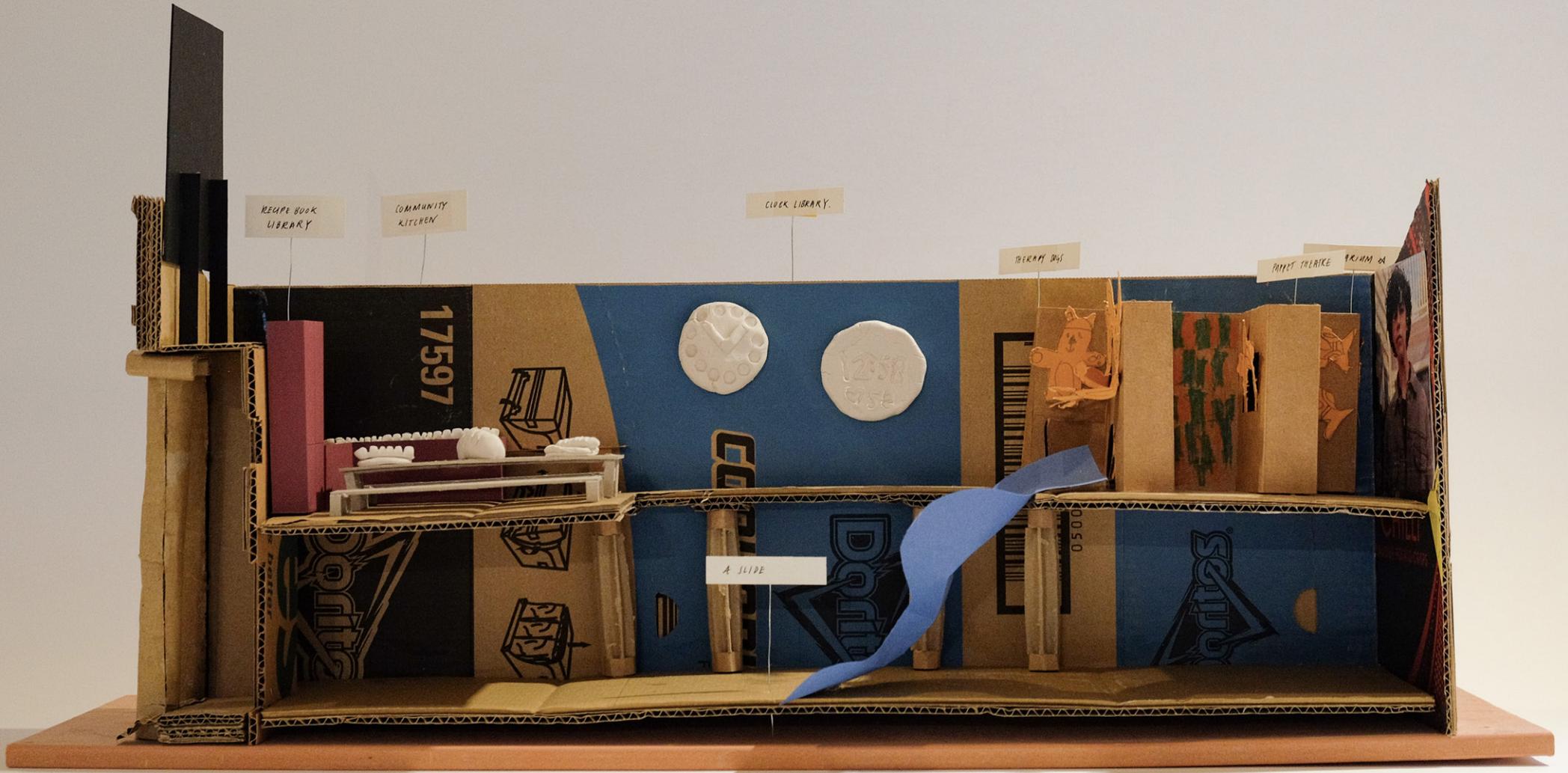
The  
-sides



After the workshops the clay pieces were fired and another session another session with Sally Hirst and Daniel Elms, another Venture Arts Artist, was held to refine the ideas collected. In some cases this involved modelling sketches from the workshop that were not yet present in the model. In others ideas were grouped together to form different zones within the model. The final product depicts the library as a cohesive building, its floors reunited and its accessibility improved. A selection of physical interventions and new facilities provide a hopeful vision for a vibrant space that attracts a wider range of people within the community. Introducing a selection of these ideas would allow The Portico Library to reach, educate and collaborate with more people across the city - moving closer toward the accessible, sustainable, and equitable future it envisions.

The ideas represented in the final model include a recipe book library and community kitchen, that would improve wellbeing as well as teaching new skills and building communities across cultures. A story telling space, improved art gallery and cinema screen were also suggested to provide an opportunity for people to learn about the history of the library in a digestible manner, as well as about cultures or organisations within the local community. A lift would improve physical accessibility to the space. Other suggestions include a clock library, new windows, therapy dogs, a puppet theatre, an aquarium, a slide, bean bags, a sensory room, lava lamps and a hot air balloon.

Photographs: final form of the model (pages 56-61)



RECIPE BOOK LIBRARY

COMMUNITY KITCHEN

CLOCK LIBRARY.

TREKMY DIS

PAPET THERICE

BRAMM ON

A SLIDE



NEW WINDOWS

JEWELRY ROOM

EBAN PAHL

LAVA LAMPS

CINEMA SCREEN

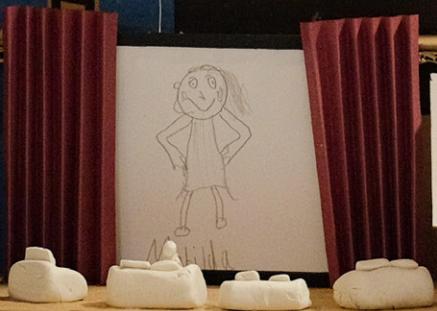
STORY TELLING SPACE

4 (187)

PUBLIC ART

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ANIMATION LIBRARY

CLOCK LIBRARY

THERAPY DAYS

KIDZON M

EFFECT TRAINING

NEW WIZARD

LAW LAMP

A LIFT!

HOT AIR SALOON

FABRIC ART

OLRIGIN FLAVOUR CO

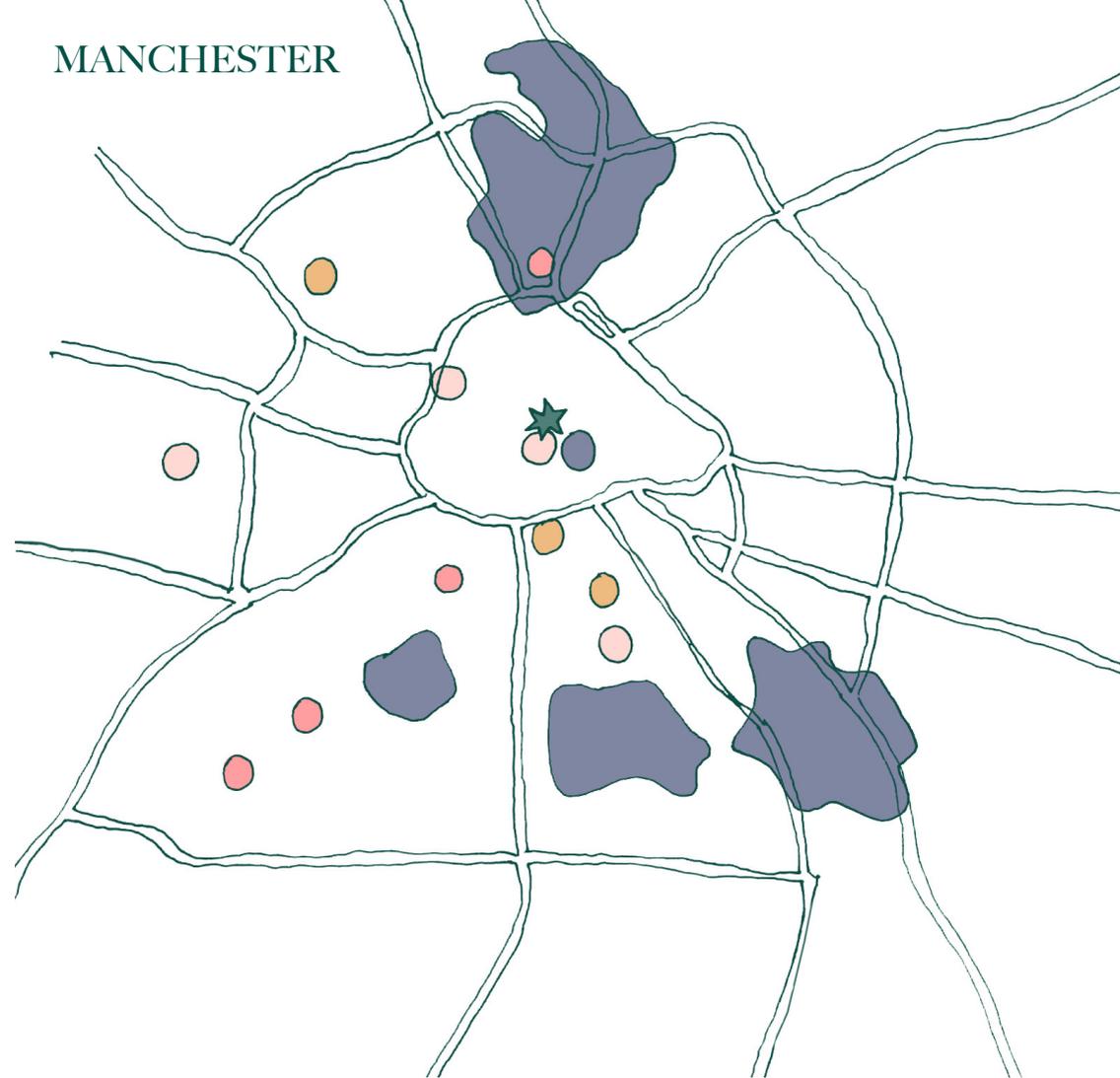
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DATE OF EXPIRATION  
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NS!

The Portico Library is keen to engage with more communities across Manchester during their redevelopment process and beyond. The adjacent map shows communities currently involved with the library and those the library would like to connect with. If you would like to get involved please contact The Portico Library.

## MANCHESTER



- ★ The Portico Library
- Groups the Library has already engaged with - Women Asylum Seekers Together, St. John Vianney RC School, Venture Arts, Editional Studio.
- Areas the Library would like to engage with - city centre neighbours and areas with a high proportion of communities from a global majority background.
- Venues across the city centre that heritage and arts culture-goers who may not be aware of The Portico Library currently visit.
- Universities across Manchester.

