

LIBRARIES WITHOUT WALLS OR ARCHITECTURAL FANTASIES: A TURN-OF-THE-MILLENNIUM DILEMMA

Hermina G. B. Anghelescu

“What is the purpose of rebuilding [the library of] Alexandria, this absolute symbol of knowledge . . . ?” asks Michel Melot in his excellent Introduction to the volume titled in English, *New Alexandrias: Great Library Construction Sites in the World* (7). In an era when information crosses the boundaryless cyberspace in seconds, nations around the world continue to erect sumptuous library edifices, “solidly anchored in the ground.” This paradox marks the turn-of-the-millennium on the library scene. By closely examining fifteen of the most prominent new libraries in the world, Melot’s admirable volume analyzes the latest trends and developments in the library science field with a forecast for the future.

The last decade of the second millennium has witnessed the contradiction, or maybe the coincidence, that the advent of the Internet, the creation of the WorldWide Web, and the emergence of large-scale digitization projects overlapped with the construction of new homes for two of the world’s richest libraries: the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Similarly, many other countries have heightened their efforts to have new national, academic, or public libraries built. Their symbolic significance is the survival of the book into the next millennium despite the new concepts of “paperless society” and “libraries without walls.” All of these libraries were built to serve both as sanctuaries for books and as research and information centers. They are “physical places” where “the permanence of knowledge” is the supreme leitmotif.

Melot explains the “belief in the unity of the library” and the struggle to preserve its collections intact by drawing the following parallel:

In Latin countries, let’s say of Catholic tradition, the reaction [to maintain libraries] is even stronger, since libraries have for a long time stood for and will continue to represent the unique patrimony, almost sacred, a place for history. While in the United States and in the Northern countries, let’s quickly call them countries of Protestant tradition, libraries are primarily civil institutions, mostly operational. (26)

This dichotomy is reflected in the architectural design of various recently built libraries: some center around the museum function (display of old

treasures), while others focus on the functional aspect (quick access to information).

Melot's Introduction is an exemplary study in comparative and international librarianship. The author masterfully guides the reader through different time periods and various global regions, pointing out the social, cultural, political, and economic peculiarities. He depicts a wide panorama of developments in librarianship, highlighting prominent institutions not only from the countries covered in individual chapters but also from other geographical regions, such as Canada, the United States, Sweden, Switzerland, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Russia, Germany, South Africa, Morocco, and Lebanon.

The cities where the libraries are located make up in alphabetical order the fifteen chapters of *Nouvelles Alexandries: Les grands chantiers de bibliothèques dans le monde*. It is just a coincidence the opening chapter is dedicated to the Alexandria library—the oldest and most enigmatic one. The chapter has two parts: one covering the old, extinct library, and the other devoted to the new construction site.

Jean Sirinelli in “The Ancient Library in Alexandria” considers the attempt to reconstruct the Bibliotheca Alexandrina as a “symbolic resurrection of the myth” (45), which surrounds like an aura the ancient and mysterious library. The new library will serve as a bridge between the Arab-Muslim and Western cultures. The author traces the obscure history of the ancient library and presents its acquisition policies and its collections, relying on sources from the classic period.

Jean-Marie Arnoult and Jan Meissner in “The New Library in Alexandria” elaborate on the scope and mission of the new building, which is meant to serve not only as a library but also as a conference center and as a museum. In addition, the site will host the International School of Information Sciences. Under UNESCO auspices the project serves as a “reinvention” of the old library. The external wall of the circular building will bear characters from all writings in the world.

The National Library of Algeria, inaugurated in 1994, and still in great need of books, strives to represent the symbol of modern Algerian society. Marc Sagaert presents the triple vocation of the library as protector of the national cultural heritage, information center, and research center in a variety of domains: from political sciences to history, from languages and literatures to religion and civilization of the Arab world.

Martine Darrobers introduces the black granite “Diamond”—the Royal and University Library in Copenhagen—which will bring together under one roof the rich collections of Denmark's Royal Library and those of Copenhagen University Library. The academic dimension of the Royal Library is not seen as a mere incorporation of the university's collections but as a new facet added to its complex activities. The Copenhagen

University Library was founded in 1482, three years after the university was established; the Royal Library was founded in 1653 and served as a personal library to King Frederick III. The unification of these major Danish libraries symbolizes the modernization of these two institutions to serve better the general public and the student population.

Jacques Keriguy writes about the Sheik Anta Diop University Library in Dakar, Senegal. Since its foundation in 1950, the Dakar University was endowed with a library that consisted primarily of collections existing in different university departments. It was only in 1965 that these collections were transferred to a library *per se*, a building which two decades later became obsolete. At present a new library is being erected with international support. The university authorities are proud of the unique identity of the new institution which will become “a converging point for all of the members of the scientific and academic community in the search for information and knowledge” (123). At the same time, the library stands for a bridge linking the past to the present, a symbol for the ever-increasing population of the African continent.

“Juma Al-Majid Center for Culture and Heritage” by Jean-Marie Arnoult and Jan Meissner presents the philanthropic work of a Saudi Arabian industrialist, who decided to make his 300,000-volume personal library available to the public and to finance the construction project which was placed under UNESCO auspices. The new building, an elegant illustration of Islamic architecture, will have the capacity to store 1.5 million volumes, 50,000 manuscripts, 4,000 maps, 200,000 volumes from private collections, and 2,400 periodicals. In addition, it will provide online access to electronic full-text and bibliographic databases.

The fourth most important library in Germany, after Munich, Berlin, and Frankfurt, the Lower Saxony State University Library in Göttingen opened its doors in 1992, and “perfectly illustrates the exemplary German library system,” as Marie-Françoise Bisbrouck notes in her article (149). The building is located “in the heart” of the Letters and Human Sciences complex, thus ensuring the close ties of the university and the old city which has hosted the university for two and a half centuries. The focus of the project is the library’s clientele who need to fulfill their information needs almost as soon as they arrive at the library. The internal architecture was designed so that all public-related services will be easily accessible to users.

The City Library of The Hague, inaugurated in 1995, is one of eight libraries opened during the 1980s and early 1990s in the Netherlands. Didier Guilbaud discusses the “ten commandments” of the library. It is intended to be flexible, compact, accessible, extensible, diverse, well organized, comfortable, in harmony with the environment, safe, and economical—all these gravitating around the community’s needs.

Christine Deschamps wrote the article on the huge British Library in London, the construction of which paralleled the building operations of the French national library. The history of the famous institution is detailed along with the evolution of the new project. The nine reading rooms—three for sciences, two for letters, one for rare books and music, one for manuscripts, one for maps, and one for Oriental and Indian collections—were designed with the researcher's "intellectual comfort" in mind. The library also has facilities specially planned for various events, such as an auditorium with several annexes and exhibition halls. The author minutely describes the storage areas (120 linear miles of compact shelving), the environmental control systems (temperature, humidity, light, and security), and the furniture both for the users and the staff. The online catalog provides access through multiple access points to five different databases: British Library Catalogue, SRIS Current Catalogue, Human and Social Sciences Current Catalogue, and Current Music Catalogue (CMC). Three other catalogs will soon be added: Maps and Manuscripts, Catalogue of Newspapers, and a catalog which will ensure access to the collections of the Document Supply Centre in Boston Spa. The users will be able to order the documents they need right from any of the terminals. The Automatic Book Retrieval System (ABRS) will locate the documents and will send them to the reading room via the Mechanized Book Handling System (MBHS). The Readers Admission System (RAS) will automatically check the readers' identity and their good standing. As for the costs of the British Library endeavor, it seems to be the most expensive building in Great Britain, at 164 million pounds.

The Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL) situated in the heart of Manhattan, was opened in May 1996 as an annex to the centennial New York Public Library. Marie-Pierre Dillenseger describes it as "the concretization of a dream of quick and easy access to a wide array of up-to-date information, with no regard of medium or location" (259). The two years after the inauguration of the library will play a major role in the evaluation of this project and of the issues that research libraries face at the end of the twentieth century. The state-of-the-art technical equipment of this library makes it a gateway to electronic resources throughout the world. Practically, from a technical standpoint, there are no borders to the resources of this library. However, the librarians' challenge consists in organizing, for quick retrieval purposes, the infinite universe of knowledge available via the Internet.

Jacqueline Leroy is the author of the chapter covering the Bibliothèque Nationale de France—the legacy of the former French President, François Mitterrand—"ambitious in its objectives, audacious in its conception, original in its approach, and difficult in its achievement"

(262). The author explores from historical, social, and cultural perspectives the French concepts of public, academic, and national libraries along with the evolution of the polemic idea of the need for a new national library. The project was perceived as part of “an urban development plan, [meant] to fill in an empty space” in the Tolbiac region in East Paris, where the Bibliothèque de France will “display its amplitude through the four open books [the four towers], new landmarks of the Capital city” (270–271). Leroy analyzes details regarding the architecture: towers, esplanade, and interior garden; the materials used: concrete, glass, wood, and metal; the technical equipment: heating, ventilating and air conditioning system, security, and automated document retrieval system; and the furniture for the storage, reading, and work areas. The integrated automation system allows access to three categories of services: the online library catalog, the technical services (cataloging, collection development, and preservation), and the administration (finances and human resources). The library expects to have three categories of users: “the curious public” (estimated 4,500 people daily), the researchers involved in professional study, such as specialists and doctoral students (also estimated at 4,500 people daily), and scholars conducting research which requires access to special collections and materials from the national patrimony (estimated 3,000 people daily). The latter two categories will have access to reading rooms specially designed to meet their needs. Non-Parisian scholars will be able to reserve a seat in the reading room via Minitel (an enhanced feature of the French phone system). The activities organized in the auditorium and the exhibition halls will contribute to the diversification of the “French intellectual landscape” (294) by displaying significant works from France’s rich national heritage. The old and the new Bibliothèque nationale will complement each other: the old locale situated on Rue Richelieu will remain “rather patrimonial” while the new one will be “rather documentary” (264).

The National Library of the People’s Republic of China, situated in an avant-garde area of Beijing (Peking), opened in 1987, and hosts sixteen million new items (40 percent in Chinese and 60 percent in foreign languages), while the ancient documents, the “millenary treasures,” continue to be kept in the old Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City. Christophe Comentale investigates the library’s development in pre- and post-communist China. It has multiple roles, among which are to serve both as a national and as a research library “promoting socialist culture and practices” (303). It is also a “national reservoir of books,” open both to Chinese and foreign scholars who can conduct research in thirty reading rooms (301). The library, acting as a national bibliographic agency, is actively involved in international projects.

The San Francisco Public Library “demonstrates the Americans’ confidence in public reading as an essential service to the community,” according to François Reiner and Michel Melot (317). The library uses all of the electronic resources in order to directly reach its constituencies. The history of the project is intertwined with the efforts in raising the necessary funds, and with the portrayal of San Francisco’s political, social, and cultural landscape. The authors detail the characteristics of the collections on each of the five floors of the building along with the particular services offered in each area. “It is obvious that the heart of the library is an integrated system” (338) both for the library staff (413 terminals) and for the general public (250 terminals).

The National Central Library of Taiwan, situated in Taipei, reflects the evolution of other recently built libraries in the area, and its future will be integrated into China’s general library development. Christophe Comentale outlines the history of the library’s rare book collections, some of them having been temporarily sheltered at the Library of Congress during the Sino-Japanese War, and repatriated in 1966. Before moving into the new building, opened in 1986, the library outgrew several other locales. One of the major goals of the library is its integration into the international cooperation programs through an elaborate international exchange agenda with a million institutions throughout the world, and the promotion of its Center for Chinese Studies in order to attract an increasing number of sinologues to research its special and rare book collections that embody four thousand years of history.

The National Library of Estonia in Tallinn opened in 1993 and became “the most active cultural nucleus of the country, the symbol of its long history and its new independence” (361). Ivi Eenmaa and Catherine Suard describe it as a project close to the history of the Estonian nation. Known as the Public State Library of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Estonia during the communist era, the library acquired its real identity as a national library in 1988. In addition, it was attributed a parliamentary library role stipulated by an act of 1994. At present the library is confronted with all of the difficulties encountered by similar institutions in ex-Soviet republics, the crucial one being the implementation of an automated system.

The Waseda University Library in Tokyo is the largest academic library in Japan, and it consists of the main central library plus thirty-three branch libraries placed in schools and colleges throughout the campus. The library was built exclusively with private money, and it stands for a revolution from many perspectives. The opening of the closed stacks to free access, the adoption of a new classification system (Nihon Decimal Classification), the modernization of the physical layout of the reading rooms, and the implementation of a new automation

system (WINE-Waseda University Information Network System) are only a few examples.

Nouvelles Alexandries: Les grands chantiers de bibliothèques dans le monde is abundantly illustrated with color and black-and-white photos and architectural plans, showing different stages of the construction process and focusing on specific architectural details. The various architectures, some very audacious, mirror the particularities of the region where the library is located, along with the architects' desire to take the library buildings out of their traditional shoe-box shape as mere containers of books and to transpose them into a modern vision ready to confront the next millennium.

The volume is characterized by a genuine conceptual unity: the chapters are extremely balanced, and they follow a similar pattern, which provides historical background, description of the collections, presentation of the building highlighting its audacious architectural features, technical equipment, and user categories. Each chapter is followed by a list of further readings ("orientation bibliographique") including works in different languages. There are chapters which have inserts that furnish supplementary data in conjunction with certain specific topics (e.g., organization charts of various libraries, statistical figures regarding collections, special programs and services). A very detailed table of contents at the end of the volume is very welcome, but it cannot be used *in lieu* of an index that would have turned this volume into an impeccable work. A pendant in English of this excellent work would be very much appreciated in non-French speaking parts of the world.

Reference

Melot, Michel, ed. *Nouvelles Alexandries: Les grands chantiers de bibliothèques dans le monde*. Paris: Éditions du Cercle de la Librairie, 1996. 416 pp. 750 F. ISBN 2-7654-0619-7.