

# Surrounded by science: The Researchers' Gallery at Malmö University Library

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### Abstract

*The Researchers' Gallery at Malmö University Library shows current research in exhibitions, co-created by librarians and researchers. The library invites all visitors to take part in and learn more about the research process and outcome. In an academic yet informal setting, the library offers a credible space for research communication. The Researchers' Gallery is a space for students, researchers and the society to meet, and encourage cross-border knowledge creation. The Researchers' Gallery has become a platform for continuing collaboration between researchers and between researchers and librarians. Exhibited research now has a natural and an integrated place in the learning environment of the library and at the university.*

**Key words:** *communication; libraries; exhibition; research; universities; information dissemination; professional role; interinstitutional relations.*

### Introduction

Malmö University is located in the city centre of Malmö in the south of Sweden, right by the Danish border. With nearly 350,000 inhabitants, Malmö is the third largest and the fastest growing city in the country. The young population, nearly half under the age of 35, are originally from 184 different countries (1). Over the past 20 years, Malmö has undergone a major transformation from an industrial town to a university city. Malmö University has about 25,000 students and the library is open to the public as well as students, researchers, teachers and other employees. The library is both a place for use of academic knowledge and a place for recreation set in an informal learning environment. This is why the library is a credible place for research communication.

The idea of the library as a space for research communication has been discussed at Malmö University Library, for over 10 years (2). In 2016, the library received a large funding to develop the concept of The Researchers' Gallery, and finally we were able to implement our ideas. The foundation of the concept is to bridge the boundary between the work of libraries and the activities of research and science communication to the public. The purpose is to make exhibitions based on current and ongoing research, and also to make the research easily accessible and reach a wider audience. There is a broader purpose too,

concerning communication between the university and society.

To produce an exhibition, a close collaboration between librarians and researchers is required. The librarians put research in a societal context and from this it is clear that the library is the originator of the exhibition. Through exhibitions in the physical library space, we invite all visitors to the library to consider and discuss difficult subjects, and challenge people's ideas about complex social phenomena and scientific questions.

Research is traditionally published in articles, dissertations and books. Research publications often have an academic language that makes them difficult to read for many people. Meanwhile there is a requirement to communicate the University's research to the surrounding community. This is important, since an open and active dialogue between science and the society can contribute to the use of research results as well as to give new perspectives and ideas to the current research. It may also inspire new groups to apply for higher education. Cultural museums in Sweden observe the same tendency - visitors create and share knowledge rather than being passive recipients in a one-way communication (3). The Researchers' Gallery is a space for students, researchers and the society to meet, communicate and create new knowledge together.

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These conditions motivate exhibitions about research at the university library and reinforces their important role. The librarians interpret the research and by that offer visitors the chance to be surrounded by research and to take a closer look at it. We capture the visitors' interest and explain how research can be undertaken. Therefore, we exhibit both ongoing research and research findings. We display the research process, the complexity of research and how it relates to other research and statistics. Additionally, we find it important that the exhibitions appeal to all the senses and are pleasurable.

### **A space for cross-border knowledge creation**

The space plays a significant role when setting up exhibitions. Space location and shape are of importance for how the exhibitions are designed and perceived. When this space is used in the context of an academic setting, it strengthens the aspects of learning and knowledge production.

The Researchers' Gallery is located centrally in the library, close to the entrance. It has a defined space, in an area where visitors pass through, as it has four openings without doors. This makes it easy to take part of the exhibitions in a casual way. It also allows the exhibitions to expand outside the gallery, in the surrounding passages that leads to the café, writing workshop and library classrooms. Therefore, the room itself offers possibilities that forms the expression. We want the exhibitions to arouse curiosity and engagement, both in terms of appearance and in terms of content. Most visitors come to the library to study, borrow books or to attend meetings. In this context, the Researchers' Gallery open the eyes for the unexpected. The visitors are welcome to use the exhibition space as part of the learning environment, or to take part of the exhibition and the research communication in a more active way. The design of the room provides the conditions and it is a space for cross-border knowledge creation.

When reading a text, you work your way through from left to right. An image or an installation communicates differently and appeals more to the senses (4). Color, light and sound give an impression and can interact with the artefacts, films and pictures that are included in the exhibition. A successful exhibition is readable, opens up the visitors minds and make them feel comfortable in the room (5).

Adding value to communicating research through exhibitions offers possibility to explore a new professional role where librarians act as curators of exhibitions. To create an exhibition, several activities and competencies are required (6). We have identified roles and qualities necessary to produce an exhibition. Librarians form a team that currently consists of five librarians with different roles: a graphic designer, a librarian who specializes in communication, a librarian with knowledge of media and collections, and two curators. Together with the library team the researchers take part in meetings, workshops and designing. We decided to adopt a collegial approach, which also includes colleagues outside the exhibition team, when it is relevant. Teaching librarians and bibliometricians are examples of colleagues that has contributed. With this approach, the strengths of the entire library staff can be included in the work of producing exhibitions. Curiosity, knowledge of the academy and experience in leading projects are important characteristics for a curator. Traditional librarian skills, like the reference interview is very useful, but it has also been important for us to learn new things. In the course of developing these skills and competences, we engaged in an iterative process of reading, shadowing programs, visiting museums and testing new ways of working creatively. By formulating questions, testing, describing procedures and reflecting upon them, we established new experiences and knowledge. In order to find structure in our work and process, we have made a five-step model that is available online (7). The model is inspired by Matassa's five steps (idea generation, evaluation and development, planning, implementation and review) but has been adapted for Malmö University Library (8).

To make meetings with researchers more dynamic and the role of the curator less vulnerable we use two curators, working side by side. In The curators handbook the curator is the editor of ideas (9). If our role is to edit ideas, then the role of the researcher is to share information that can be conveyed into an exhibition. When meeting the researchers, we listen with an open mind and ask ourselves questions like; what makes us react and want to know more? What is interesting to highlight? What gives us visual impulses and ideas for the design? How can we engage the visitors? Are there other stakeholders in society that can be involved in the exhibition?

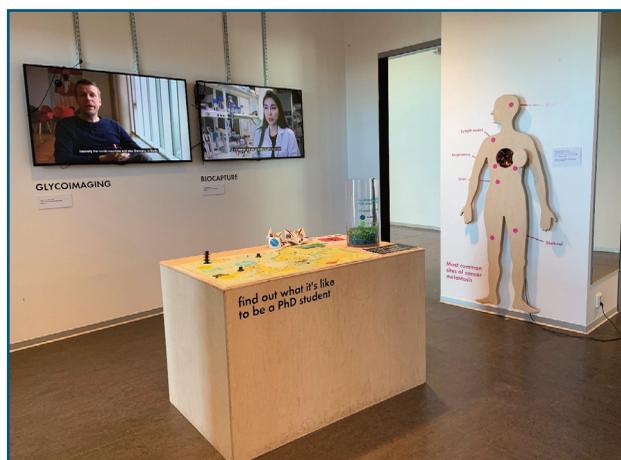
The graphic designer makes a small-scale model to visualize the narrative and the planned design for each

exhibition. It is important to keep the physical space in mind when making this model. When the researchers are shown the model, the design idea becomes clearer and visual. The model plays a significant role since discussions alone may never achieve the same effect. After entering the exhibition space, you are surrounded by research. Every exhibition has its own challenges and the staging comes out different, based on the subject. For example when staging a cancer research exhibition, the space looked like a lab. We want the visitor to understand what the exhibition is about and to strike a chord, without having to read any texts but we also want to offer the possibility to explore and to go in depth. The exhibitions always include interactive elements, it might be a board game about being a PhD student or a possibility to make your own journal placard. Often the exhibitions are a bit provocative and we invite the visitors to react and contribute. Sometimes the interaction has been part of the exhibitions and in some exhibitions, the researcher has asked for informants. When it is possible and relevant, we host events like lectures, discussions and quizzes connected to the exhibitions. Exhibited research has a natural and an integrated place in the learning environment of the library and at the university.

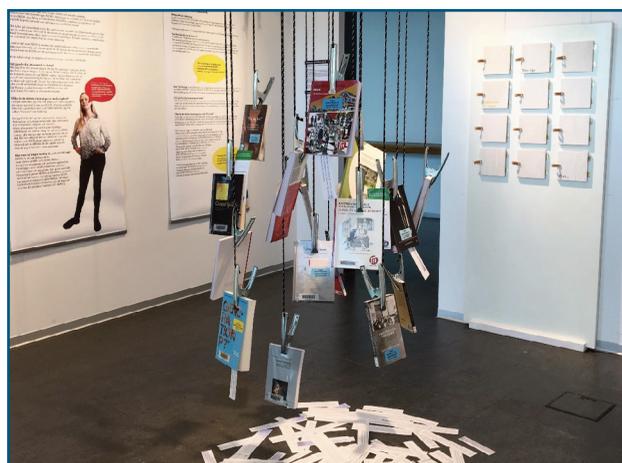
### A playful collaboration with unexpected outcome

During the four years that have passed since we started the Researchers' Gallery, we have produced seven exhibitions together with forty researchers (Figures 1-4). Our work is distinguished by playfulness and curiosity, where we test different approaches and learn new ones. We are not afraid to try things we have never done before, so we continue to explore and find new challenges.

Through the Researchers' Gallery we have obtained an overview of the university's research and created a platform that has generated continued collaboration between researchers and between researchers and librarians. This has led to collaboration between librarians and other actors both inside and outside the university and our expertise is requested for in new contexts. One researcher described the collaboration with librarians like this: "Participating in this work does not take time from my research, it enriches it". Working with exhibitions does take some time for us librarians, but the broader competences we have acquired



**Fig. 1.** From the exhibition "Fighting cancer with plastic bullets" 2020. At Malmö University chemists, physicists and biologists from two international networks, BioCapture and GlycoImaging, collaborate to find ways to diagnose and treat cancer at an early stage.



**Fig. 2.** From the exhibition "6 on sex" 2017. Six researchers, linked to the Center for Sexology and Sexual Studies, presented their fields of research. The exhibition also included a timeline with highlights from Swedish sexuality history, a curiosity cabinet and a collection of erotic literature.

through this work have built relationships and made our role visible at the university in a way that enriches our professional transcendental role.

The Researchers' Gallery has showed us the benefits of using research exhibitions to communicate scientific results and studies. It allows us to describe, explain and experience complex facts without having to simplify or reduce them. The Researchers' Gallery has made the library an even more attractive space for learning and



**Fig. 3.** From the exhibition "Green waves and red cottages" 2019. This exhibition places the concept "idyll" into a context of Swedish literary history and popular culture by highlighting work from different periods. Visualizing the songwriter Bernt Staf.

meeting, and has become a positive addition to the library.

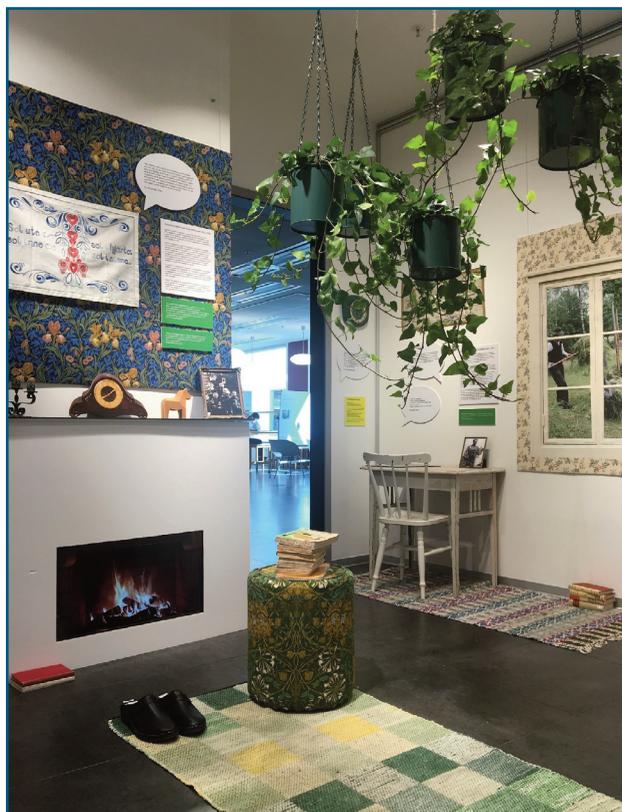
The next step for us in working with the Researchers' Gallery is to develop an interactive digital gallery space and offer virtual tours of our physical exhibitions. This will open the way for people, unable to visit the library, to experience research in a pleasurable way.

*Submitted on invitation.*

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**Fig. 4.** From the exhibition "Green waves and red cottages" 2019. Visualizing the work of the authors Karl-Erik Forsslund and Vilhelm Moberg.

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