

'Bookshop of the future' one step closer to realisation



Authors, poets, sales directors, librarians, booksellers, technology developers, publicists and literary agents gathered at Foyles's flagship bookstore at 113-119 Charing Cross Road in London in order to share ideas about what its new bookshop should look like and the nature of future bookshops in general. Foyles will move to its new premises at the former home of Central St Martins College in spring 2014.

Those attending the day were divided into various groups to discuss three key themes: diversity and choice, bookshops as cultural destinations and diversification of products and services.

Miriam Robinson, Foyles's head of marketing, described the response to the workshops as "overwhelming," saying, "six hours of the day for busy people is not an insignificant period of time to give up. It has been so heartening to know people care this much." Gene Alloway, a bookseller from Michigan, travelled to London specially for the workshop and it was his first time in the capital.

The new building, formally an art school, is imposing and has a feeling of prestige and creativity to it; "a hallowed space," according to Alex Lifschutz, the architect in charge of designing the new shop. It is made up of a large front façade, an atrium, assembly halls and a series of mezzanines.

The ideas that emerged throughout the sessions encompassed everything from "bibliotherapy", personal shopping, physical membership clubs, writers in residence, listening ports for audio books, moveable book shelves and a whole range of products and services including wedding gift lists, suggesting that future bookshops will be very much a social experience. The possibility of performances, art installations, gigs and exhibitions was also discussed. It emerged that a bar serving alcohol should be an integral feature of the new Foyles shop – "Hemingway's Bar" was the preferred name by some.

The workshop's participants also placed great emphasis on creating a sensory, tactile environment for children, recognising the importance of the children's book market.

However, areas of friction did emerge. I put it to one group that the need for art house cinemas, performances and installations almost detracted from a bookshop which simply sold books.

Most attendees responded that Foyles was such a good stockist that new ideas would only ever be features of the bookshop and the need to attract as many people to the new shop was paramount.

But others were more dubious: "I want a bookshop to be first and foremost a bookshop," industry agent Lucy Luck told me.

Whatever the new Foyles will look like, it is clear that commitment and enthusiasm for the future of bookshops in general is not lacking.

Phil Jones from the Bookseller said: "Bookshops are often seen as old-fashioned, but these workshops give books a chance to be at the centre of the conversation."

Lifschutz was similarly enthusiastic: "It's a fantastic project for us – after all, this is a chance to work on the most famous bookshop in the world. How many times in our life will we witness the rebirth of the bookshop?"

Felicity Capon and Fiona Baird - The Telegraph