Library Architecture: Some Observations

by BERNHARD FABIAN

I

To begin with, I am not a librarian, and I am not an expert on library architecture. For the past two decades my role (assigned to me by various librarians) has been that of the token user. And it is as a user that I am supposed to speak to you on a subject on which there appears to be more disagreement than one would initially expect.

Can the user be helpful as a commentator on the architecture of libraries? Perhaps, perhaps not. As we all know, the „user" comprises a spectrum of readers, all intent on making use of books (or other text-related media) but otherwise dissimilar in their practices and their pursuits. There are occasional users, habitual users and professional users. They may be skilled or incompetent, dull or sensitive, naive or sophisticated. In short, the variety is infinite.

You will be aware that all of them are selfish creatures. Whatever the differences between them, users are united by certain expectations. They expect the library to have all the books they require, and they expect the library to make the books they demand instantly available. These expectations cannot be directly related to a specific architectural design or pattern. Reduced to bare essentials, they seem to presuppose no more than a large, technically well-equipped „container".

Users who do their reading in the library (in contrast to those who merely borrow their books from it) have additional expectations. Again, the spectrum ranges widely, and the preferences are dictated by personal likes and dislikes. There are of course those who would love to retire to an armchair in a corner. But most readers, and in particular those who do research, require a large enough desk which can be lit, when needed, by a desk lamp, and a comfortable chair. More recently, a socket for the notebook has been added to the short list. And, or course, a copying machine nearby is always welcome, provided copying is allowed.

All this sounds, and indeed is, modest and elementary. But there are plenty of libraries (among them many university and research libraries) which do not provide adequate work-places. Chairs may have been selected for their stylish look rather than for their physical comfort. Desk lamps may have been deemed unnecessary (they might have distorted the overall impression which the reading room was expected to make) And so on. I keep wondering how many librarians have spent some time in their libraries as readers, and have assessed their reading rooms from the user's point of view. Have they been in a cubicle? Or have they read a book under glaring neon lights? Do they know how well their air-conditioning works? I know a library in which the only window that can be opened is in the librarian's office.

II

Will any technically well-equipped „room" built around a smaller or larger number of work-places make a good reading room? I hesitate to say no, because by saying no I move into a territory where we encounter strong likes and dislikes. But there is no denying that some reading rooms are loved by users, while others are rejected or even abhorred.

It seems to me that these preferences and disapprovals cannot and must not – at least not in the first place – be attributed to higher or lower technical standards. The requirements of the user are basic requirements. They are few, and they will always be elementary. But the needs of the reader can hardly be reduced to a desk and a chair. The point is that reading has a material basis, but is essentially a psychological process. Of the factors which influence the act of reading some are „external" and can easily be identified. If need be, ajustments can be made, so that the „external" environment of the reader can be controlled or manipulated.

Other factors are of a more intangible kind. They are of an „internal" nature, and are closely related to the psychological and intellectual aspects of the act of reading. To sit on a comfortable or an unformfortable chair is one thing. To be animated or distracted, to be invigorated or discouraged by the general atmosphere of a reading room is another. It is these „internal" factors which apparently account for the success or failure of a reading room.

From the user's point of view, the room in which he does his readingmay be said to constitute a kind of shell around the small space which he occupies in a large construction. The form in which this shell presents itself to him is not of primary importance. Reading rooms, as we know, come in all sorts of

shapes. They can be round or oval, oblong or polygonal. This does not matter. All of these rooms may ultimately prove satisfactory to the user, though there will of course be individual predilections for one or another.

What is of major significance to the serious reader is that his position vis-a-vis the book is a precarious one. Reading may be pure pleasure or enjoyment. But in the case of the scholarly or professional reader – the typical user of the research library – it is not, at least not in normal circumstances. For him, reading means struggling with an author, an idea, an argument. For him, reading is a persistent effort; it is hard work. It means attention, concentration, absorption for hours on end.

What matters to the serious reader is the feeling that he is being „supported" in his activity, that he is being given perceptible, though generally invisible, assistance. This feeling of being sustained or encouraged derives from the awareness that the „shell" constructed around his workplace has been framed not only with technical competence but also with some kind of appreciation or understanding of the nature of his enterprise.

Architects are not normally readers in the sense that they spend long hours in libraries. I wonder how many of those who have built libraries ever had a clear idea of what textual research is like, and what a life of learning spent in libraries really entails. As a consequence, in designing reading rooms most architects appear to concentrate on what I call the „external" factors – which are no doubt of great significance. They do not attribute equal importance to the „internal" factors. That is to say, they create reading rooms without really having a guiding image of the reader in their minds.

Readers are not only selfish creatures; they are also sensitive creatures. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, they sense a concern for what they need and want as they sense a blatant disregard of what they would like to have as a physical environment for their intellectual pursuits. Most architects are not, or not sufficiently, aware of the various ways in the user responds or reacts to his environment. Are librarians always aware of the situation of the reader in the library?

What is a successful reading room? I have been in many reading rooms in a number of countries, and I am fond of quite a few of them. But I do not wish to list my favourites and thereby imply that I have an aversion to others. However, I would like to single out one in which I first worked in 1954 and to which I returned, until recently, for at least a few weeks every year. The reading room does no longer exist, and therefore my praise of it will be unobjectionable.

I am referring to the Rare Books Room of the old British Library, generally called the North Library. It was designed by John James Burnet at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of the extension known as the King Edward VII galleries. The whole complex has received much praise and is considered to be one of the major architectural achievements of the period, if not of the century. Burnet's reading room contrasts sharply with the famous circular reading room built under Panizzi's auspices and which was recognized as model to be followed elsewhere („destiné à servir de type" in Proper Mérimée's words).[1] The North Library is (or, better, was) rectangular in shape and well proportioned, though comparatively modest in size. It felt neither too large nor too small. It was suitably and appropriately equipped, though be no means lavishly.

What was remarkable about it was the atmosphere that pervaded it. It had about it an air quiet dignity and an unobtrusive elegance that were hard to match. Like the whole complex to which it belonged it was of exemplary simplicity. Nothing needed to be added to it, and nothing could be taken away from it. It suggested to the reader that great care had been taken to provide him with a room that sustained him in his work and made it possible for him, in Panizzi's words, „to fathom the most intricate inquiries."[2] It was a busy room but surprizingly quiet, a room which was equally comfortable when crowded or sparsely occupied. Despite some shortcomings (which it also had and which readers either endured or complained of) it appeared to provide the perfect „shell" for a reader who pursued, as readers normally did, an enormous programme of reading. I have yet to encounter a reader who did not like the North Library – in spite of the occasional draughts which caused physical discomfort.

There are many reading rooms which provide a sharp contrast to this room which served – and delighted – the international scholarly community for nearly a century. These reading rooms will be found in various places in a number of countries and in a variety of institutional contexts. What groups them together is that they were all built in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, sometimes in the eighties. Today, they all provoke a feeling of uneasiness. Not only do they appear prematurely dated; they also appear to be more deficient and inedequate than they should be in view of their recent origin.

The reason is not far to seek. The sixties and seventies were a peculiar architectural period. Minimalism was then de rigeur, and brutalism was regarded as the hallmark of advanced modernism. Consciously or unconsciously, architects followed the would-be futuristic style of Le Corbusier. Reinforced concrete was the „natural" building material. To make the proper im-

pression on the beholder the concrete had to be fair-faced concrete. Only then did it really come up to the standards proclaimed by the progressivists.

There is no need to enlarge on this architectural concept. We all know the universities, the hospitals and the town centres then designed with blatant disregard for the prospective „user". His or her needs and wishes were simply ignored, sacrificed in the interest of higher social and architectural aspirations.

Reading rooms designed on these principles have a gloomy and depressing atmosphere about them, even it they are large and light. They do not seem to be intended for reading and study. To the architects who built them reading obviously did not recommend itself as a „modern" activity for which a correspondingly „modern" environment had to be created. In their view, reading was obviously not different from everyday office work. For them the reader apparently was an antiquated clerk, perhaps a descendant of the medieval monk for whom the smallest cell was good enough, as certain types of cubicle appear to suggest.

The disdain implied in the architectural design may not be obvious to everybody. But the sensitive reader is aware of it; he feels degraded and debased. There is no typical reaction to the architect's condescension on the part of users. But we all know that the brutalist architecture of the period has provoked, and is still provoking, hidden or open rebellion. Vandalism of various kinds is the result. The fate of some of Corbusier's projects is well known. Many library and university buildings erected in sixties and seventies are rotting away. The final stage of the process will inevitably be the physical as well as the intellectual slum.

But Le Corbusier's legacy consisted not only of so-called modules into which people were to be compressed. He was also the inventor of flowing transitions from room to room, resulting in a kind of dynamic spaciousness. His architectural expressionism imbues, it would seem, one of the most idiosyncratic reading rooms (and, indeed, libraries) of the seventies. I refer to Scharoun's celebrated State Library in Berlin.

Those familiar with it are agreed that ergonomically it is a problem, if not a disaster. Looked at from the user's point of view, the reading room is an enormous open space with fewer partitions than are required even by modest functional standards. Similar in conception to Scharoun's concert hall, it is a perfect example of architectural wilfulness. There are smaller and larger intersecting spaces, stairs up and down to open stacks, higher and lower platforms which are intended to disclose unexpected vistas, and so on. The underlying

assumption obviously is that the mind of the reader is a free-ranging mind, and that the library ought to provide a space in which this mind can voyage forever.

In my view, Scharoun's reading room is counter-productive. It distracts the reader instead of helping him to concentrate; it disperses his energies instead of assisting him to work economically; and it offers opulence and extravagance instead of providing essentials. The manuscript section (there is no separate room) is inedequate; there is no rare books room; and, characteristically, the individual cabins (too few for a library of this size) are placed in the darkest part of the reading room, so that they require artificial lighting. Faulty design is ubiquitous. The whole building is an architectural caprice realized at the reader's expense.

III

More recently, library architecture appears to have improved, and the nineties may eventually go down in history as a period of considerable achievement. There are, of course, the usual post-modern aberrations, as in other branches of architecture. And there are – most regrettably – some failures on a grand scale. But, on the whole, many new library buildings are of a fairly high standard. And great care has normally been taken to create an environment for the reader which is both ergonomically satisfactory and aesthetically appealing.

Among the new trends in library architecture one of the most significant appears to be the discovery or, rather, rediscovery of the book as a major element in the design of a library. That is to say, architects pay again attention to the fact that a library is more than its reading room. The reading area (or areas) are of course central to it. But the library is also a storehouse for books. It is the place where the book asserts itself in its importance and in its uniqueness as a medium.

Librarians are likely to experience the massive presence of the book more as a technical problem than as a symbolic manifestion. Books, as we all know, can be a burden, and the librarian is the architypal sufferer from the burden of the book. He may see little reason for celebrating or even exalting the book. But in fact nearly all of the great libraries of the past were conceived as monuments, if not as shrines, of the book. There is no need here to go back to the eighteenth century or even to the seventeenth. The significant period is the nineteenth century. The pattern was set by Antonio Panizzi with the round

reading room of the British Museum. For its period, it was ergonomically perfect with the rows of seats radiating from the central catalogue. At the same time, there can be no denying that it was intended to be more than a mere reading room: it is a dome erected to worship the book.

When the last of the nineteenth-century domed reading rooms was opened in Berlin in 1913, Adolf von Harnack, then Director General of the Royal Library, opened his speech in a suitably theological fashion: „'Habemus domum' we exclaim today – in truth a scientific dome (*Dom der Wissenschaft*), not only a house."[3] Appropriately, the nineteenth-century reader ascended to the reading room – in London, in Paris, in Berlin and, above all, in Munich where a magificent stair-case leads up to the sanctuary of the book.

Present-day architects – or at least some of them – appear to be acutely aware of the symbolic function of the library, especially the great library, and of the implications which the symbolism has for the design of a major library. One of them writes: „There are certain types of building over which there hovers an aura of myth. The most transcendent of all, the cathedral, is grounded in the sacred so that both form and pattern of use are fused in the language of ritual. But there is one type of building which is profane yet in fulfilling its proper role touches the hem of the sacred: the great library... The library and what it houses embodies and protects the freedom and diversity of the human spirit in a way that borders on the sacred."[4]

It may come as a surprize that this is the opening sentence of the small book which Colin St John Wilson wrote on the new British Library. By common consent, this is a thoroughly modern building, and it is also a perfect example of highly restrained classicism in modern architecture. It is a success with the reader, and – if I am not mistaken – it is also generally considered to be a building which fulfils its proper role as a house of the book. Still, there are critics, and their point is that it does not sufficiently stress the significance of the book. The most outspoken of them, I need hardly remind you, is the Prince of Wales is his *Vision of Britain*, subtitled „A Personal View of Architecture." His critism is devastating: „Take the new British Library. How can you even tell that it is a library? I has no character to suggest that it is a great public building. And the Readig Room looks more like the assembly hall of an academy for secret police. It could not contrast more sharply with what's replacing – the beautiful old Reading Room in the British Museum."[5]

There is no need to go into details here (Charles has been refuted architects). However, one point appears to emerge clearly: the design of libraries ought to emphasize the special role which the book has played, and is likely to play for a long, long time, in our culture, which is essentially a text-culture. Nobody

will expect modern architects to celebrate, or even worship, the book in the same way as the nineteenth-century architects did when they created the monumental national libraries of the period. But there seems to be a general feeling that the dignity of the book must be preserved, and that the modern architect must find appropriate ways and means to assert the time-honoured position of the book.

I want to draw attention to only two examples. One is the entrance hall of the new British Library. It displays in a six-floor tower of bronze and glas the King's Library formerly housed in the noble and elegant nineteenth-century room designed by Robert Smirke. The idea of the book tower is not new (it is derived from the Beinecke Library) but in the hands of Colin St John Wilson it has retained its originality. The tower, restrained as it is, gives the book a powerful presence. It is a symbolic form which can hardly be surpassed in its expressiveness.

The other example is again an entrance hall – that of the National Library of Croatia in Zagreb. The building is very recent and very contemporary in its design. [6] The atrium is cut out diagonally from an rectangular design, extends over all levels of the building and has glass walls. It does not display any books, but its extraordinary spaciousness announces the existence of yet invisible treasures. It creates an environment which is at once inviting and threatening, urbane and arcane.

IV

Libraries, we have been told for some time, are changing, and the library of the future will differ radically from that of the past. Whether or not the future library will be one without books is likely to remain an open question for a long time. In the forseeable future it is bound to be a hybrid library, to use the jargon term, comprising books as well as texts stored electronically.

What the modern or future-bound part of the hybrid library will be like from the architectural point of view is not difficult to anticipate. It will have to be a highly functional room or building stuffed with the appropriate equipment; in other words: a kind of consulting room in which textual objects can be searched, inspected, or manipulated. Those who wantto envisage it, should remember that even Bill Gates is not prepared to read more than a few pages on the screen. The design of the electronic library does not appear to be a particularly appealing task for the architect. In all probablity, there will be few surprises.

It is at the traditional end of the hybrid library that the interesting developments are likely to occur. Many large, or larger, libraries have to expand. Increasingly, historical collections (however they are defined) are separated from modern collections. A number of major libraries have already been split, or are about to be split, into two libraries. As a rule, the modern collections are housed in a new building, whereas the historical collections are retained in the old building, which often dates back to the nineteenth or the eighteenth century and is likely to be of considerable architectural interest. Examples of one library in two buildings can be found, to give but a few examples, in Göttingen, in Ljubljana, in Berlin, and in St. Petersburg. Others are likely to follow, once this type of library is fully established.

With the new general interest in historic environments old library buildings inevitably receive attention. To restore them and adapt them to present-day requirements is regarded as a particular challenge by historically-minded architects, and some of their efforts have been highly successful. Wolfenbüttel is an early example in Germany, and the University Library in Halle one of the more recent. In addition, there are many smaller libraries, predominantly academic libraries, which have profited from these exercises in conservation.

In many cases historical collections have been neglected for a long time. They are now being rediscovered and have to be reinstated as a central element of our cultural tradition. This has had, and will have, far-reaching consequences for the architectural design or re-design of libraries. The major single factor to be taken into consideration is that the huge endeavours since the sixties to convert the printed traditions of individual countries into secondary form have proved to be inadequate. Contrary to all expectation, micro-libraries have not replaced the original library collections. At best, the have served as a substitute for printed material in need of special protection. Generally speaking, all secondary modes of presentation have produced a new interest in, and a new demand for, the original – to the surprize not only of librarians but also of other custodians of cultural artifacts. Virtual tours through museums have not replaced visits to the museums themselves. The rare book rooms in the major research libraries are as crowded as ever.

Practically all libraries with relevant historical collections are urgently in need of support both moral and financial for their efforts to preserve their holdings in an indifferent or unsympathetic cultural climate. To find this support they have begun to solicit the help and backing of the interested general public. Following the example of the museums, they surround themselves with Societies of Friends to whom they can appeal for help. The well-known campaigns for the „adoption of a book" are now part of the strategies of many libraries.[7]

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The point to be made is that libraries – traditionally reserved and reticent institutions – are taking unprecedented steps to attract public attention and to win public support. There have of course always been patrons of libraries. But never before have libraries tried to engage the interest of so broad a public, as they do now and will presumably do more frequently and more intensively in the future.

If one looks at the library not only as a reader but also as a „friend", institutional and architectural changes appear to be inevitable. As an institution, the library will of course remain a library and perhaps stress even more strongly than it did before its traditional role and nature. But „friends" must be received, and „friends" ought to be entertained. This requires facilities which in the past libraries could do without.

The fact that many libraries now stage more exhibitions than before must be taken as an indication that they regard themselves as museums of the book in a novel and still largely undefined sense. Of course, the great libraries have always had some of their treasures on permament display. But this was hardly understood as a museum activity. There are now also plenty of temporary exhibitions of a hitherto unfamiliar kind. Imaginatively conceived, most of them them appear to be directed to a new, broadly defined general public.

Moreover, libraries serve more frequently now than they did in the past as conference centres. Conference facilities in libraries used to be rare, if they existed at all. They gradually become standard. Libraries also invite scholars as fellows, and conceivably more and more special facilities will be provided for non-resident researchers among the library's „friends".

That museums have acquired a new social function is a truism. Whether or not one welcomes this development is another matter. Museums have become influential factors in the urban environment, and they likely to play a key role in the urbanism of the future. There are museum shops, and there are museum cafés. In one of the world's great museums the café has already been advertised as a nice café with a museum attached. For obvious reasons, libraries will not be able to compete with museums. They will not attract a comparable number of visitors. But in their own way, libraries, too, will assume – and will have to assume – a new public role. They will become cultural centres. Here and there they are already regarded by town planners as component elements in long-term strategies of urban renewal.

To my knowledge, there is as yet no single library which could be said to embrace all the features which will make up the library of the future. But as a the cultural complex the library – that is to say, the traditional library preserving

the pinted tradition – will differ architecturally and institutionally from the library which we know or habitually envisage. The first of the new cultural complexes appear to be in the making. The Royal Library in Copenhagen has been redone, and is expressly conceived as a cultural centre. Similarly, the National Library of Austria is being reorganized. In addition to pursuing its own cultural activities, it will open itself, according to an official announcement, to as broad a public as possible.[8]

May I end on a piece of recent news which appears to announce the cultural future? The Museum of Modern Art, opened in 2001 as part of the new museum complex in Vienna, has already been closed for repairs. One of the structural changes in the museum will be the addition of facililities for sponsoring events. According the new director, they are urgently needed but were inadvertently omitted when the museum was planned.[9]

REFERENCES

1   See Arundell Esdaile, *The British Museum Library* (London 1948), p. 119.

2   Quoted from Edward Miller, *Prince of Librarians: The Life and Times of Antonio Panizzi of the British Museum* (London 1967), p. 120.

3   Translated from Harnack's *Wissenschaftspolitische Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Bernhard Fabian (Hildesheim etc. 2001), p.136.

4   Colin St John Wilson, *The Design and Construction of The British Library* (London 1998), p. 7.

5   *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture* (London 1989), p. 65.

6   The library was conceived by four architects: Velimir Neidhardt, Davor Mance, Zvonimir Krznari• and Marjan Hr i•.

7   See Graham Jefcoate, „'Adoptieren Sie unsere Bücher': Gedanken zum Stiftungswesen in modernen Forschungsbibliotheken", *Buchhandelsgeschichte,* 2001/4, pp. B 133-B 138.

8   See Österreichische Nationalbibliothek: *Newsletter* no. 1 (February 2002), p.7.

9   ORF, *Zeit im Bild,* 8 January 2002.