

WHERE IS THE LIBRARY?

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Abstract

Urban tissue is composed of public spaces and their complementary buildings, most of which form a background for the less numerous monumental structures. Their value and importance is derived from the part they play within the city (for instance that of a church, a museum, an opera, a train station, etc.), and which finds its confirmation in their distinct architectural form and deliberate placement in areas that are vital to the perception of the form of a city. The compatibility of these three components – those of status, distinct architectural form and deliberate placement – makes them *important structures*. Regardless of historical, political or economic circumstances, the form of important structures has always been an expression of the aspirations and capabilities of a given period. Over the centuries, libraries have been a part of this group of structures. Currently, due to the civilisational transformation tied to the advancement of information technologies, the status of libraries within cities is undergoing substantial changes. Their modern architectural form is changing as well. In many cases it no longer expresses such values as durability, stability and solemnity, which had defined library buildings over the centuries, providing them with a particular distinctness. Is the deliberate placement of libraries in areas that are important to the perception of the form of a city still important in the face of the changes that are affecting the other two components that have been previously mentioned? The paper includes one of the possible answers to the question: *where is the library?*

The only thing that you absolutely have to know, is the location of the library.

Albert Einstein

The new role of libraries

The desire to gather all the knowledge and all of the experiences of the universe in one universal archive, that is going to encompass all locations and time periods, and which itself is going to be located away from the destructive reach of time, has accompanied humanity since

the dawn of history. Throughout the ages, this desire has remained unchanged, despite the shifting needs and aspirations of man and the technical possibilities that were the deciding factors behind the forms of library buildings. The effects of the aforementioned aspirations were library buildings that, apart from fulfilling their main utilitarian role, expressed the contemporary values of a given time and the distinct qualities of libraries, such as durability and safeness, but also openness and harmony¹.

The changes in spatial and temporal relations that are currently happening in relation to numerous institutions and public spaces due to information technology, have caused the concept of the library to undergo a process of redefinition. The modifications are, for the most part, focused on the structure, the functional programme and the services that are being provided, which evolve under the influence of information technology. The changes are expected to result in conditions that are going to be conducive to the upholding of the feeling of cultural continuity and identity, which seems particularly important in a situation that features the drastic acceleration of civilisational processes, something which does not remain without influence on the psychological condition of man. [...] *The most crucial task before us is not one of putting in place the digital plumbing of broadband communication links and associated electronic appliances (which we will certainly get anyway), nor even of producing electronically deliverable "content", but rather, one of imagining and creating digitally mediated environments for the kinds of lives that we will want to lead and the sorts of communities that we will want to have.* (Mitchell, 1996, p. 5).

Transitional periods are marked by uncertainty and disorientation. Routines and old habits tied to a well known status quo are often replaced with resentment and irritation. However, these transitional periods are also a time of searching and creative ferment. This description also applies to libraries. A lack of certainty regarding the future fate of books and libraries generates energy and involvement in the search for a new formula of the library of the future. The immense diversity that regards both the search itself, the resources that are available, as well as the goals that have been set, causes a wide diversification in both the final solutions, as well as in the routes that had been taken in order to develop them. In his photographic essay titled *Borrowed Time. How do You Build a Public Library in the Age of Google?*² published in the online *Slate* magazine, Witold Rybczyński³ presents – in a very compact manner – the possible strategies of the functioning of libraries under these new conditions. The starting point of his deliberations were the results of an audit ordered by the municipal authorities of the city of Washington, the conclusions of which included a recommendation for the demolition of the central library designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe – built in the 1960's – and replacing it with a new building. The justification for the recommendation in the opinion of the municipal authorities was the fact that the current library was outdated, as it had been built long before the onset of the digital world. Rybczyński pointed out that many American cities, aware of the

¹ B. Homiński, *Wpływ współczesnych przemian cywilizacyjnych na nową rolę bibliotek w strukturze miasta*, doctoral thesis developed under the supervision of dr hab. inż. arch. Anna Palej, prof. PK, Krakow, 2011.

² <http://www.slate.com/id/2184927/>, retrieved on 25.03.2016.

³ Witold Rybczyński – an architect, writer, critic and professor of architecture, who strives to popularise the topic of architecture among non-professionals. Author of the books *Home: A Short History of an Idea* and *The Most Beautiful House in the World*.

coming changes, built new library buildings in the final decade of the XX century. As an answer to the new challenges faced by these institutions, they have been provided with computers and their functional programme has been expanded to include additional elements such as auditoriums and exhibition halls. An expression of the uncertainty regarding the future fate of libraries is, on the one hand, the commonly used monumental architectural costume, which made many of the libraries that have been built at that time (for instance in Chicago, San Francisco or Nashville) similar to the XIX century public buildings in the Beaux-Arts style, expressing a yearning for stability, durability and predictability. On the other hand, the statement that the aforementioned qualities should no longer be used to describe libraries has become the starting point of the search for a different vision. A goal of escapades, a meeting place, where something is always going on, where it is good to be seen and which resembles a Starbucks⁴, this is the new image of a friendly library, known to us from some American cities (Seattle, for instance). Rybczyński finished his essay by concluding that the role of libraries as a meeting space is still viable and is tied to the old need to meet face to face with another person. In this statement Rybczyński agrees with Umberto Eco, who in the year 1997, while speculating on the subject of the changes that are going to be brought about by universal Internet access, stated: *I don't see the point of having [...] people online at all if all they are doing in the end is talking to ghosts in the suburbs*⁵.

It appears that the currently observed changes that libraries are undergoing are of a different character than those which have been forcing the evolution of the form of their space up to the end of the XX century. Until now, these factors have mostly included the emergence of new carriers of information and the rising pace of gathering the elements of their collections. The current change is fundamental and involves primarily the symbolic layer of the concept of the library itself, while it expresses itself in the process of the abandonment of treating libraries as *treasure troves of wisdom* or as *places where wisdom is cherished and access to it is celebrated*⁶. They are to be replaced by *libraries that are human – libraries that are joyful, where you can drink a cup of coffee with cream [...] – a library, which a person wants to visit and which is going to gradually transform into a giant machine for spending free time in, like the Museum of Modern Art, where a person can go to the cinema, to take a stroll around the garden, to see the sculptures or eat a two course dinner*⁷.

The new architectural forms of libraries

In 2007 Andrew McDonald, who, at the time, was the director of the library of the University of East London in Great Britain, provided a revised and updated version of the then-acceptable

⁴ Starbucks – a global chain of coffee shops with over 23 thousand branches all over the world, which bases its mission on the concept of the third place, coined by the urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg, cf. R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1999.

⁵ A statement made by Umberto Eco in an interview by Lee Marshall, Wired, <http://www.wired.com/1997/03/ff-eco/>, retrieved on 25.03.2016.

⁶ J. Kabrońska, *Forma rozwiązań architektonicznych jako droga realizacji idei biblioteki przyszłości*, doctoral thesis written under the supervision of prof. Marian Sztafrowski, Faculty of Architecture of the Gdańsk University of Technology, Gdańsk, 1993, p. 5.

⁷ U. Eco, *O bibliotece*, Świat Książki, Warsaw, 2007, p. 47-48.

standards of designing library buildings⁸ in a groundbreaking article titled *The Top Ten Qualities of Good Library Space*, in which he included the changing needs of their users, the spread of information technologies and the tendencies that were emerging in the contemporary designs of such buildings. The theses that had been formulated by McDonald and were later published, have the character of guidelines and factors to be discussed before commencing with the design work on a library building, rather than being a strict set of requirements. In terms of their application to architectural design, they pertain first and foremost to the functional aspects of library buildings. Apart from a set of ten qualities of a good library space, which were mostly based on earlier standards, Andrew McDonald mentioned another quality desired of a library, which he called the *wow factor*, or the *oomph factor*. Through the use of this hard to define quality, McDonald understood a distinct space, which captivates the minds of its users and expresses the spirit of the institution. In terms of architecture, it should have the capacity to surprise and make a strong impression on the observer. The *wow factor* is thus a part of a library that is immensely dependent on the actions of its architect. Since the end of the 1990's, the *wow factor* has been deliberately used by clients, architects and architecture critics as a desirable trait of buildings, especially public ones – libraries included. The method of the implementation of the presence of the *wow factor* in the design of a library building can be influenced by, for instance, the mission of a library, the wider context in which a library is being established and, first of all, the sensitivity and talent of the designer.

If the role, function and importance of modern libraries are undergoing far reaching changes – as has already been mentioned – we can assume that the typologies that have been established over the years, as well as the tried and tested functional and spatial solutions or ingrained architectural costumes of libraries, and perhaps even the modernist tenet that the form is to follow function – are also going to be subjected to a revision. This is indeed happening right now. The search for the presence of the *wow factor* is expressed through architectural designs that are characterised by, among other things:

- the combination of the function of a library with other, often equally important components within larger complexes, the combined function of which is not identifiable through their architectural form;
- the interconnection and mixing of the exterior and interior space, which leads to innovative solutions which blur the line between the interior and the exterior;
- the combination of often opposing qualities within a single building and the unwillingness to chose between two mutually exclusive options;
- the abandonment of set patterns in favour of a deeper analysis, an individual approach and, as a result – a unique, often shocking solution;
- the combining of public and private interests into one structure, and
- the styling of interiors based on a distinct visual motif.

The qualities mentioned above are conducive to the construction of mixed-use buildings. The parts that enrich their often complex programme can also be composed of other cultural facilities, non-government organisations, as well as commercial entities. In order to better

⁸ The so-called 'ten commandments' of planning libraries by Harry Faulkner-Brown.

integrate each of these elements, the interior circulation space can be shaped after the manner of external public spaces – streets and squares. Such buildings, due to the functional and spatial complexity of their architectural form, often utilise one of two mutually opposing strategies: - that of outlining each element of the mixed-use building within its massing, or - the unification of its constituent elements within a cohesive form, behind a unified facade.

Where is the library?

Is the deliberate placement of libraries in places that are important for the perception of the form of a city still important in the face of the changes in terms of the tasks that are currently being fulfilled by libraries in the lives of societies and the shifts in regards to the architectural form of their buildings? Does discussing the placement of a library within the plan of a city still have merit in a time of a widespread *connection to the cloud* from any possible place, and in which *our libraries are made without walls, meant for books without pages*⁹?

The substance of a city is composed of a network of public spaces and its complementary built environment. Two types of this environment can be easily distinguished within historical cities: the neutral type, used mostly for residential purposes and which is clearly dominant in terms of its area, as well as the monumental structures which stand out from their background. The latter group has mostly been composed of the fortifications of cities, temples, the residences of rulers, theatres, places of commerce, exchanges, museums, offices, train stations and other public buildings. The scale of their massing, the materials they were built with and the language of their architecture have been subjected to the role and status of a given structure within the life of a community and in the plan of the city, and – in accordance with the principle of appropriateness (*decorum*) – communicated the type of institution that was housed within. The importance of monumental buildings found its confirmation in the form of three components - a particular type of use, a distinct architectural form and a location in an area which was important in the life of a community and the perception of a city¹⁰. It was also highlighted by the deliberate composition of public spaces that helped to make a city more legible - the streets and squares, with a logical pattern of axes, planes, accents, dominants, etc., in which the strong and dominating forms – potential points of orientation – are characterised by a placement that is adequate to their size and character.

The modern guidelines regarding the placement of libraries stress its practical aspects. The aforementioned guidelines by Andrew McDonald direct our attention at the physical accessibility of a library building and an arrangement that minimises the psychological barriers that potential users can come across. The guidelines provided by professional library associations, on the other hand, point to:

- the physical accessibility of a library with various forms of transport, with preference towards group transport for a group of future users;
- placement in the vicinity of other institutions –both public and commercial – that are important to the functioning of local communities;

⁹ J. Browning, *Libraries without Walls for Books without Pages*, Wired, 1, 1993.

¹⁰ J. Gyurkovich, *Architektura w przestrzeni miasta. Wybrane problemy*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Krakow, 2010, p. 59.

- the potential positive influence of a library on its surroundings.

Contrary to theatres or museums, libraries are cultural institutions that are regularly visited by the same users. It is due to this reason that the most desirable location for one is to be placed centrally within the area that is to be serviced – be it a university campus, a district or a city.

The following paragraphs contain a discussion of two examples of library buildings that have been built in medium-sized Polish cities, and which include novel solutions regarding the placement of libraries in combination with a node of the rail transportation network.

Stacja Kultury

The public library in Rumia has been operating out of a new building since the year 2014. It takes up, along with a group of non-government organisations, the larger part of the existing train station. The other, smaller part (around 20% of the building's area) is taken up by the spaces required for the servicing of the passengers – their size having been greatly reduced in accordance with modern standards. The atypical use of the former building of a train station for the purposes of a library became a pretext for it to begin operating under the name *Stacja Kultury*¹¹ (*Culture Train Station*, or *Train Stop Culture* in English), which found its reflection in the design of its interior, which features numerous references to the railroad-related past of the building. The clever arrangement of the interior designed by the Sikora Wnętrza interior design practice has been awarded the *Library Interior Design Award* in the year 2016 in the *Single Space Design* category by the *American Library Association (ALA)* and the *International Interior Design Association (IIDA)*. Despite the fact that the library in Rumia is not located within the geometric centre of the city, it is placed in a central location in terms of functionality, as it has a good degree of accessibility. Rumia is a city of around 50 thousand inhabitants and lies along the route of the SKM rapid transit railway – the main element of the public transportation system of the Gdańsk agglomeration. It only takes 20 minutes to get to the neighbouring Gdynia, while in the case of Gdańsk – the capital of the region – around 50 minutes. During peak hours, the trains arrive and depart every 7 minutes. Furthermore, there is a transit node for buses that bring passengers in from other parts of the city, complementing the main public transport system, while the majority of the city is within 20 minutes of walking distance. The good transportation ties of the city with the agglomeration cause many of its citizens to use the trains of the SKM in their daily commutes. The train station in Rumia is thus not only an element of its transport infrastructure, but also a space of transit, a gate, which forms a border between the city and the agglomeration. A library which is placed in such a favourable location, along the way to the daily travels of the residents of the city, naturally attracts travellers. The convenient working hours are also conducive to this effect – the library is open four days a week, to 8 PM. The arrangement and the interior design address both the needs of those users who wish to quickly rent a book, as well as of those who wish to spend some time in it.

¹¹ On the topic of using branding in the operation of libraries, see. B. Homiński, *Rola wizualnej komunikacji marketingowej w kształtowaniu architektury i wnętrz budynków bibliotek*, Zarządzenie Biblioteką 1/2013, Gdańsk 2013, p. 19-29.

Figure 1. The interior of *Stacja Kultury* in Rumia

Source: author's original photograph.

As we can see in the photograph, the counter of the book rental section and the larger part of the collection are located on the lower level of the library. This is also the place where the space for the youngest readers was designated. On the mezzanine, which has been introduced into the interior of the formerly single-level train station hall, one can find, among other things, a press corner with a sofa, workstations with computers, and the remaining part of the book collection. The industrial lamps and the sofas facing each other, forming lounges, which bring to mind the layout of the seats of the rapid transit trains, also draw attention to themselves. The eye-catching design intervention was limited to the interior of the building. From the outside, nothing but the stylised sign reading *Stacja Kultury* speaks of this peculiar form of use of a train station.

To sum it up, the library in Rumia has taken up the larger, currently obsolete part of the existing train station building. The structure is an interesting example of using existing transportation infrastructure for new purposes. The new location of the library, despite being placed outside of the geometric centre of the city, is convenient for its inhabitants, many of which make their daily travels within the Gdańsk agglomeration using the rapid transit railway. The library benefits from being situated *along the way* and from extended operating hours, rather than from a central location, as it *delineates* the social centre of the city.

Sopoteka

Sopoteka is the name of the newest and largest branch of the public library of Sopot, which has been operating out of a newly built mixed-use building called *Sopot Centrum* since 2015. The building has been built under a public-private partnership on former railroad land, in place of a former train station. Sopot is a city of around 37 thousand inhabitants, located at a distance that can be travelled in 13 minutes by the SKM train from Gdynia and 21 minutes

from the centre of Gdańsk. Sopot, along with Gdynia and Gdańsk is called the Tricity (*Trójmiasto* in Polish) and forms the central part of the agglomeration of Gdańsk. Sopot is also a resort and one of the most popular places for summer vacations, known, among other things, for its wide sandy beaches and the longest wooden pier in Europe, which has a length of over 500 metres. The *Sopot Centrum* building lies, in a manner similar to the building in Rumia, near an SKM train station, and, apart from having sections that serve as a train station and a library, also includes service, gastronomic and commercial spaces connected by internal and external walkways, forming a natural extension of the network of the public spaces of the city. The train station in Sopot, contrary to the one in Rumia, is located in the very heart of the city, near the main promenade leading to the pier, and is surrounded by residential buildings, most of which are located within 15 minutes of walking distance away. The *Sopoteka*, located on the first floor of the mixed-use building, takes up only one of its sections. It is thanks to this composition of the functional programme that an effect of synergy arises – the influence of the whole of the functional elements of the building is strengthened in a much greater manner than the sum of its parts would indicate. The aims of visiting the building become diversified, and each of the sections mutually push visitors into each other. Just like the *Stacja Kultury* in Rumia, so does *Sopoteka* advertise its operations by using its own unique name – its brand. However, there are more similarities with the library in Rumia – the authors of the original arrangement of the interiors are, likewise, the Sikora Wnętrza practice, and the leading design motif references the cultural heritage of the place. In this case, the key motif focuses on the city being a resort and a place of recreation: the interior has a light, sandy colour scheme, with wooden elements and the use of cream-coloured textiles. The large space of the library has been divided into a number of different zones, which is reflected in the diversity of the elevation and the materials of the floor and the furnishings.

Figure 2. The interior of the *Sopoteka* in Sopot



Source: author's original photograph.

The elements that make the interior stand out are sun beds, poufs and so-called beach baskets – freestanding booths for individual work, inspired by wicker baskets – which were once distinct elements of Baltic beaches. The *Sopoteka* is characterised by working hours that are convenient for its users – six days per week, from 9 AM to 8 PM. The Sopot library's peculiar challenge is the expected seasonal difference in the number and type of users. Due to a beneficial location within the centre of the town, most of its user base can be formed of tourists during the season.

To sum up the characteristics of the library in Sopot, we need to point to its outstandingly beneficial location in the centre of the town, as it is placed *along the way* of the daily commutes of its inhabitants and those who visit the city. The building is accessible in a perfect manner to pedestrians, the passengers of public transport and the users of cars. *Sopoteka* not only makes use of these advantages, but, along with the other components of the new complex, increases the attractiveness of the city centre. Despite not standing out with any distinct architectural language in its facade, as it is but an element of a mixed-use complex which is predominantly focused on commerce, the *Sopoteka* is an important place on the map and in the life of the city.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the XX century and during the beginning of the XXI century, the role of public libraries is being substantially redefined. The way libraries are being used is changing – on the one hand they become places that provide access to information and knowledge – the goods of the new economy, while on the other hand they remain the symbols of continuity, tradition and culture – values that are being searched for in a world which is becoming more and more commercialised. The uncertainty regarding the means of operating under changing circumstances, which is typical of transitional periods, jumpstarts the imagination of designers and leads them on a search for new forms of expression that come at the cost of abandoning the current language of architecture. The two examples of libraries that are located within medium-sized cities in Poland stand out due to their distinct location that ties them with a train station of the rapid transit railway.

The excellent accessibility in terms of transport can compensate in some manner for the losses caused by shedding their distinct architectural form, which is no longer unequivocally identified with a library within the space of a city. In the examples that are being discussed, the inventiveness of the design is focused on the interior of the library, the stylisation of which references the qualities of the pre-existing cultural context. It may seem paradoxical that in such times where information technology allows us to surmount so many limitations related to the need to be in a given place at a specific time, the appropriate placement of a library remains important. In the conditions in which libraries compete with each other for users, their beneficial placement becomes one of the factors that are reflected in the manner and intensity of using this institution. So, if the question regarding *where is the library* is still important, then the answer is – the library is where its users are.

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