

INSIGHT



Sendai Mediatheque, Japan. Photo © Hideki Yoshida

Designing Libraries

The search for modernity



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The modernisation of libraries across the world over the past several decades parallels the search for modernity in library architecture. The library is no longer, architecturally, the imposing façade of a temple to knowledge and, internally, an organised repository of books ‘for all persons desiring to make use thereof’, in the constraining words of the UK’s outdated Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, but a communal space in which we see a blurring of the lines between building, books and people – between space, knowledge and learning.

Some months back I had an interesting conversation with Czech architect Pavla Melková, who spoke passionately about the ‘poetry’ of library architecture, and the imaginative relationship between architecture and the book. Just as a book of itself is merely a physical object, literally a closed book until you open it, a library building is similarly a material enclosure until people animate it. The wider public space in which it is situated is simply somewhere people flow through until they stop, stay and have an interesting experience. Redefined, a library is such a place. Architecturally, the challenge is to design a space that is open and not closed, filled with light that comes from both inside and outside, literally and imaginatively.

The dematerialisation of the library

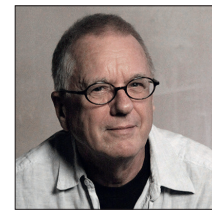
The architectural journey in search of modernity has been tracked in an interesting essay by Daniel Gil-Solés, *From symbolic temple to dematerialisation* (independently published and available from Amazon). One of the starting points he

identifies is the 1972 Exeter Library, New Hampshire, by architect Louis Kahn who sought a ‘new form and a new modern conception of libraries, which is still alive and well’. Its classic status is derived from the library’s main floor that reaches 70 feet in height and soaks in natural light from a clerestory at the top of this space and from large expanses of glass on the north and west sides, where, in Kahn’s words, the reader can bring the book to light.

But, in the view of Gil-Solés, the 21st century, ‘the century of mass digitisation’, was born in Sendai in 2001 with the first iteration of a Media Library, by Japanese architect Toyo Ito. Its unique engineering is designed to create a transparent cultural media centre with complete visibility to the surrounding community. The open space includes a café, retail shop, and community space that can support film screenings and other events. Novel in its time – but now, after almost two decades of further digitisation, are we seeing ‘the breakdown of walls and of the secular isolation of the library?’ The library space is being transformed as we move towards a library without books, but ‘filled by users who interact and talk’.

But where is the librarian’s space?

In following through this transformation Gil-Solés cites the example of the library of the University of Amsterdam, where open shelves have given way to interactive spaces, and books requested online are delivered to students in red plastic crates. It was designed as a second ‘home’ for students, where they could both study and relax, a temporary library concept in anticipation of an eventual new library. That library building is now underway, due to open in 2022, and the architectural concept clearly continues the evolutionary journey of the library in the age of



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digitisation. ‘The function is changing from book repository to a place where learning and meeting occur in the broadest sense of the word,’ says the University’s website. [<https://uba.uva.nl/en/new-ub/design/design.html>] Again, the integration of interior and exterior spaces and the use of natural light underline where libraries of all types are moving.

But where is the librarian’s space located in the digitised and dematerialised library space we are evolving? Perhaps, as Gil-Solés suggests towards the end of his essay, given the idea of the newly fluid, even ephemeral library space, but the permanence of the need for information and knowledge, the librarian will become a sort of guerrilla warrior, popping up wherever he or she is needed, and wherever this flowing public space comes to rest before it moves on again. **IP**

Source
Architectural descriptions of Exeter Library, Sendai and the University of Amsterdam can be found in the archive of archdaily.com, from which I have quoted in this article.