Wandering in Knowledge

Inclusive Spaces for Culture
in an Age of Global Nomadism

edited by
Luca Basso Peressut, Imma Forino and Jacopo Leveratto
Summary

7   Inclusive Interiors
9   Introduction

Questions
13  Architectures for Knowledge
   Luca Basso Peressut
25  Moving Figures (on Changing Backgrounds)
   Imma Forino

Museums
35  Performing Museums
   Margherita Parati
73  Representing Supranational Identity in Jewish Museums
   Stephanie Carminati

Libraries
107  Library 2.0
    Daniele Mondiali
131  The Network of Local Libraries
    Lavinia Dondi

Hybrid Spaces
169  Libraries and Museums Hybridisation
    Jacopo Leveratto

Apparatus
211  A Glossary on Global Nomadism
    Elena Elgani
245  Annotated bibliography
259  Authors’ profiles
263  List of illustrations
Inclusive Interiors

Editorial Series

This book represents the first issue of the editorial series *Inclusive Interiors*, which has been launched to disseminate the scientific outcomes related to the research project *Inclusive Interiors: Spaces of Sociability in an Age of Global Nomadism*, funded by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano, as part of the FARB Programme 2015/2016. This series of studies – in the attempt to build the foundations of an adaptable environment that meets the need of intercultural dialogue determined by current phenomena of transnational migration – aims at outlining the most relevant architectural experimentations on collective interiors, in order to highlight the most innovative strategies and tools of “inclusive design” in this regard. In doing that, it collects multidisciplinary critical contributions focusing on the new spaces and architectures that respond to the change of social sphere in a society marked by the intensification of the mobility of people as well as information.

Scientific Committee

Giovanni Attili, Università La Sapienza, Roma
Luca Basso Peressut, Politecnico di Milano
Daniel Cid Moragas, ELISAVA, Barcelona
Irene Cieraad, Delft University of Technology
Arianna Dagnino, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
Christoph Grafe, Bergische Universität, Wuppertal
Hidenobu Jinnai, Hosei University, Tokyo
Susan Yelavich, Parsons School of Design, New York
The term “wanderer” effectively sums up the nature of present-day society. The willingness to move, spurred on by the economy of a country or by the desire to discover, is the author of a large part of the contemporary dynamics, connected correspondingly to an increase in multiculturalism, socio-cultural hybridisations and new perceptions of identity. Despite this mobility, which leads people to move more rapidly and with ease, the need to be tied to the one’s territory in a global society is still present and can be related not only to birthplace, but also more often to the place where an individual has resided the longest. People are further characterised by multiple territorial links, index of hybrid identities powered by very different cultural landscapes.

According to this view, a current topic of interest is the development of the sense of belonging to the community, often related only to ingrained local realities, in opposition to non-places that characterised contemporary actions. These are essentially represented by the dynamics of the prevailing media stores, inherited directly from the American landscape and in which large masses of people pour out, especially on weekends, to engage in consumer activities. The places of commercial activity, most of all set in peripheral areas, do not state the problem of identity. On the contrary, they tend to be rather anonymous, making material goods the undisputed stars of the space. Thus, even in Europe, urban public places, including squares and buildings that promote cultural initiatives, tend to empty gradually, especially in small and medium-sized cities, which are increasingly characterised by this new dynamic, which emanates from the American suburbs.

Now, in less than thirty years, the public square – the meeting ground for culture – has all but disappeared, swallowed up by a radical new concept in
human aggregation steeped in commercial relations … The shopping mall has created a new architecture for human assembly, one immersed in a world of commerce in which culture exists in the form of commodified experiences. … Even more important, these are the places where most people spend much of their leisure time…. These are the new domains where people live out much of their social life – where they engage one another in discourse or just in passing. (Rifkin 2001, 154–155)

Small city libraries and neighbourhood libraries are part of those public services that are linked to the place and are the promoters of belonging identity, which needs to be supported to reverse the on-going trend. Public institutions become one of the key factors for the rediscovery of urban places and their redevelopment. This process is effectively summarised by the term of *glocalisation* (Bauman 2010, 87–102; Latour 2004, 44–45), which is often linked to that of *globalisation*, reflecting the need to support local enterprises to be able to sustain global society which would otherwise seem to be problematic.

Therefore, the discussion focuses on the characteristics of a real renaissance of local libraries, which corresponds to a completely innovative architectural design, demonstrated by case studies collected in recent years in Europe, the context of the research. After a premise dating back to the 1980s and useful for identifying significant episodes to compare with present-day dynamics, the analysis of the contemporary debate regarding the salvage of such public institutions follows. The aim of the research is to outline a new way of living and thinking about the space of the local library, which becomes a real meeting place for citizens, as well as a key building that contributes toward forging the identity of the city, working in opposition to the anonymous business enterprises, which are situated mostly in remote areas.

**A historical premise**

A European reference framework is crucial in discussing the topic of libraries. To fully understand the present-day situation regarding libraries linked to the object of the research, the comparison between them becomes essential and allows the highlighting of both the positive aspects and the critical states in which they find themselves. In particular, analysis is carried out on the main characteristics of the cultural debate related to libraries in European countries where it has been of more interest and cutting-edge since the 1980s, the time period in which the research begins. Very different surveys are pointed out, which can be directly related both to the Italian phenomenon, immediately highlighting its deficiencies, and to
current occurrences in several European countries, where the institutions have marked out a clear course for development.

What, then, is meant precisely by cultural debate regarding public libraries? Reference is made to a number of cultural issues raised by various disciplines that contribute to the architecture of the library. Being a public building, it is strongly related to specific community funding, regulated differently in each country, and it depends indirectly on cultural debate, or on the specific idea of these institutions that people have constructed in different ways in Europe. If questions connected to public funding and to the idea of these cultural buildings really exist, the architectural debate around this space is also as important because it is related directly to the social changes that involve libraries, besides the variation in European architectural schools that seem far removed from the willingness to “internationalise,” which arises from the Modern Movement.

In Northern Europe, for example, the services promoted by public authorities have always been at the heart of the community. A city can exist and develop as a result of the efficiency, which may give a real contribution to building the social life of individuals where environmental conditions prove quite adverse. This is the cultural background in which the libraries by Alvar Aalto are conceived, destined to represent a turning point in the architectural design of these institutions. Here, there is a transition between architecture for public buildings conceived through monumental experience and not without a formalistic emphasis, to an architecture that instead chooses anti-rhetorical features and more linear shapes, linked, in the first place, to the experience of the Modern Movement. A clear choice regarding form that comes close to the forms of living usually experienced by the citizen, rather than to the contemplative and resonant vocation of buildings that usually host collective functions.

Alchemy for Alvar Aalto is not something to contemplate but to use, and indoor spaces, in particular, to be experienced, and to be experienced not in exceptional moments, but in the context of daily activities, twenty-four hours a day. (Fusaro 1984, 156)

This architectural feature can be seen in the Viipuri Library in Vyborg, whose design begins in 1927 and lasts until 1935, and whose different phases of the project testify to the final transition to the organic Aalto language. The architect, winner of the competition, initially conceives a building with classical language, directly inspired by the work of Erik Gunnar Asplund, providing an austere entrance facing the street with neoclassical facades, which are nevertheless very simplified. Later, the
administration decides to revise the location of the building, planning to move it inside the city park of Turkellinpuisto, which leads to Aalto availing himself of the opportunity of making substantial changes to the project, taking it in the direction of the poetry of Organicism and setting it free from the constraints of the competition. The library becomes an organic body related to the city through a dynamic motion that connects the inside to the outside and no longer through neoclassical facades. The conceived space comes from the poetry of the Modern Movement but it goes beyond because it transcends functional schematism to deal with the real quality of the architecture and the value of space related to the person who lives and experiences it (Fusaro 1984, 158). It is an architecture in which spaces to read and to listen are defined time after time by the actions that take place there, responding effectively to the needs of the user. This is a significant architectural transition that interprets the social need, which can already be found in Northern Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, to bring the public institution closer to the citizen, pursuing the goal of widespread and customary public attendance. Thus begins the developmental stage of the library institution, full of legislative processes and citizen participation. It will be the subject of analysis for other European countries, as well as a reason for pride in Northern European governments, which are the dominant position even in the 1980s and 1990s. The architects, who came from the experience of Organicism and who were supported both by a well-defined legislative system and by institutions linked to public libraries, continued to design spaces that were primarily close to the users. Besides, these libraries were conceived in strategic urban locations and they were always run by qualified personnel, as can be understand in an article that looks at the situation of Danish libraries in the 1980s (Krogh 1984, 132).

A new practice, concerning a design method that begins from a modular principle takes place, not only in Denmark, to ensure a sufficient size to carry out rational management of library services. The number of citizens, multiplied by certain standard values, adds further information, which is essential in these types of plans. In doing so, however, there is no intent to underestimate the individual initiative of architects, but instead the aim is to ensure a correct starting point for the project, making it able to satisfy the changing needs of the previously analysed library. Finally, the fundamental requirement that is demanded of these design solutions, already present in the 1980s, is the flexibility of the interior that allows a true rearrangement of the functions, besides an innovative approach aimed at the model of the “house of culture” (Krogh 1984, 135), a meeting
place on a human scale which is, at the moment, the image of the library of the future.

In France, the tradition of public libraries dates back to the years of the French Revolution, in which the first dépôt littéraire available to citizens is installed in Paris, in the Capuchin church of rue Saint-Honoré. Here begins a long and rich journey that French library institutions undertake, dealing effectively with the management of the immense paper legacy accumulated over the centuries by scholars.

It is only in the second half of the 20th century, however, that centralised systems focusing on the management of libraries in urban areas begin to develop, looking at the successes both in Northern Europe and in the United Kingdom. In the 1970s, the French central government sets the baseline development of the current system, formulating guidelines both on the specific functions required in the library field and on the construction of new buildings designed to house them. So here a new trend, which promotes suitably designed architectural buildings, begins to emerge in opposition to the common practice of placing libraries in existing complexes. The administration also states that the services offered to the public should be centrally located and be clearly commensurate to the number of citizens served. However, most importantly, a new model of the library, which tends to merge with other recreational activities, takes place in the 1980s, becoming a richer and more fortified space. This concerns the inclusion of small auditoriums, exhibition spaces or rooms for audio-video activities, made to complete the usual apparatus of the library, which tries to approach the new requirements of contemporary citizens, placing new media at the same level as the book. The importance of this has decreased considerably with the arrival of more immediate cognitive tools, such as audio-video and digital platforms, antecedents to the contemporary world of the Internet. The presence only of books is no longer considered enough to think of public investment for a service offered to the city.

These innovative buildings, which ride the media revolution of the late 20th century, are called multimedia libraries and involve an architectural review because the new functions that integrate the reading activity require specific places which undermine the usual identity of the building. This evolution of the space, as mentioned earlier, aims to promote an effective image of the service, thus discrediting interventions in pre-existent complexes (Barbera 1992, 15). The new trend, destined to amplify, has been well supported by French administrations since the 1980s who have inaugurated a true renaissance of the library apparatus, moving away from the traditional model of public reading to approach the more advanced
British model. The new médiathèque, whose idea is now extremely close to the cultural centre, also has unprecedented consent among citizens, both due to the quality of the spaces, and to the richness of the collections, not only the paper ones. Once again, there is research of the public library model that may represent not only a place of knowledge but, more importantly, a place of meeting in which people are welcome, a rich and versatile space established through fruitful collaboration between librarian and architect, as already occurs in other European countries that boast an efficiency in the service: “this space has become multifaceted, building or screen, this modern temple cut out from the world to store up its representations, is rightly what we always call library” (Muscogiuri 2009, 47).

British public libraries instead were officially established by a law dating back to August 14th 1850, the Public Libraries Act, promoted by a strong reformist push supported by the aristocracy, merchants and men of culture who looked on with admiration at the French dépôt littéraire. However, if this cultural innovation is supported in France, mainly by the consent of the teachers and the people who, despite their lack of resources, succeeds in capturing the attention of the public by virtue of the episodes connected to the upheavals in the French Revolution, in the United Kingdom the reformist movement is supported by cultural and philanthropic initiatives promoted mostly by the noble classes. For this reason, British public libraries are destined for a quick and concrete development and this leading position remains unchallenged throughout the 19th century. In the second half of the century, a system of management and control for the reading rooms in urban areas begins to take place, while other European countries adopt it only about a century later. The assumption of British libraries is innovative and differs from that adopted, for example, in France, where libraries arise primarily because of the need to protect and preserve ancient documents. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the service points immediately to the promotion and dissemination of topical culture, assigning a key role to the reading of periodicals and journals.

Newsrooms within the public library were established as a purely English space. Statistics at the end of the 19th century show them as vibrant places in the city: open to all ... and visited daily by thousands. (Atripaldi 2000, 18)

During the 20th century, library services continue to make progress, while library architecture remains anchored to a classical language, which does not seem even to grasp the new kind of space promoted by Aalto
in Northern Europe. Innovative services in terms of the evolution of library equipment are no match for a cutting-edge architecture capable of provoking a response. The ethical purpose of the building prevails over its aesthetics, highlighting the socialising and emancipatory ends which mark this type of architecture (Atripaldi 2000, 128).

Only in the last decades of the 20th century in the United Kingdom, when the new idea of neighbourhood library arrives, the architecture of the building radically changes, adopting a modern language in which citizens can immediately see themselves. The library institution becomes a place where a variety of activities can be carried out, not only reading and study, but also exhibitions that promote local culture and initiatives related to listening to music and to the education of children. Thus, the architecture assumes an important role in managing the coexistence of different activities in the same place, as well as in promoting library attendance through a well-structured entrance that mediates the relationship between the city and the inner reading room. The new idea of the open lending space and of the reading positions acquires great importance and becomes less formal and more flexible than in the past, while the design of the spaces for staff equipment is discussed directly with the librarians (Smith 1984, 182). Therefore, a fruitful collaboration between architects and library staff begins and goes hand in hand with surveys and assessments regarding the true needs of the population, as well as targeted market research, whose goal is a complete renewal of the English public library achieved only as recently as the 1990s.

After the achievement of the British model of the public library and the progressive libraries of Northern Europe, but before the French conception of médiathèque, the model of the dreigeteilte Bibliothek, a three-level library, expands in Germany, where the tradition of reading rooms is certainly more recent. It is a prototype designed in the 1970s by Heinz Emunds, director of the Municipal Library in Münster, which became the model of the German modern reading room par excellence.

The new idea of the public library, which grows throughout Europe, essentially deriving from the English model, presupposes the existence of an innovative space dedicated to non-specialised information which cannot be organised using the usual forms of cataloguing collections. Emunds starts from this concept to develop a new spatial and organisational model for the library in which the topical sector acquires a central role and even a new way of exhibiting materials. This part of the library space must answer a rather generic question, with no precise objective, which is difficult to relate to systematic arrangement on shelves, or to classic cataloguing by author or title. Therefore, the German librarian identifies a new
classification system based on areas of interest, bringing together different materials on the same topic, even if it is not on paper, and this assumes a more inviting setting, similar to a bookshop, with books displaying their covers on low shelves. The new space thus conceived is located near the entrance and welcomes the visitor who can go up from here to the other two traditional areas – firstly, the level with reading spaces and open bookshelves and on then the upper level containing the storage spaces. The main characteristic of this approach is that of directing the attention to the needs of the average user, whose interests lie mostly in the topical area near the entrance, which also includes periodicals. The segmentation of the proposition corresponds to progressively deeper and more specialised information needs, from more generic and less structured requirements, which imply the simplicity of the offered tools and easy access, to more clearly defined information requirements, connected to study and reading activities, which need more complex services and the possibility of use with no assistance. Finally, the third level, the one furthest from the entrance, is intended for in-depth and specialised studies and provides rare or infrequently consulted documents stored in the repository.

This organisation of the proposition permits superior service, guiding the users directly to what they are looking for but on the other hand, it would lead to excessive sectorialisation of the users, thus decreasing their ability to discover items of interest among the readings they are not used to. To avoid this eventuality, library spaces require continuous connections and cross-referencing between the different sections, mediated also by the architecture, to intrigue the reader, stimulating them to delve more deeply, and to promote promiscuity among users who have different needs at the beginning. The three-level library model, which emerges here, focuses primarily on topical interests, but without neglecting the needs of scholars and researchers. It introduces an innovative spatial articulation that seems to be led by a functionalist matrix, a way of conceiving a space that reflects the German tradition, which is often characterised by this kind of approach.

In Italy, in the wake of the great European practice, a renewal period for the organisation of public libraries, really backward than other situations on the continent, starts during the 1970s. What is to solve is first the deep imbalance in the public service that characterizes the different places of the peninsula, due both to the lack of a comprehensive planning and to the absence of any strategy for the coordination of activities related to the public reading (Barbera 1992, 54).
The distribution of the largest libraries in our country does not respond to a national need and planning, but is the result of local circumstances determined by different historical developments in the various Italian regions and especially by states and governments that have dominated the peninsula before unification. (Cohen Pirani 1982, 13)

Thus, in the first half of the 1970s, general regulation for libraries is launched and subsequently it is entrusted to the respective regional powers, besides being registered at a central office for coordination and set up to have, for the first time, a complete picture of services all over the country. The situation is inadequate compared to the level in Europe and delegating services to regional powers contributes to the emphasis much more on the imbalance between the places for reading which is more developed only where resources allow for growth or where the attitude of the directors is particularly enlightened.

It is clear, therefore, how the structure of public libraries in a country is highly inconsistent and how it can be so difficult to restore the balance. For this reason, even during the 1980s, the general objective of the institution is to completely renew the network of knowledge, allowing indiscriminate access to information for all citizens. If other European countries can already allow investment that has a view to the future of the library, this is not true of Italy, where little available funding is used in developing the national library system to raise it to the standard of other countries and, as a consequence, it minimises resources for new buildings and specific arrangements. Together with this, Italian policy also excludes activities of public reading by any profit motive, even in long term, as opposed to what happened in France for example, where in the recent decades of renewal, there were business initiatives to assist cultural programmes.

The Italian architectural debate on libraries highlights the importance of working on an integrated system of basic public services to be developed within the city. Public reading rooms are not associated with the addition of new functions connected to them, as in the media library, but to programmatic coordination with other local services, such as schools, sports and entertainment. The intention is, therefore, to create a network of activities offered to citizens that is spatially controlled through careful planning (Baffà 1984, 67).

Accordingly, we have a solution regarding the problem of the image of the library that is far from most in the European debate, because here it is not the more or less attractive form of the building which contributes to the success of public service, but a series of spatial factors, controlled by planning and connected both to the location of the building, on structured
and customary routes, and to a good relationship between inner and outer spaces that depend principally on the structure of the entrance system (Baffa 1984, 72).

In spite of these positive points, however, Italian libraries fail to take off, and among the causes of this failure are to be found, for example, the inability to apply a policy of standards, a design that begins from technical data to ensure appropriate spaces to be provided for the reading activity. This is mainly due to the lack of a clear definition of the service, which can be seen each time in different ways, but also to the tendency to work on existing buildings, which has advantages, but certainly also a number of limitations. Along with this, the collaboration between architects and librarians has been lacking in Italy. It would have allowed, once the goal had been clearly focused, the realisation of certainly more efficient buildings (Sandal 1984, 77–81).

The contemporary cultural debate

The International Federation of Libraries Association (IFLA) is an international organisation that deals with the promotion of efficient library services and is conscious of the intrinsic value of those services. Its main goal is to support the freedom of access to information, ideas and knowledge. Freedom promoted, among others, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Today the organisation operates within an international view in which deep differences emerge and where the gap between rich and poor countries is further emphasised by the digital divide, which is the digitisation of culture, promoted by rich countries, that excludes from the global conversation those who are not able to sustain a technological and multimedia approach to knowledge.

Related to this problem, social compensation, linked to the new role of libraries, comes into play. The digital divide should be weakened and a democratic and balanced dissemination of culture through the offered services should be promoted. The goal, which emerges, also represents the main subject of the different editions of IFLA documents that have been published since the 1970s, concretely describing the terms of the changes to consider each time, and also offering possible developmental guidelines to make the library a true service to the democratic advancement of universal knowledge.

In particular, a recent and clear document promoted by the organisation is The Public Library Service: IFLA/Unesco guidelines for development, drawn up in collaboration with UNESCO and dating back to 2001. It has been translated into Italian by the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (AIB), which also sponsored the promotion of updates in subsequent years. The
document is a revision of the Guidelines for Public Libraries written in 1986 and derived, in turn, from the Standards for Public Libraries, published in the 1970s. The 2001 edition was published as a result of the important changes introduced in the field of information and communication, which have deeply readjusted the environment in which libraries operate, compelling them to profoundly rethink their role. The document consists of six chapters, each of which investigates librarianship issues except the first chapter, the most wide-ranging one, which deals in general with the new objectives of today’s public library and addresses all those who are involved in the process of change in the institution. Here, a model is outlined. It includes a number of innovative activities and is actively involved in the process of democratisation of society.

The primary purposes of the public library are to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. They have an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinions. (IFLA 2001, 2)

According to the document, libraries should cover a much wider range of services than in the past, which are related not only to knowledge, in the most classic sense of the term, but also to information and to those activities related to leisure. The first chapter shows, furthermore, how the library should become a place for the promotion and dissemination of local history, preserving and making available the material about the history of the community and helping thus to build and sustain a shared cultural identity. Local knowledge needs to be preserved in all its peculiarities and the necessities of the citizens should guide the choices of the library, especially in the field of information services. Therefore, besides reading activities, other cultural initiatives such as exhibitions, conferences, workshops and training courses, should be promoted, together with spaces for theatrical and musical performances. Activities for children and teenagers should also be promoted as part of the services offered to users, in order to educate to read and gain knowledge from an early age.

The most innovative social change, however, concerns the new idea of the library space, which is considered to be a meeting place and a real “living room” for citizens, especially where there are a reduced number of public spaces (IFLA 2002, 25). The institution thus becomes an agent of personal and social development and a positive growth factor for the community. A new “square” for the city, if the square is a fundamental social meeting place within an urban area, as well as a public space useful
in strengthening the sense of belonging in a community: on the one hand, as a laboratory for training and information, a gateway and guidance for the multimedia universe and, on the other, as a place for social gathering (Muscogiuri 2009, 36).

Libraries are considered as guardians of a cultural heritage that also testifies to the multiculturalism of the today’s society they represent, and to which they offer their service. In the United States, even earlier than in Europe for historical reasons, research regarding cultural differences that animate society and consequently modify library equipment, is carried out, outlining a number of innovations from which public reading rooms cannot escape. The belated awareness of multiculturalism is destined, to change the nature of libraries, which have not only to rethink their identity, but also their goals, after a searching inquiry regarding catchment areas and multicultural needs. The inevitable social diversity therefore, if well managed, may be an opportunity for enrichment not only for the community, but also for the organisation of the libraries that, having recognised true pluralism, will as an example, provide for updates to collections on the grounds of the prevailing languages and adapt new services to actual local needs. Being able to actually satisfy cultural needs, which are in continual evolution, for each individual, it is also necessary that librarians recognise the different social groups to which the service is addressed, creating a heterogeneous staff able to understand the cultural backgrounds of belonging. A mixed staff has the characteristics of engaging with the community, in all its facets, in the initiatives promoted by the public institution and provides greater flexibility in problem solving (Buttlar, Caynon and Ruhig Du Mont 1994, 7–37).

Libraries thus play a fundamental role within multicultural societies because they should be able to provide the key to understanding social differences and their management, which is tied to a very specific cognitive process. Promoting awareness and understanding of cultural diversity within the community becomes one of the main goals of the library, as well as a further source of social redemption for them.

It is important to highlight how a multicultural society brings the need for dialogue and encounter as fundamental requirements for peaceful coexistence of different linguistic and cultural heritages: “affirming that respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantee of international peace and security” (UNESCO 2002, 62). Once again, the library has to renegotiate its status as a promoter of multicultural policies and it should also be a place of comparison between different identities, a space of relationship and dialogue in which, to the individuality linked to
the book or media, a more or less collective activity of mutual acquaintance is added, in unison with the contemporary idea of the library as a meeting place. This tendency is particularly visible in small cities or districts where the public institution really tries to support the life of the citizen. Far from resounding cultural vocations, it aims to meet the information and knowledge needs of multiple identity users. It is within small communities that people benefit most from library services by also mediating social discomfort, and thus establishing fruitful intercultural relations, which should be supported. It is precisely here that an education to pluralism is really needed, because it is often insufficient.

Multicultural activities include both information services for all users and library services addressed specifically at socially disadvantaged ethnic-cultural groups, to guarantee them equal access to library equipment. Multicultural initiatives are often considered as a benefit to only minority communities, while actually a part of the activity is directed instead to the community as a whole, to promote awareness of other cultures and other languages and to support intercultural dialogue. These multicultural services promoted by libraries should not, therefore, be added to commonplace activities or carried out only on special occasions, but rather they should constitute a vital part of the offer to citizens, to modify according to local needs. At the same time, it is essential that these activities have a global calling and are part of a network of initiatives to promote policies that ensure equitable access to information.

The arrival of the digital age seems to be another blow for libraries. There are those who say that by digitising a large part of the volumes and placing them on a collective network, these institutions no longer become necessary, or may even become almost obsolete. An American author, Mark Y. Herrings has published a paper on this topic, in which he lines up in defence of libraries as guardians of knowledge throughout the centuries that represents the history of humankind. This is why the Internet cannot, in any way, replace these institutions (Herrings 2007). In doing so, however, he does not underestimate the importance that new technologies play, or hide how they have been able to improve our lives over time. What he suggests instead is to reflect on the rapid and irrepressible on-going process of mass digitisation, which leads one to think of Internet platforms as an end and not as a means to facilitate the achievement of a much higher goal.

The decline of the library, however, is not only due to the advent of the digital age, but to a much deeper cultural change, on which Herrings also focuses, stating that if past generations built large libraries, the generation of today fails to understand their value and historical significance,
preferring partial and impoverished knowledge which is immediate and easily attained, knowledge that is achieved through the Internet. This cultural involution, supported in general by institutions and families, represents the point of departure for the reasoning regarding the fate of libraries and, in particular, of the book, the use of which decreases with the increasing use of multimedia information and the consequent arrival of the multimedia library. From here, the easy transition to the desire for a complete digitisation of the library, replaced by a web platform, which should only be a means to increase access and development. Such a transformation would be absolutely inconceivable, firstly because of the enormous differences between the two knowledge systems: on the one hand, the multiplicity of confusing information, which is unorganised and unfiltered by the Internet and, on the other hand, the knowledge we can find in a library, which is planned and selected by librarians. Furthermore, information from Internet links, unlike that which is gathered from a book in a library, is of short duration, it is not as “eternal” as printed physical paper, so topics researched via the Internet can only be about the present day. The library and the Internet therefore lead to two kinds of documentation with very different goals and for this reason they cannot merge or replace one another because one would distort the other. Their intrinsically opposed nature has to subsist because it is essential to the development of knowledge, but this dualism should be strengthened rather than attempting to foster a reciprocal fusion.

Having understood both the fundamental presence of the library for the dissemination of culture, and the importance of the roles assigned within the knowledge process, it is necessary to understand how the evolution of information technology can positively influence the development of the library. Through the use of new technological methods, two main innovations are triggered: the introduction of a user-oriented interface, through which the user interacts easily with existing operational tools of the cognitive process and, as a consequence, the active participation of the user who acquires the opportunity to modify data and multimedia content. This opens up a scenario based on “a social dimension of resource sharing as opposed to individual autonomy” (Muscogiuri 2009, 20), which previously characterised the process of knowledge. In general, the service is thus designed according to the satisfaction of the user, who interacts actively to the implementation of cultural proposals.

The role of librarian is also changing. They not only have to provide citizens with the information requested, but rather to convey to them the appropriate skills to independently perform their research, assisting them in the acquisition of the necessary tools to manage the increasing flow of
information. The librarian remains, however, the traditional intermediary between the document and the reader, but most of all they are a key figure regarding the choice of books and collections in the library. Careful selection represents the cultural direction of the offered service and the reading room still differs significantly from the network, in which the materials available are almost infinite and variable.

To survive to the present day the public library decides to revise its position and to introduce substantial changes to align itself with the new needs of society. It is an institution that has preferred to put its reputation at stake in order not to lose its importance within the information circuit. It can be seen how its role was modified from a mere space for culture into a place designed as a catalyst of urban life. How it managed to redeem its centrality through the implementation of multicultural policies, a fundamental step in globalised society and, finally, how it was able, at least for the moment, to control the technological evolution placed in its service. Libraries, beyond a mythical aura by which they seem surrounded which draws them as permanent bodies that are almost unrelated to the unfolding of history, have always been changing devices, in close proximity to the dynamics of society and bearers of a cultural mission which has unfortunately not always been disinterested (Battles 2004, 11–23). The evolution of this institution, therefore, reflects the evolution of culture and its mode of transmission with which it goes hand in hand.

Through the current compensation, libraries run the risk of obscuring their core values, which is also their goal of being the custodians of universal knowledge to which everyone should have free access. They preserve the collective memory of humanity and their history has always been the history of what men have decided to leave as testimony so that future generations may benefit from it. This means that the undisputed star of libraries should, even today, be the book, the primary means of the transmission of culture, as well as essential tool for the progress of society. Today library institutions should therefore be able to develop the services that revolve around knowledge, without missing the overall objective or reducing its intrinsic value. In doing so, the library of the future, beyond healthy forecasts, continues primarily to be a place dedicated to knowledge, but where services will be highly specialised and customisable and where access will be allowed to all media and, consequently, the acquisition of skills related to new technologies will become key. In addition, libraries will take shape as places to meet, socialise and converse, characterised by nonstop accessibility (Muscogiuri 2009, 22).

It is precisely in small towns or in neighbourhood areas that the symbolic value of the original institution is more unstable, threatened by the
prevalence of policies related only to information and commercial interest. In these peripheral scenarios that are very different from those of central libraries or university libraries, it is well understood that culture is often atrophied and other activities prevail. It is, therefore, in such situations that there is an urgent need for sound cultural proposals, which in some way “educate” the public. It is not appropriate, as so often happens in these cases, to lower the quality of the initiatives or collections, to have a larger membership to the services. On the contrary, the library has to guarantee selected and particular proposals to submit to users. If not, the library would lose its meaning, resembling the shopping centre, where the policy of the outlet provides a large number of attractive items, which have not been properly selected and are often of low quality in order to increase the number of purchasers.

From here, we arrive at the topic of communication strategies, which are often adopted by the most advanced libraries that follow marketing policies to increase the number of users and improve the service. What does not seem acceptable is the transposition of initiatives, which mostly derive from the commercial world, in the content of the library proposal. It should be clarified that the communication strategies that the public institution adopts, together with the technological tools to provide the service, are part of the means by which the library conveys the value of culture and the importance of knowledge. The latter are, in other words, the real content of the proposal that reflects the quality of the service and that symbolically represents the actual purpose of the institution.

**The contemporary architectural response**

The present-day model of the local library derives mainly from the idea of British and American public libraries, which were described in the first part. They are the result of a political choice made in the second half of the 19th century which promotes the diffusion of literacy skills and cultural integration of the masses. Libraries, together with schools, constitute a city network dedicated to knowledge.

Public library architecture is also linked to the city by the classical mark it has left, which correlates it with other cultural institutions and continues until the last decades of the 20th century, in which a profound renewal of the library begins, primarily involving local libraries. Their social role, which spreads in the meantime to other European countries, becomes exhausted, firstly because of the increasing level of literacy and subsequently because of the changes in cultural and technological surveys. For this reason, small libraries need to radically rethink their role within the network of knowledge in the last decades, much more than larger
libraries which conserve old documents, should do. The latter also suffer a severe decrease in users, but they still remain as custodians of collections representing universal knowledge, preserving their objective in society (Agnoli 2009, XIV).

Nevertheless, how do we exactly define local libraries or neighbourhood libraries? They are public institutions that have a reduced catchment area and are located in small towns or city districts. The main feature, which differentiates them from the larger libraries with old collections, is linked to a cultural proposal which deals basically with topical issues, as provided for the public library model from which they descend. The central theme is not, in this case, the maintenance and consultation of valuable collections, as usually occurs in a large library which promotes a high level of culture, but in general the promotion of popular culture, linked to the context and citizens, although they may not be devoid of vocations on a larger scale. The contemporary term *glocal library* (Muscogiuri 2009, 25), seems to perfectly capture the meaning of this proposal in our globalized society in which the value of local issues becomes essential in supporting the weight of a global culture. The service should thus provide citizens with materials and activities that satisfy their needs without hindering the cultural approach and, indeed, information is always selected by the library staff. Knowledge, which may be declined depending on the social context in which the library is located, has to remain the central objective, also in local situations. Around knowledge, other services can subsequently develop.

As in the large libraries, the local ones, in which the idea of a meeting place further develops, both the reduction of the digital divide, through policies of technological knowledge dissemination that are aligned with the citizen, and the development of multicultural services that promote dialogue and pluralism, are considered crucial. Therefore, a new model of a cultural institution emerges in connection to the circuit of information and it inevitably states an architectural problem, which is especially related to the interior space, through which the peaceful coexistence of multiple services is achieved and new systems of relationship between users are introduced. Moreover, if the architecture of historical libraries is directly related to precise typological developments, that are to be found in many manuals that highlight an evolutionary course whose steps are represented by the architecture of famous libraries, the question is different for local institutions or neighbourhood libraries whose historic course has never been traced, and neither is there any literature on the subject. In spite of this, as a result of the social and cultural renewal at the end of the 20th century, the design responses have been clear and,
in addition, they are related to the cultural and architectural heritage of belonging and can be seen to have been satisfactory. Indeed, the architecture becomes especially important where the public institution needs to find a new identity, which helps it to redeem itself and reintegrate effectively into a circuit of urban services. The identification of an architectural issue is attempted, both in connection to the city and the interior space, in which the popular culture of the citizens can be recognised, rather than the promotion of a cutting-edge architecture which should attract users through shiny surfaces and sinuous shapes. Building new belonging relations through the architectural design, with both the context and citizens who use the public service, thus becomes truly necessary.

If the local library is the place with which citizens can identify, or in which they find the popular culture to which they belong, it signifies that the local library should be the expression of a shared identity. The architecture allows finding oneself through formal experiences already lived, in this case by users of the institution, or through symbolic perceptions contained in space and connected to indelible events of the memory of oneself (Ottolini 1996, 137–182). Christian Norberg-Schulz points out that in identity given by form, we have the idea of character that represents how things are, and gives our investigation a basis in the concrete phenomena of our everyday life-world ... On the one hand it denotes a general comprehensive atmosphere and, on the other, the concrete form and substance of the space-defining elements. Any real presence is intimately linked with a character. (Norberg-Schulz 1979, 10–13)

In light of this, it was decided to consider the model of the urban square as a typical place of cohabitation of citizens in a civil society, as well as an effective representation of popular identity of an urban centre. The square embodies the character of a place that we re-propose for the architectural idea of the contemporary local library. This space, taken as a model, is described as the essence of the city, promoter of public opinion and driver of democracy (Amendola 1997, 176), and the beating heart of the neighbourhood or town, but what are the spatial characteristics of a well-designed square that lead us to the idea of the local library as a place of meeting and dialogue? Surely, in both spaces, moments of union among citizens should be promoted cutting, within the larger space, clearly defined areas designed and sized for a prolonged pause. We often find here measurements related to human proportions, thus favouring the welcoming nature of these places,
which may also correspond to specific meeting points within the larger space, such as a water basin, a kiosk or a reception desk in the library, or again cafeteria spaces. Even the readability and clarity of the architecture, which is as true for the square as it is for the library, influence their living conditions – complex spaces and no immediate paths are not suited to the nature of these public places. Indeed, they seem to discourage and confuse the visitor who may often be occasional. This does not mean, however, that the design of these spaces is not also fuelled by the wealth of various experiences and by functional variations that lead to discovery. There may be, for example, public spaces where a small market is discovered or where there is an exhibition behind a completely unexpected corner, but their presence does not interfere with their inner formal clarity. Furthermore, citizens join in spontaneously in a public space, even when there are no special events, only if it is comfortable in terms of temperature or otherwise it contains high-quality materials and furniture.

Today the local library, as the town square, is thus essentially a meeting place around which multiple activities, sometimes unexpected, take place, and where citizens decide to meet thanks to the particular living conditions of the space and its inner vocation.

The parallel between these two places, which are seemingly far removed from one other, leads to further reflection regarding the decline of urban public spaces in the present day, which often succumb or even disappear because of business rationale. Perhaps, through the renewal of the libraries, a turnaround can be triggered, by attempting to restore the value of public areas of the city and restoring dignity to historical sites of exchange and dialogue, such as squares and reading rooms. Instead of these places, shopping centres are considered more and more often as meeting places, especially in small and medium urban areas, located in the suburbs, which are dedicated only to consumer activities, rather than culturally stimulating ones. In addition, the European context should be considered, particularly the English and the Nordic countries, where such a trend reversal has already been implemented, since the public sector in these countries is historically fundamental for the development of society.

In Britain and the Nordic countries, public libraries have been, and are, the most natural meeting places for groups of citizens engaged in bottom-up activities. They facilitate initiatives of all kinds, from the political, such as the organisation of a protest, to the most innocuous, such as sewing classes ... This range of activities certainly contributes to giving citizens a sense of belonging, provides places of knowledge and mutual aid, smoothes contrasts and softens tensions, and allows people to continually improve their skills and expand their interests. (Agnoli 2009, 80)
The architectural theme that brings together the contemporary idea of the local library and the model of urban square, which also summarises the spatial characteristics in common, is linked to the new living conditions that library institutions propose and these derive exactly from historical urban meeting places. Therefore, if public reading rooms have always been, especially in the culture of those less advanced countries in this issue, silent spaces to study and read, with a mainly individual vocation, now they are places where the living condition becomes manifold and, besides the more or less cosy areas, we also find spaces for social relations. It is precisely the mutual relationships between people that inspire a new architectural idea promoting a place of interaction well connected to the city, a network of connections that finds a new living condition to be adopted in the square. Buildings are no longer introverted but rather open to the city, as well as to the user, and boundaries are interrupted to generate dynamic correlations and new opportunities for architectural comparison. This change also arises in parallel with the current transformations of urban centres, which promote the design of public buildings that are able to handle the new features of the society, linked to mobility, multiculturalism and new ways of learning. The architecture thus has to be able to interact, be versatile and flexible (Cacciari 2004, 64–69).

The design of the institution should therefore firstly represent an element of mediation with the city, in the case of neighbourhood libraries, or small towns, in the case of others. They develop a kind of space, which is typically urban but re-proposed here with the appropriate proportions, linked to the covered square or the covered road, used to emphasise the transition between the inside and outside, between the inner and outer spaces. Thus, libraries should embody today the so-called logic of the passage (Agnoli 2009, 94), because unlike other public buildings, they are considered places of transit, or to have a more or less prolonged pause, which may even be visited by chance, or be places for unexpected encounters, to intersect for the pleasure of discovery, besides many other reasons connected to study or reading. The link with the context, which is a prerequisite for the existence of local institutions, is not defined only through a true connection to the existing buildings, but also through the ability of the library to be perceived by the citizens as a real part of the city. This perception occurs not only by acquiring spatial dynamics of urban squares, but also by bringing outside parts of the library that can be integrated with the town, and proposing exhibitions for specific events that can benefit from evocative parts of the city: “in short, the future lies in making the public library a city and the city a library” (Agnoli 2009, 152). Regarding the construction of the interior space, the furniture plays a vital
role in commanding the nature of these places, which appears dynamic and changing and no longer predetermined but to be reorganised from time to time, following the renewal that involved library institutions. This is in contrast with other public buildings where the relations between people and space appear prearranged. The furniture meets the user, mediating the relationship between them and the architectural space around them, suggesting ways of using and configuring possible relations between them and the other users. It is important, however, that the organisation of the interior space is not permanent, but rather it should be able to convey a message that can be modified, which may also involve the ideas of citizens. As a result, the building provides fixed furniture to determine, together with the architecture, the permanent character of the building that is easily understood by users and connected to a strong, shared identity which they are able to recognise. There should also be movable furniture, easily manageable by both library staff and users. This would allow flexibility not only in organising the space in case of special events, but also to make citizens able to manage the small area they intend to use depending on their individual needs, thus allowing a temporary customisation that will even put the least assiduous visitor at ease: “finding the right chair means feeling good, feeling at home, watching the ‘different’ in a less aggressive or fearful way, reaching for a book or magazine, taking a child into one’s arms and reading a story to them” (Agnoli 2009, 125).

Architectural solutions

Through concrete references to planning, it is possible to analyse the results derived from the hybridisation between the model of the urban square and the space of local libraries. The presence of the features that refer to this model is easy to understand, even if it leads to very different architectural solutions. The proposed plans share the desire to pursue a strong link with the context, obtained through an intermediate place of connection between the space of the library and the city. The first architectural solution dealt with is the one edited by the Catalan group RCR Arquitectes for the district library of Sant Antoni in Barcellona, completed in 2007 (El Croquis 2007, 192–211). The area is close to the oldest part of the city and it is structured by the grid of the Cerdà Plan, an urban plan, edited by engineer Cerdà and dating back to 1859, which is fundamentals for the city. The goal was to handle the expansion outside the walls of the ancient nucleus through the creation of an urban grid that generated a sequence of square blocks and rounded corners, which were designed to be built on only two sides of the perimeter so that they retained a central void passage. Throughout history, however,
these recommendations were not followed and, for mainly speculative reasons, the blocks became congested, increasingly reducing the parts of emptiness inside. This is also the urban situation today in which the Catalan group has to operate and which provides an opportunity to work on the central void, which is historically connected to the city. For this reason, the library project consists mainly of a facade toward the street that connects the existing adjacent buildings, but that, at the same time, is designed to be crossed to allow access to the central void in which a real urban square appears. Around it are the spaces of the district library, which are fully glazed and turned toward the centre. The design of this public institution thus becomes an opportunity for the design of a square, in the perimeter of which, services to the citizens are located and whose central space becomes the point of connection with the city. What emerges, in particular, is an urban place regularly visited by groups of people with totally different needs. From the elderly, who use the outside square to rest, as well as the services given to them inside, to the children, who take advantage of the distance from the traffic for their outdoor games and who take refuge inside in winter. To this, we add the young people of the neighbourhood, who look for a secluded place to study or read a newspaper in peace and quiet. The spaces very close to the square are, however, the periodicals area, located near the entrance facing the street, and a recreation area, which is also used for games and activities. The more silent reading area is in the volume set above the entrance and overlooks towards both the road and the square below.

Another interesting architectural solution that reinterprets a connection with the city, making it a key point of the project proposal, is that adopted for the Jaume Fuster Library, again in Barcelona, but this time in the Gràcia district, to the north of the city centre (Muscogiuri 2009, 253–258). The plan is by Josep Llinas, one of the most famous architects in the contemporary Catalan scene, who assisted in the revival of Spanish libraries that took place from the 1990s onwards. As a result, both the number of institutions and that of users strongly increased. These libraries are of an innovative and contemporary design, as was previously illustrated, and this one by Llinas is dedicated to Jaume Fuster and built between 2001 and 2005.

The building completes the existing block and it also becomes an element of connection between the Plaça de Lesseps and the beginning of the linear park that would develop along the Avinguda de Vallarca, both next to the new library, the strategic crux of the urban reconfiguration of the neighbourhood. For this reason, the solution provides a place of mediation between the outside world and the inside of the building,
which also allows the connection between the square and the park. A place, which is, however, contiguous with the volume of the library and revealed only through a fascinating cantilever roof, with inclined planes and wood panelling on the underside, that takes visitors to the entrance and draws the eye to the adjacent public spaces. Under this portion of the roof, which represents the lowest part of the complex volume of the library, besides the main entrance, on one side there is a periodicals area, which is fully glazed towards the outside, and on the other, a cafeteria, which is directly accessible from the covered public space, without the need of going through the entrance, and which is completely glazed. The place of mediation that is outlined is related to the functions that are more connected to the square, and with its boundaries, it contributes to the construction of the public space. In addition, the cantilever roof houses the outdoor space of the cafeteria, so, when the weather is good, it becomes a covered seating space, as well as a space for non-instant access. The architecture of the library appears very rich, not only outside, but also inside, where a multitude of functions unfolds on both the ground and the first floor, creating spaces characterised by the movement of the roof and consequently by different kinds of natural lighting.

The design strategy found in the two examples solves the issue of the local library through a concrete relationship with the surrounding context, which is developed by creating an intermediate space that becomes the heart of the project proposal, as well as a place to meet and exchange. Outlining the structure of the two solutions, the place in question, which is similar to a square and common to both ideas, resembles a zip, with more or less visible boundaries between the city and the library, and between the outside world and the space for culture inside.

The local library can also be connected to the existing context and to the dynamics of the city through the adoption of another typical urban model – the covered road, which, unlike the more or less covered square, is set mainly as a running place, rather than a place to stay in. These are two ways of modelling a public space, pursuing a common goal, which is to identify a place where people can forge relations and share experiences, a place that is the expression of the democracy of a country. A covered path connected to the indoor space of the library, which also becomes an urban path, thus follows the logic of the passage (Agnoli 2009, 94), a disinterested way, without a specific purpose, which leads to discovery. The perception of the passer-by, which we refer to, is typical of the flâneur, who glances along the city, drifting through crowds and experiencing whatever they come across on the way (Benjamin 1995, 145–160).
A library project in which we find this kind of experience is the Mediterranean Media Library (Mediateca del Mediterraneo, MEM) in Cagliari, edited by OP Architetti Associati, a group of architects located in Venice. The building, opened in 2011, is set in the district of Stampace and it reuses a historical complex consisting of a long, narrow court and resolute facades in brick and travertine, where previously there was a municipal market. Only the court acquires a leading role in the project, through which it becomes an urban path, almost entirely covered by a glass structure, to which all the activities of the media library are exposed. This building is proposed as one of the cultural centres of the city, linked to the context and with cutting-edge initiatives. It houses the municipal archives on the second floor, the only level added and, therefore, covered in Corten steel on the outside, while the spaces used for the library are located on the first level. The main activities of the average user are on the ground floor, which also involves those who pass by, and includes a newspaper library, a film library, a toy centre, together with versatile spaces used for temporary exhibitions and conferences. The urban indoor path, therefore, consisting of two fully glazed, slightly concave walls, becomes the focus of the composition, also because it embodies the fundamental role of the media library, as a place of meeting, and dialogue and break, made possible by seating areas. The main entrances are located here, and right here the media library meets the dynamism and vitality of the glass covered court, which allows the citizen to have both a disinterested break, before being swallowed up again by the urban surroundings, and also to have the opportunity to use the cultural services, to examine the proposed ideas which they personally find attractive. In addition, two small squares, placed on the opposite small facades of the existing building, represent a further mediation between the context and the cultural centre, connecting the level of the city to that of the interior covered walkway, and emphasising the access through the two portals that characterise the facades toward the city.

Another library that pursues the logic of the passage is San Giovanni in Pesaro (Agnoli 2009, 85–97), built between 1996 and 2001, and designed by Danilo Guerri and Massimo Carmassi, who would not follow the final phase of the project. The complex is located within a portion of the old San Giovanni convent, dating back to the 17th century, and which, only in the second half of the 20th century, becomes a municipal property after having previously hosted military functions. First, the administration thought of constructing a generic social centre for the neighbourhood and, only when preventive work was completed, they decided to use the building as a town library, aiming for a cultural centre which was broader than those which
have previously been discussed thus far. The main idea of the project was to change two wings of the convent connecting the entrances of both the ends through a covered walkway alongside the existing building, re-evaluating the overall height. Thus, a new urban path was outlined, built with wooden trusses and a transparent cover, which connects the two parts of the city, as well as depicting the two entrances of the library, the one next to the information desk and the other, close to the cafeteria. Even in this case, as in the previous example, the purpose is to intrigue the passer-by, and considering culture as a way of meeting and discovery. The urban path, which is placed between the two wings of the building and a park, becomes a place of dialogue and relationship, both for the users of the library and for the citizens in general, shaping a fundamental element of mediation between the institution and the context. The rooms facing the covered area outside are dedicated to the quick consultation of books and reading, while, upstairs, more silent study areas, even individual, are located, and only one of the two wings houses a terrace, with a further reading area that overlooks the park.

In these two solutions, however, the local library issue deals with the connection to the city, seizing the opportunity to think about a contemporary cultural design centred on the urban scale. Visualising the relationship between local institutions and cities, the spatial organisation does not appear much different from the two design solutions analysed previously, because what emerges is still a place located between the adjacent space of the city and the interior space of the cultural centre. Once more, it is a hinge, a place dedicated to the stitching of two different worlds, but what changes is the nature of this semi-urban space as has been outlined at the beginning. In general, the run of the flows prevails here over the stop, unless it is quick or the space is specially prepared, as the image of the media library in Cagliari suggests, showing the covered urban path furnished for a city event.

There are libraries, however, whose meeting place, which follows the dynamics of the square, does not represent a moment of connection with the city, but rather an interior space, which is well defined and involved in a variety of uses, and which is a meeting place more or less introverted. This is what occurs in the Álvaro de Campos Library in Tavira (Casabella 2007–2008, 102–109), a town in southern Portugal, where the library designed by the Portuguese João Luís Carrilho da Graça was built between 1999 and 2005. The idea deals with the reuse of the old prisons of the city, which is also the birthplace of Álvaro de Campos, one of the most well known literary heteronyms of the poet Fernando Pessoa. What remains of the old building is the main facade, the outside walls of the lower level
and the stone used to cover the ground floor. This level is the crux to which the library is addressed. Here water basins and green areas, which trace the original plan of the existing complex, pinpoint a patio, which becomes a place for meeting, outdoor reading and rest. A space that is enclosed by walls but faces the sky, with its stone seating plans used in a variety of ways reveals what would seem to be a very sheltered, small town square in a region where wind is often a problem. In front of the patio, there is an entrance area that, with its white walls and Corten steel elements, offers protection from the surrounding context. The library spaces are located in the new area, next to one side of the old prison and to the rear, and they comprise all the functions that a contemporary cultural centre requires, including a well-organised training space for children and young people. A further patio in the new portion of the complex is designed to give light to the rooms. Its nature, however, is quite different compared with the one that represents the heart of the composition. The first is a space to be admired mostly from the inside, as well as being functional for the organisation of the building. The second, on the other hand, reveals its importance as a place to stay and forge relationships, which is the point of impact on the ground floor of the historical building, the most precious part of the complex.

Another architecture where the main meeting space is introverted is the Holmsbladgade Neighbourhood Centre, in Copenhagen, which was completed in 2001. The design of the building is by Dorte Mandrup, a Danish architect who has been able to continue the tradition of Northern Europe, providing good-quality spaces for an exemplary cultural service, particularly in Denmark, where the design of the library has always been a subject of research and investigation. This is a centre that focuses on the activity of meeting and connecting people that goes beyond the usual activities of a district library, changing the nature of the place. The new complex is placed in an existing building, dating back to the second half of the 19th century. Along with this, the architect provides a prismatic volume, connected to one of the two ends of the building, and a series of niches that protrude outwards and that are inserted in a metal grid placed near the entrance. The focus of the composition is also that which we are interested in exploring, i.e. the space inside the new glass parallelepiped supported by concrete pillars which allude to a forest, a typical landscape of the North. This is actually the only part of the building not to be designed for a specific task, but rather designed to welcome new and diverse activities, and which is anyhow a space with a definite character. The area, where people meet and share opinions, is highly customisable and manageable by users, a true public
space in the city, even if it is not directly accessible from it, where users discuss, organise workshops or plan. This place of relationships, similar to a small square, is suspended and protected from the cold. It is equipped with a modular wooden grid that traces the perimeter making a series of useful shelves, and with easily stackable wooden chairs. The other functions of the city centre take place instead in the existing building in which we see, besides the spaces of the library, a youth centre, several rooms designed to accommodate neighbourhood associations and a cafeteria near the entrance, in a triple-level foyer with wooden niches that protrude from the facade.

Summing up the two design solutions described above, they clearly differ from the previous ones, whose meeting places represent a semi-urban space, a mediation between the inside and outside, while this kind of place, still seen as the centrepiece of the solution, is quite different. The link with the city is no longer immediate, but rather subtended, or represented only by the emphasis of the path that leads from the outside to the heart of the architecture that is not identified as a transition space but rather as a clear part of the building whose nature is opposed to the rest of it. In the Portuguese case study, the space in question is the only one placed in the pre-existing part of the building and it is announced by large vertical surfaces, while Dorte Mandrup situates it in the only added part, specifically designed and reachable by walking longitudinally through the industrial complex. The identified places preserve the main features of a public space, despite being introverted but, because of this, they are even more efficient regarding the climatic characteristics of the context.

The furniture plays an important role in declaring the nature of local library institutions which is emerging as a result of the social and cultural renewal in progress. It is important, in this regard, that the interior space presents a balance between fixed and movable equipment which allows, on the one hand, the construction of a well-identified place in which citizens can recognise themselves, while in the other hand, the opportunity for users to customise their area, which is capable of guaranteeing multiple uses.

A solution that focuses on these needs is that of the library of Villanueva de la Canada (Muscogiuri 2009, 293–294; Casabella 2007–2008, 84–93), a small town near Madrid, designed by CH + SQ Arquitectos. These two architects come from the Spanish capital, where, as in Catalonia, a strong revival of cultural institutions took place, leading rapidly to large improvements. The library, finished in 2002, was designed primarily as a meeting place for local citizens, as well as a place of learning and knowledge, represented architecturally through ascending stages of a
spiral path that connects different spaces through a system of ramps. Therefore, we start from a children’s area, to get to the more specific study rooms with advanced equipment, experiencing an interior arrangement that plays on differences in height and on the continuity of the paths. The space, characterised each time in a different way, is evenly pervaded by a comfortable and cozy atmosphere, provided by natural materials, continuous finishes and the right balance of sunlight. Besides a well-defined overall perception of the place, single episodes can be identified in which fixed furniture, characterised by multiple uses, are related to movable furniture that are more specific and easy to move. This is the case of the children’s area situated in the star-shaped volume, where the wooden shelves, which become large steps to sit on in the lower part, are put together with little tables and chairs scattered randomly. The variability of use of the large steps is easy to see as the child uses them both to reach for the books and then to sit down to read, while the round tables can be used mostly for group activities, or even to encourage dialogue between the young visitors. A large flight of steps also characterises another part of the building in which the multiplicity of use of simple horizontal planes of wood, to read, converse or watch a little show, prevails over the addition of movable equipment. However, these fixed and more relaxed seats are balanced by a series of movable furniture which characterise the entire volume of the partly filled reading room, in which lightweight chairs and rather large tables can be easily managed by the individual user, thus allowing customisation of their work area.

Another interesting architecture from this point of view is that of Studio Archea, a group based in Florence, for the Nembro Library, near Bergamo, which ended in 2007 (Muscogiuri 2009, 415–416). This reuses a courtyard building, dating back to the late 19th century and established to be used as a school, to which the Italian architects add an extension required for the role of local library. The new volume is a glass parallelepiped that closes the central space of the court, but allows a side passage that separates the new intervention from the pre-existing architecture. The two buildings are connected only through a basement, located underneath the courtyard, which hosts an area for relaxation, which also contains computers. The quiet reading rooms, the specific areas for children and teenagers, together with the service spaces, are located inside the 19th century building, while the added volume, which is accessible from the basement, contains the local library collections and some spaces for reading. The interior arrangement is characterised, on the whole, by the use of wood which enriches areas, making surfaces continuous and warm and, in a different ways, it relates to movable furnishings and glass partitions, outlining cozy
and well-measured places. The idea of the space appears decisive in the basement, where the place is conceived mainly for people to meet and enter relations, even before glancing at a book or doing internet research. It is simply distinguished by two lower shelves that contain computer equipment and limit a space in which easily assembled, comfortable, red pouf seats can freely move. So they relate to the fixed wooden furniture but allow great freedom in configuration as well as in customisation. In the added volume, a fixed skeleton of wood replaces mobile equipment, and it contains books and configures a continuous space in height, in which the user turns around a central leading element. Through the correct balance between the objects, spaces can be identified and bestowed on the nature of the places, which are on the one hand easily customizable and, on the other, give a strong identity to the place.

The two architectures described show an approach to the theme of the contemporary local library that does not focus on the relationship with the city but, on the contrary, it begins with the organisation of the interior space, assigning to it the architectural resolution of the main issue. Edges and equipment then configure the required kind of space, bestowing its inner idea through meticulous work done on the scale of the interior design and achieving the result that the previous solutions enhanced towards an urban approach.

After having analysed the different ways of connection to the urban structure, together with the importance attributed to the fulcrum of social and sharing relationships, and having determined the fundamental role of furniture in the transmission of the revisited nature of a place, it is instructive to understand how even the clarity of the designed space affects the configuration of a new habitability. An easily understandable organisation and a correct location of the roles have to correspond, however, to various activities on which the contemporary library feeds, especially at a local level. The richness of the initiatives proposed by the institution has to go hand in hand with a space whose dynamics appear immediately comprehensible by the user, as happens in a public square. An architectural solution that achieves this goal is the MedaTeca, realised in the town of Meda, near Milan, and opened to the public in 2012. The building was designed by Alterstudio Partners, a group of architects including Marco Muscogiuri who understands the contemporary debate regarding public libraries, and who is also author of several texts related to this issue. The MedaTeca appears as a space that is entirely addressed to the citizen and to the indiscriminate promotion of knowledge and information, a meeting place structured vertically by distributing the functions of the complex over five floors, two of which are filled.
location of the activity is clear, as is the access to the different levels, made possible through a spiral staircase, which leads only to the lower floors, and also a central volume that contains the stairs to the upper floors and the lifts. The functions do not appear “sectorialised” however, because the different levels communicate with each other through the double height parts of the space, which allow the visitor to understand what is happening on adjacent floors, as well as through the glass facade and through the blocks with stairs and lifts, which play an important role in the composition. What emerges is a kind of “vertical square” in which the activities of the media library are available on each of the different levels, enjoying a very flexible space, ready for new configurations and accommodating unexpected initiatives. The variety of use, which joins a fundamental clarity of the designed spaces, is also made possible by the furniture, which includes moveable shelves with wheels that are able to organise the space, alongside the mostly movable chairs. This architectural configuration seems to derive from the German idea of the three-level library because here, as that model of space predicts, we find a ground floor dedicated to the reception and to the presentation of the initiatives that may interest citizens while, going up, and in the case of MedaTeca also going down, the activities become more specific and dedicated to a more restricted audience. From reading rooms, where glancing at a book or resting, dedicated to children or teens and next to the entrance level, in the complex of Meda, we have reading areas for adults on the second and third floors, while on the second basement floor there is a library storeroom and an auditorium.

This solution, like the other Italian ones presented, reflects the situation in Italy in which, though later than in other cutting-edge European nations, significant events have occurred in recent years and the public library issue is being developed by following its most important contemporary implications, promoting interesting architectural solutions.

Another remarkable building from the same point of view as the previous one is the media library in Corbie, a town near Amiens, designed by the French group Béal & Blanckaert, and built between 2007 and 2009. This architecture, which, unlike those previously treated, is set in a natural environment, continues the tradition of the French media libraries developed at the end of the 20th century, and interprets the theme giving a stimulating solution. The volume is designed as a plastic element that crystallises the landscape and its individual wings go towards the green area and close to the ground, as if they are continuous with it. The Corten steel plans, composing this volume, identify spaces that are often brought forward by covered places which are, however, still outside, and which
mediate the relationship to the park and protect large windows through which we have a direct visual connection to the context, another true leader of the project. The entrance is between the two portions of the building that stretch out onto the road, and leads to a central part of the volume in which the information desk is located and from which four distinct portions of space depart, hosting different activities. Despite this, the functions do not appear isolated in confined spaces or away from one another because they are visually open towards the common central part and from which the other parts of the complex can be seen. Moreover, all the spaces are connected to the landscape through large windows and outdoor covered places. The clarity of the distribution, from the centre to the four wings, seems immediate and, at the same time, the areas of the media library, the reading area, the children area, the small atelier and the conference room take advantage of wide and versatile spaces, whose simplicity and brightness are suited to many normal or unexpected uses. Even in these two solutions, the problem arises and is solved from the inside, considering the characteristics both of the location and the context. In the first case, it is a small portion of a site, while in the second, a large green area. If in the immediately preceding examples the interior space aims to have different degrees of variety and customisation, which are possible because of the coexistence of fixed and movable items, here it is the spatial clarity of the solution, linked to functional variety, which represents a possible design strategy.

Finally the English experience of Idea Store is essential, both in understanding the real needs of contemporary local libraries (Agnoli 2009, 85–97) and in analysing the architectural responses that began in that context. In the 1990s, the public library system was in crisis and the government decided to allocate funding to raise the standard of operation and efficiency and to start concrete projects through which the role of local libraries could be re-launched. It is in this context that the Idea Store experience began, gathering interest not only for the results which were achieved, but also for the methodology which was applied to discover the new needs of users. Through surveys and market research, an investigation was conducted, outlining the new features that library institutions should adopt. These arose from direct dialogue with citizens, which showed that the main reason of the decline of these centres was due to lack of amenities, as well as to inconvenient location, which was often distant from the usual shopping routes. Thus, the administration of Tower Hamlets, a suburb in the East End of London, promoted the investigation, deciding to invest in libraries to cope with the serious problems of social exclusion and unemployment. They soon realised that these public institutions should
be located in places that are more appropriate and they should have a new, dynamic image, given both by the form, and here the architecture comes into play, and by the content or the offered services. Thus, the first solution for seven Idea Stores began. They were placed in strategic areas of the city and appeared as bearers of an innovative idea of knowledge and information, as well as places of socialisation for citizens, to cast off the antiquated image of old libraries.

Two of these seven buildings, the one on Chrisp Street and the one on Whitechapel Road, were designed by the British group Adjaye Associates, between 2001 and 2005 (Muscogiuri 2009, 425–428; Casabella 2007–2008, 128–137). Here the architecture follows a logic that is not that of the public space, on which the solutions analysed above are based, where the meeting place for citizens becomes the focus of the composition, whose dynamics are easily associated with those of a town square. The model to which these architectures refer is instead the store, or a space for undifferentiated consumption, which promotes buildings characterised by a strong communication strategy to attract people and encourage them to buy more disparate goods. Coloured and flashy containers can be seen, with instantly recognisable and repeated images. Are we really convinced that this is a good alternative for small libraries from an architectural point of view? If store communication strategies can be helpful in improving the service and establishing a dialogue with the user through a language, linked to the consumer culture, which they recognise, the architectural parallel is not so immediate. The discipline has to answer the needs arising and connected both to the city and to the organisation of the interior space. It has to establish a link with the context, a basic prerequisite for a local institution that the policy of the store definitely puts in second place. Moreover, if the district library intends to define a place that is able to mend popular identity that citizens recognise, the model of the mall, called par excellence a non-place, is likely to be misleading, at least in architectural terms. Using the dynamics of the consumer spaces in cultural institutions, which by definition have the opposite vocation, sounds unusual and it should lead to reflection.

The two Adjaye buildings with their shiny and colourful surfaces, certainly represent a winning strategy from the social point of view, but examining the architectural value we understand that they are far from the comfortable spaces of the libraries in Northern Europe, or from those built in Spain in recent years. The debate is whether the glow of Idea Store is designed to last, or whether it represents only a temporary phenomenon. Perhaps only with the passing of time, will it be possible to answer this question and today we can only raise doubts regarding such architectural proposals.
The library as an interface

In response to the wandering society, characterised by phenomena related to the mobility of people, multiculturalism and the consequent socio-cultural hybridization, the library radically changes its configuration. After its redemption to survive to contemporary dynamics, it confirms, especially in narrow contexts, its importance not only as a cultural centre but also as a meeting place for citizens. Indeed, just where there are no valuable collections to be preserved, the users, with their initiatives, are those who define the nature of the place, who are no longer granted only access to books and to their subsequent location in space.

The “square of knowledge” becomes the new architectural way to connect the library, as a place of knowledge, to citizens and the surrounding city, outlining a natural evolution for the local institutions which, arising from the English public library, have always considered this topical issue as one of their strengths. It is necessary that these cultural centres still represent a place in which citizens can express their identity, as well as an expression of the new needs of a population that is multicultural and hybrid, a *glocal library* for a glocal society that needs a global vocation, but also a strong connection to the different contexts, which remains the basis for the existence of local institutions.

Architecturally, this idea is expressed through a new spatial configuration – a space conceived as *interface* is opposed to an introverted building. This kind of space lives by relations that constantly pass through it, making connections with the urban context and citizens. The mutual relationships between people becomes the basis for this architectural idea which re-proposes the logic of the urban square, as the mentioned case studies highlight. The dynamics of a public space appear convincing, buildings that face the new needs of society have prevailed, especially at a local level, setting themselves up as interfaces between topical culture and people, between the city and a meeting place dedicated to the community.

Books are no longer the object around which the space is organised. If earlier their location established the spatial layout, today the focus of the composition lies in the place of the relationship between citizens, at times an urban passage, at others, an introverted square, or the whole building that takes the logic and the flexibility of a public place.

Spaces conceived as interfaces are considered representative of contemporary society by Paul Virilio, who talks about an architecture that becomes a bundle of connections and works on the decomposition of the edges rather than on their continuity. Threshold spaces and limited-surfaces take place, showing their hybrid nature that goes hand in hand with the public space of a society in which contaminations occur daily.
“The delimitation of space becomes exchange/transformation, radical separation becomes a necessary step, transit of a continual activity of incessant exchange, transfers between two environments, and between two substances” (Virilio 1998, 14). Here is how the space of public institutions in urban contexts is destined to take shape, considering its urgent revision due also to the evolution of suburban situations linked to shopping centres, which drive large numbers of people out of cities. The local library, if conceived as an interface, thus represents one of those cultural services that would enable a real turnaround, thanks to which city centres would again be able to attract people, and rediscover a sense of belonging to a local community, which is essential in a globalised society.

References


