

Over the last ten years, the old world of print has been pushed aside by a complex hybrid universe of media types. This has led to an expanded mission for libraries, while at the same time raising questions about their traditional architectural form.

From Knowledge Warehouse to Public Paradise

21st Century Libraries: A Symposium in Frankfurt

by Ulrich Brinkmann¹

Where once there was literacy, now we have “iconographic competence.” Where librarians once tilled their walled gardens of painstakingly gathered and carefully preserved paper books, now they find themselves overseeing a community feel-good space. What was once a sacred hall where citizens toiled in silence, searching for knowledge, is now becoming a service point for information-mainlining “homo zappiens” expecting, even demanding instant gratification . . .

If we take seriously the remarks delivered mainly by American experts at the conference “21st Century Libraries: Changing Forms, Changing Challenges, Changing Objectives,” then architects fortunate enough to get a contract to build a library these days first need to clear their mental archives of existing building types. “21st Century Libraries” was an interdisciplinary and international conference held in early November 2008 in Frankfurt, Germany, organized jointly by the University Library of Frankfurt, the Academy of the Hessian Chamber of Architects, and the German Architecture Museum, with the support of several corporations and diplomatic missions, including the US Embassy in Berlin. In the course of two packed days, participants learned that the institution of the library, once decried a dusty and joyless place, has at least outside Germany successfully joined the digital revolution, adapting to the new reading and research behaviors of its users. Norma Blake, State Librarian of New Jersey, emphasized that in this new environment, architects would do well to avoid conveying any sense of loftiness or transcendence. Hers was the first but by no means the last allusion to a *bonmot* of Voltaire's quoted by conference moderator Jeffrey Garrett, librarian from Northwestern University Library in Evanston, Illinois, in his opening remarks, that great libraries have the quality of frightening those who look upon them. According to Blake, library users today learn through play or by interacting with others, and so libraries need to be places where these behaviors are supported and encouraged. But just what spatial concepts and design components are needed in these new libraries to distract much-courted user communities from the realization that acquiring education and character sometimes actually requires real effort?

Libraries Modeled after Shopping Malls, Disney Parks, Casinos

In Great Britain and the United States, the first libraries built to reflect the new user realities are open and ready for viewing. The papers (and powerpoints) of British

¹ Published in: *Bauwelt* 99, no. 44 (November 21, 2008), pp. 14–15

architectural historian Peter Blundell Jones, public library director Louise P. Berry, and John N. Berry III, editor of the *Library Journal*, each showcased libraries which appear to Europeans to have adopted the aesthetic standards of store window designers, even though these libraries are not physically located in shopping malls—though sometimes in fact they are, as is the case in Minneapolis and Salt Lake City. Other libraries, like the Cerritos Public Library in Los Angeles, have adopted the visual vocabulary of Disney amusement parks and the casinos of Las Vegas—whose designers, incidentally, have actually consulted for librarians in New Jersey, as Norma Blake reported, slightly embarrassed, only to add that librarians can in fact learn a lot from casino operators, especially when it comes to how customers are treated. So libraries have the responsibility to offer their visitors an experience, one having nothing to do with a willingness and readiness to first bury their noses in a book, but rather by bowling them over with architectural first impressions. David S. Ferriero, director of the New York Public Library, called this the “Wow Effect.” Ferriero presented first plans and drawings by architect Norman Foster for transforming the building of the famous New York Public Library on 5th Avenue, seemingly to eliminate everything intimidating from this monumental edifice erected in 1911.

Following the presentation by Norma Blake, one exasperated representative of an increasingly skeptical Old Europe asked pointedly “Where are the books?”, only to be told that she had in fact gotten it right regarding where the future was headed: Libraries are becoming “providers of experience, not collectors of knowledge.” In the future, according to John N. Berry III, public libraries will be supplying information less in book form than via “instant messaging, tweeting, podcasting, and video streaming.”

No doubt the situation and mission of public libraries in the United States, despite all the parallels, can't be grafted uncritically onto continental Europe. Sylvia Beiser, who described the situation in Germany, and Max Dudler, who presented his library projects for Münster, Berlin, and Essen, both defended emphatically the noncommercial character of these public places. Demographic change is also having an effect in Europe, and European libraries as well are striving to reach out to segments of big-city populations traditionally not as interested in traditional styles of education. It is very possible that the children of these groups won't be as reluctant to enter a library if it looks more like a store selling sports gear or cell phones. But if storage and circulation of books is no longer the focus of public libraries—college and university libraries will probably be spared this development—what then is their mission? What distinguishing characteristics can libraries use to appeal to their publics if they are trying at all costs to avoid looking like libraries?

Potential Roles: Urban Icon, Culture Clearinghouse, Treasure Chamber

At the start of his survey of library renovations and extensions around the world, Zurich architecture critic Hubertus Adam identified three possible roles for the libraries of today. The first would be their potential role as “urban icon,” realized brilliantly by Rem Koolhaas with his Seattle Public Library. “Urban icons” are buildings attractive enough to upgrade an entire city district. Second, a new library can serve as a cultural center

transcending just the traditional library services, reaching out with a wide range of events to appeal to as many urban constituencies as possible. Thirdly and finally, even today a library can be a place where the archiving and conservation of knowledge in print is still the highest goal. Which of these three potential roles is foregrounded for a particular project will depend on the given city, its social agenda, and its financial resources.

The review of libraries built worldwide in recent years reveals considerable design confusion on the part of both architects and their clients. According to architect and university professor Karl-Heinz Schmitz, an additional cause for this confusion is inherent to the evolution of architectural types. For libraries as for other structure types, form, function, and statement never evolve simultaneously. Looking back into the history of library buildings, the designs of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760–1834) displayed beyond any doubt that the builders were no longer of the feudal world. As libraries, however, his creations were fundamentally unworkable. It was not until Henri Labrouste (1801–1875) that the new public character of libraries found a satisfying spatial interpretation, one which remained the standard until Erik Gunnar Asplund (1885–1940) built the new City Library of Stockholm in the 1920s. As Schmitz put it in his remarks, the role of the library today is in transition, and it will take decades before this transformation finds a new and accepted spatial expression. Until that happens, the history of library buildings offers architects two basic concepts which they can draw upon to avoid what a number of Europeans present in Frankfurt suggested was the “randomness” of New World library structures. One of these is simply to continue focusing on the more traditional large central room. Another is to work with the more open and flowing spatial continuum of modern architecture.

Translated from the German by Jeffrey Garrett