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ALEXANDRIA
The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues

A place called home: Encounters with libraries

Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues
2018, Vol. 28(1) 40–54
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DOI: 10.1177/0955749018813476
journals.sagepub.com/home/ala
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Abstract
Libraries exist the world over across diverse cultures and have been in existence since the dawn of civilisation. Libraries can be seen as a collection of marks, often representing sounds, made upon some kind of support, such as stone, papyrus, paper or magnetic discs, which require deciphering and interpretation to have significance. Whether tiny island libraries or huge national libraries, each offers resources that help define identity at a global, national, community and personal level. The library has many roles to play, one that cannot be measured by statistics alone; it embodies freedom of speech and the principles of democracy but can and has been a means of social control; it is often a spontaneous expression of community and conviviality, sharing viewpoints and knowledge or it can be an engineered, assertive national statement; it is often a mixture of all these. The library is more than the sum of its parts and is an expression of the relationship between the human and the mysterious universe we live in.

Keywords
library architecture, library history, national libraries, public libraries

I am in a teahouse drinking a cup of jasmine-scented oolong in the ancient city of Xi'an. Outside, vendors are selling carved jade ink-stamps engraved with the names of westerners in Mandarin. John, I was told as I paid a man with inky fingers, is carved on mine. He meant the sound of my name transliterated into Chinese pictograms. It has nothing to do with John, none of the backdrop of cultural references and history that name carries for a westerner. Nothing to do with me. It is sounds in symbols. I stare at it as I sip my oolong and reflect on the empty equivalence – Jer-Ow-Hon. I was made to repeat it as the salesman pointed to raised lines carved within squares and, suddenly, all meaning was called into question. I imagined all the libraries of the world piled to the rafters with inky

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symbols, all meaning nothing, all sharing blank incomprehension, vast chambers of empty marks, scratches of hopelessness.

I travel the world for my work as a freelance writer and poet. Wherever I go, I try to visit a library nearby; sometimes it is my work that takes me there, sometimes it is curiosity, sometimes chance but the result has been a lifetime of peering into reading rooms, sniffing leather-bound volumes, touching interactive screens and asking questions, many questions. So, the journey we are about to undertake is not a planned tour or inventory, not a bucket list or top ten but, like life, it is a journey of accidents and surprises, revelations and enquiry at the root of which is a love of libraries.

I am in Xi'an for the Terracotta Warriors and for a library, a library set in stone. It is a short walk from my tea room through the hustle and soy sauce smells to the Beilin Museum. And it is quiet and quite beautiful. Paved walkways, finely carved balustrades decorated with dragons, harmonious gardens that create miniature, idealised landscapes, pine trees that lend autumnal fragrance to the almost-still air and pavilions raised on high, slender red pillars topped with curved, tiled roofs and more dragons. Inside the pavilions are stelae, thousands of them.

I stroke my small, jade stamp with Jer-Ow-Hon carved on it as if it has become a lucky charm. Before me lies a stone forest of hidden meanings.

At the same time as King Alfred was creating his library in Wessex, Emperor Wenzong had the writings of Confucius carved on huge stones and erected in the Imperial College in Xi'an, then the capital of China. Wenzong's project took over 6 years, consisted of 114 pieces of stone with both faces carved and comprised 650,252 characters. It was the beginning of the centralisation of reference standards in China. After 837 CE, if you needed to be sure about what Confucius really said, you would visit the stone tablets.

The project continued. The works of Mencius followed Confucius. The various Chinese scripts at that time were codified. Buddhist scriptures in parallel Sanskrit and Chinese translations were carved onto three-metre-high stone tablets while tablets from earlier eras, dating back to the Emperor Qin Shihuang c. 220 BCE, were collected and stored.

Eventually a library complex had to be built to house the stones. In 1087, Lu Dazhong, a transport minister of the Song dynasty, moved all the tablets to where I stand today, near the South Gate of the great walled city of Xi'an. An inventory was created, and a map, the equivalent of an indexed catalogue, which links to seven large pavilions and many smaller ones set in these beautiful grounds.

In a modern library you take a book from the shelf or look up items on-screen via the online library catalogue, here I find myself literally walking kilometres and then circling to 'read' from Sanskrit to Chinese. I admit, I am lost. The catalogue points my way to nothing I can understand. Then, at last, I come across a grain of meaning: 'The Nestorian Stele'. Agreed, the translation from Syriac into Chinese undertaken in 781 CE and telling the story of Nestorian Christianity, is no more comprehensible to me than anything else but I have moved west along the Silk Road, I have almost touched base. My modern mind, which cast off Christianity as superstition, breathes a sigh of relief when it meets something Christian and nearly familiar.

Spasmodic regeneration

My late mother loved to use the word 'spasm' in odd ways. 'We've had a spasm of moths', she once told me, and there was also a spasm of robberies down her street, a spasm of mass shootings worldwide and a spasm of strikes under the Ted Heath government. I can hear why she liked it; it is almost onomatopoetic, the impure consonants shudder at start and finish while the short vowel hardly gets breath. Such attention to language belongs to a passing age in our visual, icon driven, emoji-cluttered culture. It seems significant, therefore, that there has recently been a spasm of glossy picture books published on libraries around the world; indeed, there is a definite ongoing spasm of big-statement libraries being built around the globe. Some say this is inspiring, others that it relegates true librarianship to an adjunct to conference centre facilities, Costa coffee shops, welfare services and the egos of statement-driven politicians. Objectors point to closing community libraries, dwindling trained staff, poorly maintained or updated stock; promoters point to iconic architecture, Wi-Fi throughout, children playing in the bouncy room before author events and inner-city regeneration.

I am now standing before 'The Black Diamond'. This is a statement library. Standing on the waterfront of Copenhagen Harbour, clad in Zimbabwean black granite, it looks like an origami time machine or monument to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard which, incidentally, is the postal address for this lovely monster. In the years since the dramatic extension of the Danish Royal Library opened, the new building has led the harbour-front regeneration. There is now a theatre, the Royal Danish Playhouse, new government buildings and a rival to the Sydney Opera House at the harbour mouth.

This new library, an extension to the Royal Library founded in 1648, is iconic, connected and 'cool'. When the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva paid Denmark a state visit, part of his carefully planned and timed itinerary was a visit to the Royal Library. On arriving late, he ignored the champagne reception and announced that he wanted a coffee in the café. He sat, chatted and admired the interior. The building had worked its relaxed magic.

The Brazilian President had much to admire. The library's interior is as engaging as its exterior. A 24-m-high central atrium formed by curved balconies and glass is made brighter by light grey tiles from Portugal and light woods which give the whole building a warm, inviting feel. Research takes place alongside a concert hall, exhibition galleries, cafés and a bookshop. There's even a restaurant named after Denmark's most famous philosopher, and had Kierkegaard enjoyed such a place to study, his view on life may have turned a bit more cheerful.

Many governments since have followed the Black Diamond's example. If you read the blurb put out by the planners and politicians supporting such grand buildings, you could be forgiven for accusing them of plagiarism; the words 'hub', 'forum', 'convivial', 'state-of-the-art', 'people-focused', 'multipurpose', 'community', 'bright', 'friendly', 'connected' – the list goes on – have been Xeroxed across continents. But what about across the ages?

Blame the Romans

It is interesting that today's changing concept of the library, seen no longer as an edifice to learning but more as a meeting place, a forum for ideas, a place to relax and meet people had a precursor in the Library of Hadrian in central Athens, the city that gave us democracy, theatre, free-thinking philosophy and the foundations of science.

Constructed over 2 years from 131 CE, on the north side of the Acropolis, the library provided the people of Athens with a new, multipurpose, public square and cultural centre that contained a garden, works of art, a library and lecture halls. The library was the largest in Athens and formed an important part of a project to redesign the city instigated by the Emperor. The rolls of papyrus books were kept at the east end of the building. The spacious, white marble colonnades enclosed two reading rooms and there was a pond at the centre of a courtyard. It was, as the classical travel writer, Pausanias, testifies, 'a sumptuous building'.

Sadly, the barbarian invasion of the Heruli in 267 seriously damaged the building and, as my school history books put it, 'a darkness began to fall across Europe'. As libraries were being destroyed or fell into disuse, the libraries that survived in monasteries or were established by wiser rulers such as King Alfred, became a Noah's ark, preserving what could be salvaged of civilised times. But as I stare at my Jer-Ow-Hon jade stamp, I realise that libraries are about so much more than preservation, they are about meaning, identity. It is so easy to lose meaning.

Power to the people

I am now in South-West France, in *la France profonde,* in the small town of Fontaines d'Ozillac, home to 450 souls. We are on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela; this is the land fought over in the Hundred Years' War. I love it here, its sunflowers and vineyards, its chalk lanes and gentle climate.

Fontaines d'Ozillac has a large Romanesque church. Turn your back on its arched façade, carvings of Knights Templars and gargoyles with a scallop shell to welcome pilgrims, and you see a 17th-century building across the road. Photographs from the 19th century show a typical, Charentais, stone-built dwelling, in use, with abundant foliage round about.

Fast forward a century and the regional planners are inspecting a house with one tumbledown wall and a roof about to cave in. The only solution, they say, is the bulldozer and the creation of a car park.

'What are we going to do?' said the townspeople. 'There is nothing like this fine old building that has stood here for 400 years but there are plenty of car parks – and besides, whenever have we seen 50 cars to park in the centre of town?'

The mayor had an idea.

'I know', she exclaimed, 'we are going to buy the old building, and we, the commune, are going to repair it'.

The townsfolk relied on a *Bibliobus* as a library. Since the war it had travelled the countryside visiting the 120 communes that made up the region of Haute-Saintonge,

lending books that rarely changed year upon year. It was time for something better. It was time that Fontaines d'Ozillac had its own library.

The mayor raised money, the townsfolk raised money, the elderly owner was recompensed and happy to give his ruin to the town, the planners shook their heads in disbelief.

It certainly reads like a fairy story but now the 17th-century house is home to some 3186 books divided on two floors, 149 CDs, a mediatheque offering computers and internet access, a cataloguing and office space, an archive in the loft and an exhibition hall and conference room. It is all very tastefully installed and very hi-tec.

Reading, or *la lecture* as the French call it, is seen by educators, politicians and the population in general, as fundamental to French life and ideas.

'We must bring people from all sectors of society to reading', announced the mayor when opening the town's new library. 'Language is how we participate, how we become citizens. That is why the people of Fontaines d'Ozillac love their library. It is theirs but part of something bigger'.

Political pawns

A lot of people who talk about libraries don't know a lot about libraries; both politicians and political activists need to score points in the struggle to get their ideology on the front foot. What seems to be missing is content. The type of content you expect to find in libraries: thoughtful content, considered content, combative, discursive content that eschews sound bites for reasoned argument. In short, it is not appearances but the inner soul of the library that is important. It is about the collections, the referencing, the human mind that is contained on those shelves or digitised archives. This represents our collective human heritage. Without it, we are not and could not be what we are today. Libraries are invaluable if we regard ourselves as invaluable.

I leave the old-world quaintness of rural France and take a flight to Australia. Craigieburn Library stands in the heart of a developing community. New houses climb the low hillsides of this rapidly expanding town on the outskirts of Melbourne. The main road leading from the centre of Victoria's capital and passing the international airport is busy with building plots; the library is just over 2 years old and has become the focal point for the town's inhabitants. As proof, the library car park is already being expanded to accommodate membership rising at a rate of around 200 new members per month. The library serves people who speak 170 different languages with 70% of those having a language other than English as their first language. Social inclusiveness is high on the agenda. The staff are multilingual and the introduction of new languages into the library is ongoing. Punjabi and Sinhalese have recently been included and, I am told on my visit, Turkish will be coming soon.

The building utilises locally sourced earth as the primary building material and follows a green agenda, setting a benchmark for the growing township. The heavy rammed earth walls – a mixture of compacted soil and cement – form the enclosure and connect the building with the soil on which it sits. The library seems to grow from the earth. The foyer, a glass-enclosed space with engravings of written scripts from around the world,

acts as the point of contact between Craigieburn's inhabitants and the local council. It feels distinctively Australian.

Craigieburn library won the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (IFLA's) coveted Public Library of the Year award in 2014. It impressed the judges just as, seeing it first hand, it impresses me, but it's not necessary to be known around the world to be something that feeds and fosters the public soul.

No library is an island

If only Robinson Crusoe had found a library on his desert island, he may have been a happier man. For the 5-mile-wide island of Culebra in the Caribbean, the community library is a vital part of everyday life and, just as Crusoe had to build everything for himself, so the Culebrenses have built and stocked their library from scratch.

Even before you arrive on the idyllic, sandy beach and tropical-forested island, you can't help thinking about libraries. There's only one town here and its name is Dewey. It's not big and its roads are bumpy. As you drive your golf cart – visitors use golf carts to get around – you'll leave the thin stretch of tarmac that passes the airstrip and head for downtown Dewey passing boats on your left and bars, a school and the island generator on your right. Reach the other side of town and you'll see a sign that says: Culebra Community Library. Open.

It is best to park up a hundred yards from the entrance. The bumpy road gets very bumpy; a horse may be standing there. The locals still use horses to get around. As you approach, you can see the brickwork mosaic before the library entrance. It pictures giant leatherback turtles. If you have ever heard of Culebra, the turtles are probably why. The beaches here are one of the leatherback's most important breeding spots.

The library was started in 2006, founded with a donation and established in a trailer. There was no government funding, no statutory laws forcing the local council to promote reading and literacy; simply put, the islanders wanted a library. There are now two trailers and a roof joining the trailers. The total surface area is 3600 square feet, half indoors, half out. Free Wi-Fi is available and customers read and research on their laptops. People live in the wide open here, except in the hurricane season. And true enough, I see a few damp volumes that were caught napping by the recent visit of hurricane Irene. However, the roof stayed on and kept the stock safe.

Puerto Rico, of which Culebra forms a part, was a colony of the Spanish empire for over 400 years. I sense a touch of the subversive among these shelves, rebelling against the island's long history as a dependency. Books in Spanish line one side of a trailer while bilingual members of staff are familiar with the Culebran literary scene. Works of local authors, such as Claro C Feliciano, Jose Romero Samos and Benjamin Perez Vega, all written in Spanish, preserve the island's valuable heritage.

As I leave Culebra, I see from the small aircraft the devastation left by hurricane Irene. The painful sight prompts me to reflect on humanity's persistence and courage in the face of adversity. At the heart of that persistence is identity and community and our libraries are the collective focus for this, the place that gives Jer-Ow-Hon meaning. The

flight to San Juan on the Puerto Rican mainland takes about 45 minutes and, as Culebra recedes behind me, I remember another island.

On Papa Stour, off the west coast of the Shetland mainland and with a population of barely 20 people, the library is the ferry waiting room. The books are left there by the library service in a small cabinet, open for anyone to use. Remarkably, the collection has grown over the years. Here, the problem the library faces is not lost or stolen stock but mysteriously increasing stock. Apparently, travellers like to leave a book.

The Shetland Isles may seem remote to anyone south of John o' Groats – the Romans called the islands Ultima Thule, the land beyond the boundaries of the known world – but 22,000 people inhabit an archipelago famed for its awe-inspiring coastal scenery, its magical light and its rich cultural life. At the heart of that cultural life is Shetland Library.

Baltasound Community Library, on the isle of Unst, the third largest of the Shetland group, is virtually as far north as you can travel and remain in Britain. It is also the most northerly part of Europe where English in its Shetlandic variation – enriched by the Scots language and by its Norse heritage – is spoken. I am here to give a poetry reading but what I will remember is the methods Shetland Libraries employ to engage the public. 'Bards in the Bog' has poems framed and hung in public and office toilets around the islands. A book, edited by TS Eliot prizewinning poet Jen Hadfield, was launched on 'World Toilet Day', featuring the poems written by locals. All profits from the book go to the World Toilet Organisation.

Apparently, 2.6 billion people, including 980 million children worldwide, live without proper sanitation. Shetland Libraries wanted to help, and this seemed an amusing but effective way to contribute. Libraries really do make a difference.

The American dream

Activism, whether over toilets or freedom, is never far from libraries. Go to any American Library Association Conference and you realise that politics is in the blood. Big, small, north or south, librarians are standing up to be counted.

On New York's Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street stands the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, one of the world's most famous libraries. Watched over by its lions, Patience and Fortitude, The New York Public Library (NYPL) has been a guardian of social equality for over 100 years in a city where some 800 languages are spoken. The library means as much to New Yorkers as that icon of freedom a few miles further south, the Statue of Liberty.

Near the library's entrance is a plaque set in the floor. It reads 'Martin Radtke/Gardener (1883–1973)'. Martin was an immigrant from Lithuania who worked in wealthy people's gardens. When he died he left 386,000 dollars 'so that others can have the same opportunity' as the library had given him. The library helped him make his fortune. He spent his spare time here and studied stocks – not the floral variety but the stock market.

John Shaw Billings, one of the most brilliant librarians of his day, sketched the blueprint for the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building on a scrap of paper. It called for a reading room with seven floors of stacks and the most rapid delivery system in the world. It reflects life as fast and free, the counter to political control. NYPL is the embodiment

of that freedom. The struggle between freedom of thought and control of thought, however, goes back a long way.

Sovereignty and insecurity

The Plantagenet kings, regularly at war with French monarchs, realised that relying on an enemy in Paris to train its scholars, lawyers and doctors could leave their hold on power and their dynasty vulnerable. Such a reliance had to be remedied, or so they thought. The answer was an English university. Learning, however, required books and so along with the creation of Oxford University there came the collecting of learned manuscripts, treatises, classics and codices. In 1320, a room to house these was funded by Thomas de Cobham, Bishop of Worcester. This was the first Oxford library, England's path to intellectual sovereignty.

As the collection expanded, it was decided to build a new library above the Divinity School, itself still under construction. The library suffered chronic underfunding and was not completed until 1488. However, enshrined in this new library, built independently of the Church, was the idea that the truth can be ascertained through enquiry beyond scripture. Later, the destructive zeal of the Reformation lead to a quadrangle covered in 'a thick bed of torn books and manuscripts'. Only in 1602, at the end of Elizabeth's stabilising reign, was what has come to be known as the Bodleian Library opened. During its 4 years of construction, Shakespeare wrote Hamlet and the East India Company was founded by Royal Charter. The world was changing.

Bodley introduced the press, as it was called then, or what we know today as the shelf. Perhaps even more significantly, Bodley's desire to keep his library up to date and acquire all the latest material meant that in 1610, the Stationers' Company of London was required to submit a copy of everything registered at Stationers' Hall. The English Legal Deposit system had begun, a requirement that was to define the role of national libraries to this day.

Walking towards tomorrow

Walking up the Petrin Hill on a winter's day, snow crunching underfoot, you look over the white roofs of Prague. It is a bracing climb but nothing, not even the baroque domes and steeples of Franz Kafka's city, can quite prepare you for the Strahov Library that awaits at the end of your exertions. The Strahov is, in a way, two libraries: The Theological Hall and The Philosophical Hall, built nearly a century apart, a century that spans the development of modern classification systems.

People come here to admire the architecture, and it is one of the baroque marvels of the world, but as I take off my gloves and hat, gradually warming up on this bitter February day, I reflect on the seismic shift in intellectual approach that these two halls represent: one holding nothing but versions of the Bible and interpretations of the Word of God shelved around them; the other holding the seeds and fruit of philosophical enlightenment. It is as if in the delicate plaster work and frescoes by Siard Nosecký, based on quotations from the Bible, on the one side, and the neoclassical wooden

colonnades, topped by the monumental fresco by Anton Maulbertsch, entitled 'Intellectual Progress of Mankind', on the other, the struggle of authority versus freedom has been made material.

Legal deposit or despotic?

Knowledge is power, and it was power that the kings of Sweden sought in the 17th century. An offshoot of the quest for dominance of the Baltic was the creation of the Swedish Legal Deposit system in 1661. The result was the National Library of Sweden, the roots of which go back to King Gustav Vasa in the 16th century.

The king collected books on a variety of subjects including maps which were vital for trade and territory agreements. The library was expanded by subsequent monarchs through purchases at home and abroad, thefts from Eastern Europe during the Thirty Years' War and wholesale confiscation when Swedish monasteries were dissolved in the Reformation. But the Swedish Legal Deposit system built the library's collection in a more consistent and sinister way. Legal Deposit was, at the time, a form of social control. Rulers didn't want to preserve as much as observe or spy upon their subjects, their thoughts and political leanings. Of course, that mixture of inquisitiveness, paranoia and the notion of knowledge allied to power gave us the institutions we have today, institutions that give us our meaning and identity. At this point my Jer-Ow-Hon jade seems to be looking back at me like a warning: with knowledge comes power and power corrupts.

Crumbling empires

A huge statue of Catherine the Great in St Petersburg's Ostrovsky Square looks onto Nevsky Prospect, the ever-so-busy boulevard of brands, buses, shoppers and pleasure seekers that runs down to the world-famous State Hermitage Museum. However, were the Empress alive today, her attention would be firmly on the oldest public library in Russia. There is a reason: it was Catherine that founded the library built in a neoclassical style by the architect Yegor Sokolov. It houses among its 15 million items some of the world's great treasures.

Familiar to Catherine would have been the libraries of Voltaire and Diderot which the Empress purchased after the writers' deaths. Voltaire's personal library is preserved in imperial splendour, a statue of the wily philosopher seated amid tomes, many of which still bear the great man's annotations for all to read if access is granted.

However, what fascinated me and piqued a certain nostalgic yearning was the library catalogue maintained on cards. Cabinets stretch as far as the eye can see, down corridors and around reading rooms, housing deep drawers, finely built in beautiful light-coloured wood and packed with those little rectangular alphabetised records I used to see my local librarians flicking through when I was a child. Despite ongoing digitisation and a catalogue that can be accessed online with books delivered to reading rooms in a matter of hours from anywhere in the library's huge store, I am assured the cards are still used. The physical and intellectual effect is the presence of a whale of Russian culture washed up on the edge of the Russian world.

The bust of Lenin still watches over the main reading room, offering a stern glance onto a tradition where the diverse threads of monarchy, revolution and democracy have built one of the world's greatest bibliographic institutions in Peter the Great's 'window onto the West' but it leaves me wondering.

What is the future of the library?

Recently, I visited the National Library of Latvia, also known as the Castle of Light. This magnificent structure, built to celebrate Latvia's nationhood and its unique traditions, is squarely in the iconic-statement mould of libraries today. While I was enjoying my tour, there was a controlled but rushed kafuffle shot through with a dose of Latvian humour. I was told that there was an official visit about to take place from a head of state. The leader in question was from small country in Africa. The confusion was caused by the need to find a flag. What was the country? What did the flag look like? Where could they source it? Why was he being 'shunted' to the library?

The amusing incident gives rise to some interesting observations. Firstly, even libraries get caught out and can't always find the information they need and, secondly, the role of the library was suddenly switched to a function of diplomacy, statecraft and world politics.

Is the modern library to be an object to be stared at and passed by? Dignitaries visit, shake hands and get a quick tour of books they will never read on ideas they may never have encountered but, like the viewer of the glossy, coffee-table books on the same institutions, they consume them and place them on their CV of profile raisers, have-seens or have-been-honoured-withs. Or is the library a palace for the people, a giver of identity and meaning?

A place of identity

Spanish is spoken by around 350 million people, making it the world's third most spoken language. In Spain, people have a deep love and respect for the printed word; people read in Spain – on the bus, in the park, in their homes. It has a great literary heritage which is in the secure and caring hands of the Biblioteca Nacional de España or, as it is otherwise known, the Guardian of the Spanish National Memory.

I had the good fortune to see some treasures of the collection, including an early complete and illustrated edition of Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes. The curator explained that such editions are very rare since most with engravings have had the illustrations removed and sold separately. Looking at the pages, I ask myself, who can imagine Spain without Don Quixote and Sancho Panza?

A place of diversity

The origin of the name Walthamstow is said to be 'Wilcum Stowe' – a place of welcome – and this remains true today with the population's ethnic composition of just over half white-British and half Irish, Polish, Caribbean, African, Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese. The London borough lays claim to the education of Benjamin

Disraeli, the early years of David Beckham, the birth and early career of Alfred Hitchcock, and an important period in the life of Arts and Crafts Movement luminary, William Morris, as well as Fanny Cradock, Jonathon Ross, Derek Jacobi, pianists John Lill and Bobby Crush, photographer David Bailey and many members of the BBC soap opera 'EastEnders'. Positioned at the heart of the community, at the top of the town's famous street market, is Walthamstow's Central Library. It was built with donations from 19th century philanthropists Andrew Carnegie and John Passmore Edwards. In 1924, Walthamstow Library was the first in the United Kingdom to start a Youth Library, aimed at 14-to-17-year-old readers. In 1947, it opened one of the first gramophone record libraries in the United Kingdom.

A place of community

The Mitchell Library is the largest public reference library in Europe, and that makes Glasgow one of Europe's great cities. World famous Glaswegian comic, Billy Connolly, may have got a laugh when he said, 'The great thing about Glasgow is that if there's a nuclear attack it'll look exactly the same afterwards', but he was wrong. The dome of the Mitchell Library stands proud and it is a landmark of which Glaswegians are proud.

Pride, both civic and personal, is an important part of this city of extremes that displays an untiring love of laughter and a frighteningly high murder rate. It was tobacco money that set up The Mitchell and it was that famous Scot, Andrew Carnegie, who supplied money to set up the system of libraries across the city and laid the foundation stone of The Mitchell itself. Today, it serves 600,000 Glaswegians all of whom seem to be on first name terms.

A place for conviviality

Libraries can be behemoths of inclusivity, but they can also be rare and refined, somewhat unique, like a fine wine. The Cité du Vin in Bordeaux, a remarkable decanter-shaped structure of glass and steel rising eight floors above the Garonne river and built to celebrate the city's main export, houses a beautiful library in a barrel-shaped open arena.

There are 1660 books in 17 different languages, all related to wine through highly diverse connections such as production process, wine regions, literature, agriculture and pathology, religion and cuisine. Cataloguing the collection required adapting the Dewey Decimal Classification. Wine, as the subject for the collection, was a given, but Dewey didn't go quite far enough for the detail required. The result is a remarkable resource set in a complementary context, surrounded by salles de dégustation, multisensory exhibition rooms, a theatre and interpretation areas where students and wine-lovers research and share their fascination for mankind's favourite drink.

A place of preservation

Glass cabinets populate the 11th floor of an annexe to the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia or National Library of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. An environmentally controlled room

preserves the world-heritage-classified Malay manuscripts. Thirty people work in the department among the texts on history, religious Islamic teachings, law, medicine, beliefs and customs and guidance on administration. They reflect the rich cultural heritage and high intellectual attainment of the Malays from the 14th century to the early 20th century.

The tropical, Malaysian climate challenges the survival of these treasured documents. Humidity, spores and bugs still threaten the collection and its most valued item, the Hikayat Hang Tuah, acknowledged by UNESCO in the Memory of the World Register in 2001. The work is Malaysia's national epic and celebrates the virtues of loyalty above all else and obedience to tradition – a fitting tale for this young country with a long history the fortunes of which lie in the Malacca Straits, the sea-faring trade route between China, India, the Middle East and ultimately Europe.

A place for exchange

It is approaching 7pm and workers are heading home outside the English Language Library in Angers, France, an elegant city known for Cointreau and the Plantagenet kings of England. The sound of chairs scraping and footsteps from a room behind the reception desk tells me that the English discussion group has finished and English and French file in to browse the books of this small library before heading home. There is much bon-homie, a little leg-pulling over poor accents and some last-minute corrections over gender.

The current library opened in December 1993 although its roots go back to the First World War and American soldiers based in Paris. Run by The Association Angevine de la Bibliothèque Anglophone, it must have a business plan to survive, charge for certain services, fundraise and rely on volunteers. As well as maintaining stock, the library organises evening classes, readings from authors and writers' residencies.

A place of innovation

A radio station in a library? Well to quote Hans van Velzen, then Director of the OBA, Amsterdam Public Library, 'a library is only as good as what you do in it'. The 10-storey Central Library rises in Oosterdokseiland, just east of Amsterdam Central Station, and embodies a tradition of liberality and innovation which has seen this small country offer refuge to some of Europe's greatest minds and safeguard Europe's intellectual traditions. You expect, therefore, something different, and OBA Live offers talk shows with guests, discussions and comments on culture, politics, science and morality. There is much attention to literature, film and theatre as it broadcasts to the city every afternoon, as library-goers walk around, browse, listen, join-in or study.

A place for learning

The Hive is busy, industrious and people make straight for it from all over the city of Worcester. From the outside, it looks like a major European icon, as the Guggenheim in

Bilbao or Philharmonie in Berlin. Once inside, you could be in a railway terminus or airport. It is busy, it is bright, it is welcoming, it is alive; it is a library.

Worcestershire Libraries needed new premises, the university library was bursting at the seams; the result is something new, a hybrid public-academic library that has opened new areas of discovery for both students and members of the public. The library is currently running at 2500 loans per day. Students are hard at work surfing the internet, poring over books and making notes as members of the public browse collections traditionally denied them and take books to tables and chairs next to panoramic windows that overlook the wide Worcestershire countryside and the magical Malvern Hills.

A place for the past

Mancunians love their libraries. The city was one of the first ever to establish a public library after the Free Libraries Act was passed in 1850. Charles Dickens was at the opening of the Manchester Free Public Library in 1852.

It is little wonder that Manchester City Council chose to stick with their existing, classically proportioned city centrepiece. Manchester City Council took the approach of refurbishment and restoration to achieve a new library that keeps all that people loved about the old building while adding functionality that addresses customer needs well into the century ahead. Such an approach highlights the changing role of libraries in communities while reasserting core values about the democracy of knowledge and the value of information in maintaining that democracy.

In the past locals referred to it as the 'Corporation Wedding Cake' or the 'St Peter's Square Gasometer'. I can't help wondering how they refer to it today, but I am sure it is with affection.

A place for the future

Mention Singapore and it evokes stop-overs on long-haul flights, fabulous shopping, a night-time Grand Prix, British military failure, equatorial humidity, the Raffles Hotel and Singapore Sling cocktails. Singapore is many things, all of them fascinating, some of them awe-inspiring. Today, Singapore is a built-up city as large as the island on which it is built and reclaiming land from the seas that surrounds it. The traditional divisions between town and country, producers and consumers are rendered meaningless. With 80% of humanity living in cities, some would say Singapore is the future of the way humans will live on planet Earth.

It is interesting therefore that the National Library of Singapore is at the heart of this process, with an eye firmly on the future. When Raffles laid the foundation stone of the Singapore Institution Library in 1823, the library catered primarily for the reading needs of the local English-speaking population; now it is a state-of the-art glass structure striving to define its nation's identity for the future while carefully remembering the past through its Singapore Memory Project.

A place for love

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek reflects the unique and often troubled history of Europe's economic powerhouse but who'd expect to find love there? Armalamor, like a 3D version of one of Picasso's Desmoiselles d'Avignon, is three metres tall, very nubile, decorated in a kind of nude tartan and sculpted by German artist Georg Baselitz. She is very 'in your face'.

Libraries are a great place for romance; Baselitz knew this when he created Armalamor. She, or should I say it, is certainly striking, raised beneath the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek's domed central entrance area. And I appreciate that libraries do not seduce by books alone. In this university town, I am sure that young love's lamp is lit across the hushed aisles and studied stacks laced with a whiff of romance and seduction, a building that Frankfurt's most famous son, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, would have surely used for liaisons both intellectual and amorous.

So, where's home?

Over the years, I have grown to treasure my Chinese jade stamp with Jer-Ow-Hon carved proud. I might even have begun to get to know who this stranger carved there is, and what he means, in no small part thanks to libraries. And it seems, as I conclude this essay, that I must return to China, despite having to leave out so many other libraries that have informed my life, such as the Library of Congress in Washington, my beloved British Library, the public library in Kiltimagh, County Mayo, the South Australia State Library in Adelaide that displays Don Bradman's cricket bat, and Victoria State Library in Melbourne, that shows the bullet-dented, ploughshare armour of Ned Kelly.

The programme of library building in China, this vast and enigmatic country, is awe-inspiring and yet you might ask, why? Why is China investing so much of its creativity, ingenuity and capital into libraries of such variety, scale and baffling originality as the Tianjin Binhai Library? Surely, libraries are the enemy of authoritarianism? Libraries promote independent thought and China, we are told, goes against the historic trend we have seen in the West of enfranchising the individual. There is the obvious need for increased literacy in such a vast nation in the throes of huge demographic change. But the Tianjin Binhai Library courts controversy with empty shelves and current holdings of only 200,000 items despite a claimed 1.2 million capacity, eliciting headlines that it is more fiction than books. Its nickname, The Eye, begs the question, is this eye reading or watching? Knowledge, as noted earlier, is power, but, I believe, China also builds libraries because of a big idea, that of libraries as home in a universe that is bigger than we ever dreamed and grows bigger and more mysterious every day.

On all my travels, I have witnessed first-hand the huge and varied apparatus that exists behind the wood, bricks, mortar or glass that goes to build libraries in every country I have visited. The library is not a building but a cultural phenomenon that encompasses the whole range of civilised thought, from epistemology to atmospheric science, from specialised architecture to the architecture of metadata, websites and systems, from machine-readable catalogues to convivial evening classes, from social theory to protecting the

disenfranchised. There is a common aim for every library, whether it is in the town of Dewey on Culebra or the Black Diamond dominating the harbourside in Copenhagen. It is knowledge in community; it is inherently democratic and it is, or should be, a symbol of hope for humanity. Like the lanterns that Andrew Carnegie wanted to place on top of his libraries, the library is light set against darkness, a statement that knowledge matters and that knowledge must be used for a better future.

Author's note

Material for this article is drawn and adapted from various articles written by John Hudson for *BDSLife* magazine between 2007 and 2018. All views expressed are the author's and the facts presented were correct in the original articles at the time of publication. The original articles can be found at www.bdslive.com.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank BDS for permission to use this material.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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