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Technology has given us a smaller world

The Lessons from Germany

IT IS A TRUISM THAT EVERY TIME YOU SPEAK IN public you learn more than you teach. The event that proved that once again was the 8th Frankfurt Scientific Symposium on "21st Century Libraries: Changing Forms, Changing Challenges, Changing Objectives" in November. My spouse, Louise Berry, who directs the Darien Library, CT, and I participated, and the lessons we learned were manifold.

The learning began long before the event in a meeting with Jeff Hoover, an architect we know with Tappé Associates, whom we had asked to help us prepare. He generously shared both his pictures of new libraries and his incredibly creative ideas on the relationship of building design to library services and functions. Jeff taught me how important the design of interior library spaces is to facilitating new collaborative learning, the "browsability" and convenience of library use, and the enrichment of the user's experience. It resonated with me when he said, "Preserving public libraries as relevant institutions in the average person's routine experience is fundamental in maintaining a free society."

Among the lessons at the symposium itself was Sylvia Beiser's exciting view of the varied array of new public library development in Germany. A vision of proactive information service to students and faculty marked Wilma van Wezenbeek's report on the recently constructed library at the Technical University in Delft; her idea of "mobilizing information" seemed close to our own notion of a more proactive, evaluative information service in the United States.

Americans Norma Blake, *LJ*'s 2008 Librarian of the Year and State Librarian of New Jersey, and David Ferriero of the New York Public Library made us almost as proud of the dynamic changes in library service in that state and city as we were of the incredibly positive reaction of the Germans to our U.S. election. It was refreshing to be enthusiastically welcomed as Americans again, not only by the librarians but by every German we met.

Sabine Homulus, library director, and Jürgen Engel, architect, toured us through their inventive conversion of an empty bank building into a thriving, downtown, central public library for Frankfurt. They did that job at costs most cities could afford, an important lesson for library builders in the current economy. [See how U.S. libraries confronted their own building concerns in our architectural roundup, p. 36.]

Berndt Dugall showed us his new library for two depart-

ments at the University of Frankfurt. That exciting library clearly exhibits how a magnificent building can establish the importance and utility of a campus library facility. The library was packed with students one day after it opened, and every one of dozens of comfortable, fully wired, closed spaces for collaborative study by small groups of students was in use.

Northwestern University Library's Jeff Garrett, moderator for the Frankfurt symposium, delivered effective summaries in English that ensured that none of those lessons were lost to us because of our own linguistic limitations. After the Frankfurt symposium, we spoke at U.S. consulates in Hamburg and Berlin.

The whole trip gave us greater understanding of the impact of architecture and design on the future of library service to any campus, city, or town. It also delivered the larger message of how unbelievably small the world is now owing to technological networks and easy communication.

It was no surprise, for example, that librarians in Berlin and Hamburg were in regular communication with John Blyberg, head of technology at the Darien Library, and many other U.S. librarians. One such librarian, Patrick Danowski from the State Library in Berlin, asked, "Why did *Library Journal* welcome that anonymous blogger, the Annoyed Librarian (AL), to its web site?" I answered that I enjoyed AL, even though I often disagree with her (or him), and I admitted that we like it that the controversial blogger attracts readers like Danowski from all over the world.

The librarians in Germany face many of the same daunting challenges as their U.S. counterparts. That includes outstanding library professionals like Nancy Rajczak, who runs the Information Resource Center at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, and her colleagues Miriam Jaster in Frankfurt and Christiane Schaffer in Hamburg. The good news is that it is a lot easier for all of us, no matter where we are, to learn from each other now.

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