

Main Introduction

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Libraries are treasure troves of knowledge and shrines of wisdom. They preserve the experiences and insights of centuries, indeed millennia, and make them accessible to the interested, the students, the curious, and researchers alike. Just a few decades ago, they were the heart of every university, college, and educational institution. There, scholars and students sat with bowed heads over texts and books, reading, taking notes, looking things up, while the knowledge of all times unfolded before them. They worked there, just like their teachers and generations before them had done: the scholars of the Baroque era, the humanists of the Renaissance, or the monks since antiquity.

Of course, many things transformed over the centuries. The number of books grew, the spaces expanded, and at one point, books were chained down, only to be liberated once again a few centuries later. At one point, the library could be heated during the winter months, except when war caused shortages of wood or coal. The lighting also improved significantly; gas lamps illuminated the space with their soft glow, while the advent of electric bulbs suddenly flooded the rooms with bright, crisp light. Naturally, technology made its way in, air-conditioning came, elevators brought books from deep basements and the first microfiches turned up, which meant that some texts were only accessible through a microfiche reader that allowed the projection of tiny film images onto a screen. Obviously, the students and scholars changed. Long since, they no longer wore monk's robes, and stiff coats or gowns fell out of fashion; wigs were worn at one point, only to go out of style again, with hair fluctuating between being short and long. Women claimed their rightful space, and what may have initially caused disbelief and nervous smiles from their male peers soon became as normal as coffee machines in the entrance area.

Yet, despite all this change, the library remained the heart of every educational institution. Moreover, for the last two centuries, libraries have been the centre of learning, knowledge, ideas, and intellectual life. Already schoolchildren visited them after class, adults read newspapers and the newest books, and both the middle classes and the nobility found access to distant times and worlds within their walls. Alongside salons and scholarly circles, they served as a cradle for new ideas. To give an example: The legendary British Museum gathered great thinkers of their

time in its fascinating reading room—this Globe Theatre of learning, where the books looked like an audience down at the readers at the stage—such as Karl Marx, who conducted significant research there, or literary figures of the era like George Orwell, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Hardy, to name just a few.

When we enter a university library today, much has changed. Some older patrons might still read a book, but on most tables, there are only tablets of laptops with their milky-blue glowing screens, a smartphone, and perhaps a thermos, if the library rules allow it—hardly any pens, paper, or even books in sight. Only the quiet tapping of keys on the keyboards fills the space. People no longer come here mainly to access knowledge, as they can conveniently do so from home or equally from a lonely Baltic Sea beach, Bamberg or the Bahamas. An unprecedented revolution in access to knowledge has taken place. The treasures of knowledge are no longer found in bookshelves and archives, and avid readers no longer pass by endless rows of books with inquisitive eyes; instead, they scroll on their computers, the new gateway to the world of knowledge. Access to knowledge appears to have become universal, realizing the dream of countless generations of scholars.

Perhaps these processes have rendered the library as obsolete as public bath-houses, quills, inkwells, and telephone boxes: the Cambridge University Library by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, whose tower may remind us of his famous red telephone boxes, might soon become a symbol of its own obsolescence. But such a swan song seems premature. For students and people are still coming to libraries. It is no longer necessarily the books that draw them in. Is it the atmosphere of collaborative work, the space of shared concentration, the solemn seriousness of bookshelves (even if they are hardly filled in some newly constructed libraries)? What do people expect here, why do they come, and how do libraries, as well as the colleges and institutions that plan and build them, respond to this? And what does this mean for architecture? What spatial design do libraries adopt to effectively meet the changing request of their time and the emerging challenges of today?

Especially the architectural questions are posed in this book, which stems from a conference on “Shrines of Wisdom – Learning, Knowledge, and the Architecture of Libraries” that was held at Jesus and Pembroke Colleges (Cambridge University) in October 2022.

The aim is to contextualise libraries, particularly university and college libraries, and their design within a broader and deeper understanding. It is essential to consider the historical dimension to explore how and when libraries were conceived and built, what needs they met, and what concepts of knowledge, education, and the human being as an inquisitive reader informed their development. The historical studies open up a wide range of different questions about knowledge, learning and education to which libraries give architectural answers. However, to understand them adequately, we must also consider their cultural significance, as well as repeatedly focus on the human being who seeks access to knowledge here. While it may some-

times seem that libraries exist solely for the benefit of books (and some librarians view their calling as protecting and defending the books from people), the primary focus should clearly on people: their access to knowledge, education, and personal development. This necessitates a better understanding of the significance of knowledge for human beings: how do people read, how do they acquire knowledge, and what role does the environment play?

Thinking about libraries must, however, also be ready to leave the path of functional dedication in a more technical sense and ask how the identity of a school, a college or a university is expressed by means of architectural structures. When new libraries were conceived, the expense usually far extended the purely operational benefits of a new functional structure. The best architects available were hired to design libraries as landmarks of tradition and innovation, of grandeur and excellence. In other words, the library often had to shoulder the greatest part of the representational ambitions of universities and colleges, and they continue to do so. Before we condemn these efforts as ostentatious displays of pomposity, we have to realise that all social structures—including architecture—have to manage to establish bonds of identification and belonging with all their users and recipients, and a refined and outstanding appearance is one of the most reliable measures to accomplish this difficult task.

Obviously, a full understanding of the multitude of functions of libraries demands a diverse, multidisciplinary perspective, and these fundamental inquiries have to be partly descriptive and analytical, but also normative, as we must consider future developments to determine what spatial design is most appropriate for the reading individual.

Such fundamental considerations of architecture, knowledge, education, and humanity—brought together in the first part of this book—must be validated through analyses and evaluations of specific buildings. This is the task of the second part, where a multitude of individual analyses can be found, which not only describe very different library buildings but also relate them to the underlying ideas and concepts.

What can be the outcome of such a book? We hope that it will inspire the reader to deeply reflect on the important and complex task of understanding what libraries mean—what they have represented in the past, but also what they still signify today and how they can adapt to the significant changes we face. Hegel claimed that we can only ever understand properly the past, but we must remain optimistic that our understanding will also lead to thoughtful contemplations about the present and empower us to face future challenges, enabling us to approach them with insight and deeper understanding. If this book can provide such impetus, it will have found its purpose.