REPORT

into the feasibility and potential of

TOPOLOGIES

a UK wide public art initiative for public libraries

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proboscis

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This document is a distillation of a short feasibility study funded by the Arts Council of England which was undertaken to establish the interest of organisations in participating in the different strands of TOPOLOGIES.
TOPOLOGIES is an   initiative conceived and developed by Proboscis, a non-profit arts organisation which researches, develops and   facilitates innovative creative projects across a wide range of media and practices.
The research for this study was carried out between February and April 2000 by Alice Angus (co-ordinator), Catherine Williams and Giles Lane.

TOPOLOGIES is a new initiative that breaks away from traditional manifestations of public art. It aims to disseminate artworks and artists books via the UK Public Library system. Consisting of four strands, TOPOLOGIES will: commission new artworks; curate and distribute collections of artists' bookworks; facilitate artists' residencies and develop integrated education and interpretation packages.

A key component will be www.topologies.org, an Internet portal functioning as an education and interpretation resource which is planned to integrate with the People's Network and the National Grid for Learning. The portal is also intended to integrate with the ACE network of digital media production centres to allow the public to engage creatively with TOPOLOGIES.

> *In the case of TOPOLOGIES, libraries can provide an introduction to new artworks in a local and accessible setting, enhancing people's view of what their library can offer and giving them a new perspective on art and artists.*
> Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport

> *Public Libraries have 1.3 million visitors every working day, and 10 million users visit frequently – at least once a fortnight. 58% of the UK population use public libraries at least once a year.*
> (Source: Library & Information Commission report)

TOPOLOGIES: Core Aims

TOPOLOGIES aims to engage with the broad community that uses public libraries, introducing artists' bookworks and artworks — some of which can be used, handled, read, touched and listened to (as distinct from public monuments and sculptures) — to diverse and new audiences. It will provide important opportunities for artists to develop new public artwork outside traditional boundaries.

> *There are 4160 central and branch libraries open to the general public and 663 mobile libraries. Nearly two thirds (3079) of public library service points, including mobile libraries, have computer terminals for use by or on behalf of the public. 62% of these have CD-ROM facilities and 39% have public access to the internet.*
> (Source CIPFA Public Library Statistics 1998-99 Actuals)

> *In 1997/98 there were 356 million visits to public libraries in the UK. 480 million books and 37 million audio visual items were issued.*
> (Source: Library and Information Statistics Unit Annual Statistics 1999)

TOPOLOGIES will bring contemporary art into familiar venues in which the audience feels comfortable and open to experience the works in a more intimate manner, at their own pace. TOPOLOGIES aims to provide a platform that allows the public to engage with ideas and concepts in contemporary art that are often deemed 'difficult' and 'elitist' by the media. In so doing, it aims to cross boundaries between 'High Art' and 'Popular' culture whilst retaining a commitment to high quality and artistic and intellectual integrity without pre-judging its audience's ability to enjoy and appreciate the work. Crucially, TOPOLOGIES aims to make available artworks, associated workshops and education and interpretation materials to people who, through consequence of age, disability, geography or economic status do not or cannot visit galleries or museums.

> *I was very interested to learn about the project, which seems to me to have the potential to bring considerable benefits to library users and their communities, and to develop new audiences for artists' work... I should like to offer my wholehearted support for the objectives of TOPOLOGIES...*
> Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport

TOPOLOGIES aims to develop collaborative relationships with the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the Peoples' Network and the National Grid for Learning paving the way for further artistic collaborations with other organisations. The initiative will provide a stimulus for Libraries to invest in a broader range of creative services for their visitors and give them an insight into the potential for further creative partnerships.

> *We fully share and endorse the project's aim to make the visual arts more accessible by siting projects in public libraries. It also resonates with the work of our Libraries and Arts Working Party which is seeking to facilitate a closer partnership between public libraries and all art forms.*
> Guy Daines, Principal Policy Advisor, the Library Association.

Objectives of the study
- To develop key partnerships and establish the interest of organisations in participating in the different strands of the project
- To identify the sources of potential public funding and support available for different strands of the project
- To research sources of private sponsorship and support available for different strands of the project
- To identify collaborators and venues
- To produce a report that will further define the ways in which the project can be developed responding to the availability of funding and feedback from potential venues and collaborators

MAIN FINDINGS

Widespread and enthusiastic support for the project was established through correspondence, feedback forms and meetings with a wide variety of representatives of key organisations in the Libraries, Arts, and Education.

TOPOLOGIES was praised for its organic structure, its promotion of diversity, access, education, creativity and the way it can support creativity at a level that is accessible to a broad audience. A key strength that was also identified is the initiative's ability to make connections between the written word and the visual, tactile and sonic arts. Its potential as a valuable national initiative — taking place right across the UK — has been widely recognised in the comments received.

Range of Interest
Support and interest in taking part in TOPOLOGIES has been expressed by a range of professional, government and non-government organisation including:

    The Library Association
    The Welsh Library Association
    Society of Chief Librarians (England & Wales)
    Arlis UK and Ireland
    Department of Culture Media and Sport
    Local Authorities in England, Wales and Scotland
    Regional Library Authorities
    Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries (CMAL)
    People's Network
    English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Arts Councils
    English Regional Arts Boards
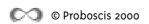   Educational Institutions
    Arts Venues

Such diverse support indicates TOPOLOGIES' ability to encompass a range of objectives: creative, social and economic.

Development of the Four Strands of TOPOLOGIES

Artists Bookworks Collections
Artists' bookworks and mulltiples are innovative and creative artworks in themselves rather than books about artists. They are easily accessible and portable art forms that are often intimate, humorous and/or contemplative. An artist's bookwork often challenges the traditional format of a book: it may involve visual imagery, words, textures, unusual arrangements or shapes of pages. It might unfold or unwind to form another shape; it might be possible to 'read' it in different directions or to unfold it like a map. A multiple might mix or use traditional craftsmanship, technology and contemporary materials — such as textiles, Audio-CDs, CD-ROMs, videocassettes or other media.

Collections of significant contemporary artists' bookworks and multiples would be curated and disseminated via the 209 UK public library authorities to create a context and points of reference for future TOPOLOGIES residencies and commissions. Proboscis would select small numbers of each work so that no two collections would be exactly the same — offering the opportunity for audiences to explore the varying collections held by different authorities. The collections could be housed centrally by an authority or tour on mobile services. In this way it is possible to take innovative and accessible forms of art to widespread communities that might not otherwise have access to such things.

Most libraries do not have artists books, it would be a new addition that could fit in with some local reader development strategies for libraries by encouraging reading in unfamiliar subjects as well as bringing visual arts into familiar venues. A collection could be used for educational purposes in text and book production as well as promoting art and the making of books to the library community.

Commissions

Proboscis would commission and curate new bookworks and multiples from emerging and established artists. Using visual, aural and tactile media found in libraries (such as print, moving image, digital and audio) these commissions would be produced in multiples and disseminated via the UK Public Library system.

The commissions are intended to be sited within existing library lending collections, enabling readers to discover them through their own use of the library. The artworks will be available to handle, use or borrow; this is intended to offer an alternative to the traditional distinction between the familiarity of objects such as books or audio CDs, and the precious and unique object of art in a gallery or museum that cannot be touched. TOPOLOGIES aims to appeal to 'users' rather than 'visitors' — bringing contemporary art into accessible and everyday contexts in people's lives.

Internet Portal — www.topologies.org

A specially developed Internet portal will be designed to integrate with the Peoples' Network and the National Grid for Learning — providing education and interpretation materials and leading users to associated art sites, both informative and creative.

Integrating and adopting the standards of the Peoples' Network and the National Grid for Learning, it will function as the means for disseminating information on all the TOPOLOGIES projects in forms that are suitable for individuals and teachers and online projects. Education and interpretation materials would be produced to cover the Key Stages of Primary and Secondary education, as well as Further, Higher and Adult learning. The site should be a key resource for people of all levels of education and interest to learn and investigate contemporary forms of art.

In addition, the TOPOLOGIES portal would be used to encourage people to learn about and get involved in creative technology; linking with the digital media schemes and regional broadband networks in libraries; encouraging creativity and computer literacy; developing innovative ways to engage with communities and uses of technology; linking the network of digital media production centres developed by ACE.

Artists Residencies

Proboscis would facilitate and develop artist residencies across the UK to build upon the success of Year of the Artist. Some Local Authorities simply cannot afford to host a residency alone, however there are a range of alternative ways to co-host and support residencies. Libraries may co host a residency with an arts institution or art school that could provide studio space and materials: Library authorities may like to join together to host a residency, possibly linking with other projects such literature and writers programmes: Local authorities could link together to host residencies or larger local authorities could fund residencies that can tour or link up with smaller authorities. Potential host partners range across theatres, artists groups, community groups and galleries, schools, Universities and Art Schools, local, national, mobile, school, and other institutional libraries, academic and specialist libraries.

The study provoked broad interest in the TOPOLOGIES residencies proposal: libraries often have exhibition spaces they are keen to use in association with the project and are well-used to hosting workshops and other programmes designed to foster links between authors and the public. Such direct contact between the public and authors and artists is widely believed to increase participation in the arts and to increase understanding.

The study found that residencies are seen to provide the following benefits:
>
> social involvement
>
> work that can tour to other libraries
>
> encouraging creativity through work with community groups
>
> a catalyst for the host to organise events and workshops
>
> collaborating with existing services such as writing liaison units and special needs units
>
> collaborating with other library user groups and local arts groups
>
> a catalyst for the formation of new groups and ongoing activities
>
> Projects that form links with other parts of the UK, developing a network of partners that can co-host and produce a project.

No matter how small or large the service point, the public library offers a gateway to cultural enrichment and personal growth. The provision of works of the imagination in all types of media stimulates an individual's spiritual and emotional awareness.
(Source: The Library Association 2000)

RESPONSES TO THE POTENTIAL OF TOPOLOGIES

An Organic Initiative

The organic nature of TOPOLOGIES means that it can respond to the variety of intellectual and physical requirements of potential partners and audiences. It would be possible to participate in all or just one of the strands of TOPOLOGIES. For instance, a large central library might wish to host an artists' bookworks collection as well as making full use of the internet portal and hosting a residency. A much smaller local service may wish to use only parts of the internet portal and only have the space for the commissions. Alternatively a rural library service that has to cover a large distance may choose to have the bookworks collection and commissions touring from library to library and co-host a residency that is linked to the mobile service.

An existing problem acknowledged by funding agencies, arts organisations, libraries and local authorities is the need to find ways to provide cultural projects across large, sparsely populated rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands region in Scotland. However, resources and funding are scarce and the logistics of disseminating such projects are complex. TOPOLOGIES offers a solution to this problem through its flexibility, its use of existing resources and networks familiar to and trusted by the public, and the relatively inexpensive and highly portable commissions and bookworks collections.

TOPOLOGIES has the ability to respond to:
- Cultural diversity & language (Gaelic, Welsh and the languages of the larger multicultural cities)
- Geography and the difficulties of making arts provision in large rural areas
- Population density
- Existing arts and libraries provision
- Differing ages of audience
- Physical scale of libraries
- Special collections within libraries
- Special needs units in libraries
- Access to Lifelong Learning

Links between Libraries and the Arts

There are already, in many areas, close links between libraries and the Arts. The aims of TOPOLOGIES coincide with many of the objectives of the Department of Media Culture and Sport and the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.

Feedback suggests that TOPOLOGIES has the potential to respond to many of the needs and ideas for strategic development of the library service; expanding its audience and service, working with other sectors, encouraging a crossover between visual arts and reading, encouraging people to use creativity and changing the public perception of the library.

Many Libraries are interested in challenging perceptions of the library and in innovative ideas that encourage involvement. They are especially interested in projects that have a long-term benefit; this might mean a series of successful projects resulting in the regular employment of someone to carry on such activities.

A number of libraries and library authorities have experience of art projects and artists residencies, some run Artists in Libraries schemes, some have run artists' bookworks projects that have generated great interest. Research across the country has indicated that many Library Authorities and local arts officers are keen to set up such initiatives. The Welsh Library Association, for example, reported that libraries are very open to ideas involving arts projects and there has been positive support for such initiatives.

Some Local Authorities indicated interest in making the project available through the library service to other council services that cater for those who cannot get to the library — the elderly and the housebound as well as residential homes and care centres — the commissions and bookwork collections would be ideal for this.

TOPOLOGIES has the potential to:
- enhance peoples view of what their library can offer and raise the profile of the service through additional attractions and increased community involvement
- be present across the library service from mobile libraries to large central libraries to local libraries
- introduce innovative ideas that challenge the perceptions of what a library is and encourage people to use the library
- make cultural activities more accessible in rural areas and where there is known to be a lack of arts provision
- promote library facilities and encourage interaction between staff and users
- be publicised and gather research through Libraries' Agencies' newsletters, publications and websites
- link with reader development initiatives
- respond to the special circumstances of libraries such as unusual or special collections and links to other organisations

Development of New Networks and Collaborations

The process of developing and implementing the TOPOLOGIES initiative would provide opportunities to establish new networks and partnerships across education, the arts, libraries and funding agencies. These could in turn lead to new projects and initiatives being generated, strengthening and deepening the integration of creative and artistic practices into everyday life.

Potential partners range across theatres, artists groups, community groups and galleries, schools, Universities and Art Schools, local, national, mobile, school, and other institutional libraries, academic and specialist libraries and other council services. Many Local Authorities work with a very broad range of artists groups and there may well be scope for TOPOLOGIES to collaborate with some of these.

TOPOLOGIES can contribute to the arts and culture programme of the region and sits well with 'joined up government initiatives'. It was suggested that project might link with other local area initiatives such as New Deal for the Community.

TOPOLOGIES offers the opportunity for partners to transcend the current fashion for regionalism and the restrictions of regional criteria by forging new collaborations across regional and national boundaries. Projects and collaborations could be co-hosted by libraries and partners in different regions, or different parts of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Supporting Artists

The Year of the Artist is providing many opportunities for artists to make new work and reach new audiences, as well as encouraging many organisations to work with artists for the first time. TOPOLOGIES will provide further opportunities for institutions to continue their involvement in the arts, and for artists to make new work, to undertake residencies and to make links with local communities.

Education, Lifelong Learning & Access
TOPOLOGIES will be well-placed to encourage a crossover between reading and arts, giving new perspectives on art, support the creative industries, promoting diversity, access, education and creativity. It could support creativity at a level that is accessible to a broad audience and make connections between the written word and contemporary arts leading to creative engagement as well as appreciation. Due to its organic and mobile nature, it can provide access to cultural activity in rural areas that are under resourced.

In some Local Authorities creativity and the creative industries are seen as being key to individuals' development and as a valid educational resource. There is a strong commitment to the creative industries and towards the importance of creativity and cultural activity.

Responses suggested that TOPOLOGIES has the potential to contribute to achieving these aims by developing new audiences for artists' work in a local and accessible setting stimulating interest in the arts. Some libraries are being developed as lifelong learning centres and study support networks; the organic nature of TOPOLOGIES would allow it to link with these initiatives.

Educational Institutions, such as Glasgow School of Art, are interested in working with TOPOLOGIES to develop partnerships with local public libraries as it allows them to develop links with the wider community outside the institution.

Visiting the library is the 4th most popular pastime in the UK.
(Source: Office for National Statistics – Social Trends 1999)

Engaging with Digital Technologies
As well as providing a comprehensive range of educational materials the TOPOLOGIES internet portal would offer alternative, unusual and inventive uses of new technologies and the exploitation of the world wide web. Some organisations and library regions are developing creative multimedia projects using digital high bandwith networks that could link to, or collaborate with, TOPOLOGIES.

Creativity, cultural activity and associated technology projects are seen as a powerful tool for creating community identity. The portal could link with existing digital media schemes in libraries, encouraging creativity and computer literacy, developing innovative ways to engage with communities and uses of technology.

Rethinking Language
The study identified an important linguistic divide between the arts and libraries professions. As curators familiar with certain terms and concepts common in contemporary artistic practice, the research team had to find new ways in which to communicate the initiative's ideas to people in other professions and walks of life. This in itself obviously contributes to the 'High-Low' cultural divide – something which TOPOLOGIES aims to challenge. New ways of describing the practices and conceptual framework of both TOPOLOGIES and the artists work it would commission and disseminate will be crucial to developing the appreciation and understanding of its aims and ideas by its audiences.
The language used to describe the project is refined on a regular basis in response to meetings, discussions, feedback forms and other comments from potential partners. In the next phase of development there will be discussions held with potential partners to explore and identify appropriate language.

CONCLUSION

Further Development

The feasibility study has demonstrated the considerable interest in and broad appeal of TOPOLOGIES within the library profession as well as its potential to engage with a wide variety of interest groups and criteria. However it is clear that this needs to be followed with a second phase of in depth research and development to:

establlish a separate organisation with charitable status

contact all of the relevant potential partners and create the necessary partnerships and networks to develop and realise the four strands of the project

research and develop the internet portal

develop educational and interpretation packages for the internet portal

research and identify potential artists across the UK for the commissions

research and curate the bookworks collections

research and identify potential artists across the UK for the residencies

identify sources of funding and sponsorship to realise the initiative

test run a number of projects

Following this second phase of research and development the TOPOLOGIES initiative could be fully implemented. However, the structure of TOPOLOGIES would also allow for partial implementation on local, regional or national levels.

TOPOLOGIES: Key Strategic & Cultural Aims

One of the key aims of TOPOLOGIES is to enhance the status of contemporary art in everyday life. By making works of art available to the public on a wide scale it is intended that, over time, a greater understanding of the ideas and concepts that artists explore in their work can be promoted. The study revealed the potential for differing perceptions of intention between cultural practitioners and governmental agencies; between highlighting the arts for cultural value in themselves and the view that arts are only valuable in social inclusion and educational terms. TOPOLOGIES can help to bridge these apparent gaps, and in developing and implementing the initiative one aim is to open up the experience of visual art to a broader audience and encourage professional recognition of artists. It is to be hoped that the one thousand residencies created by the Year of the Artist will go some way towards promoting the intrinsic values of cultural activity and the professional recognition of artists by local authorities and that TOPOLOGIES could further contribute to this process.

TOPOLOGIES aims to bridge and challenge the distinctions between 'High' and 'Low' culture, and to create an environment in which ordinary people are encouraged through their own natural curiosity to develop and enhance their creativity. In an era of rapidly expanding media provision through radio, digital and satellite television, the internet and wireless telephony the 'dumbing down' of mass media is inevitable due to commercial constraints. TOPOLOGIES offers an opportunity for works of high quality to be made available and accessible to the public without the need to resort to the lowest common denominator.

> *The public library service is indeed at the heart of society and its myriad communities. It reflects the values and experiences of society and challenges it with information and ideas from beyond.*
> (Source: The Library Association 2000)

TOPOLOGIES PROPOSED TIMESCALE AND STRUCTURE

February – April 2000 Initial Feasibility Study
Study supported by the Arts Council of England to establish interest in TOPOLOGIES as a whole and develop the relationships, framework and in-principle-support of potential partners such as the Department of Culture, Media & Sport; Museums, Libraries & Archives Council; the Library Association; the Society of Chief Librarians; the Arts Councils of England, Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland; the English Regional Arts Boards and other national organisations.

September 2000 Report Publication
Available to download in pdf format from www.topologies.org

TOPOLOGIES 3.5 year research development and implementation outline proposal
On the strength of the feasibility study the research team feels that the following would be needed to implement the full TOPOLOGIES initiative:

- a 12 month research and development phase to establish a new TOPOLOGIES organisation with charitable status, appoint trustees, recruit staff, identify and contact all potential partners in each of the four strands of the project, develop the necessary networks, run test projects and research internet portal content and technologies.(details below)
- a 6 month further facilitation and development phase to prepare the project to be launched at the beginning of the first implementation year. This includes; curate the initial artists' bookworks collections, curate and disseminate additional test commissions, commission education and interpretation content for the internet portal, set up initial residencies. (details below)
- a 2 year implementation

Objectives:
- 209 artists' bookworks collections across the UK
- 44 new public art commissions
- 34 artists residencies with workshops and projects
- audience reach: 58% (34.25 million) of UK population are registered public library users — over 10 million people visit a public library once per fortnight
- key internet portal with comprehensive education and interpretation materials for primary, secondary, further, higher and adult learning on contemporary artistic practices
- key digital domain for creative input by the public in relation to residencies, collections and commissions
- key networks of artists, librarians, local authority arts officers, regional arts board officers and national arts council officers

<u>12 Month Research and Development</u>

SETTING UP

Establish new non profit limited company with charitable status & appoint trustees

Establishing office, equipment and management systems

Recruitment and selection of staff

UK WIDE DEVELOPMENT

Further development and maintenance of relationships with the Council for Museums Archives and Libraries (www.resource.gov.uk), the Library Association(s), the Society of Chief Librarians, Local Government, the DCMS and Public Funding agencies.

REGION/COUNTRY SPECIFIC RESEARCH UK WIDE

Circulating the feasibility study and further information and making direct contact with chief librarians, library regions and arts and libraries officers across the whole country to ensure there is a clear understanding of the project and to identify potential partners

Building the complex network of partnerships with local and regional authorities, individual libraries and library and arts officers to develop ways to deliver the various strands that are appropriate to the regions.

Group discussions with librarians and arts workers across the UK to ensure greater understanding of the project and its flexible nature and to gather feedback.

Development of network of residency co-hosts

PUBLICITY

Ongoing development of material describing the project.

Circulation of material at stages during the development

Placing articles in both arts and libraries journals to highlight the project

Placing articles in library journals to gather interest and feedback

Maintaining a news and information service online at www.topologies.org

TEST PROJECTS

Development of a series of small projects to 'test run' aspects of the various strands of TOPOLOGIES. This will feed back directly into the research and development of the overall project.

INTERNET SITE AND EDUCATION

Research into internet portal to determine content and technical issues.

Research into educational requirements including consultancy with potential users

Development of internet portal structure and content

Identification of potential agencies to be commissioned to produce the comprehensive educational material which must be easily accessible to all educational institutions and so link to school and higher education curriculum's and well as being accessible to individuals.

Research into the potential for online projects on the internet portal

COMMISSIONS, RESIDENCIES, BOOKWORKS COLLECTIONS

Locate partners for hosting artists' residencies

Draw up shortlists of potential artists for residencies

Draw up shortlist of potential artists for commissions

Research into items to make up the Artists' bookworks Collections.

MARKETING
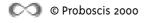
Development of marketing strategy

SPONSORSHIP

Identify and develop relationships with potential sponsors of the four strands

Development of sponsorship packages

Develop relationships with potential mentors and sponsors in kind

FUNDRAISING

Identify and analyse sources of public funding for various aspects of the project

Identify and analyse sources of funding from trusts and foundations

6 month further facilitation and development phase:
In addition to the above:

      Production of education materials
      Development of the internet portal
      Commissioning of content for the internet portal
      Curation of Commissions
      Curation of Bookworks Collections
      Facilitation of Residencies
      Development and production of initial print and marketing materials

Proposal for 2 years of project implementation
Launch of project:

      Artists' Bookworks Collections — curated collections disseminated to library authorities throughout the UK.
      Commissions — produced and disseminated to library authorities throughout the UK.
      Artists Residencies — on a staggered rolling programme
      Internet Portal — launch and continuing development of education and interpretation materials.

In a recent survey in Glasgow 92% of respondents said that the library was an important community resource.
(Source: Results of the Libraries and Archives Review Consultation Paper, Glasgow City Council, 1998)

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