

The Public Library Whereto ? New Monumental Buildings of Libraries in the Age of the Internet And New Information Technologies / Israela Yablonka

Abstract

This research is a wide interdisciplinary study concerning social aspects, architectural structures, people's need to monumentalize, personal or political interests, organization survival and futurism. Primarily, this research focuses on the future of public libraries in a world that is rapidly changing.

This research was initiated after reading a study conducted in 1994 at the Center for Technical Prediction at Tel Aviv University (Haufman & Dror, 1994). This study claims that it is possible to store the entire content of a library consisting of a million books on 600 discs. The study hence pondered the need for libraries in future societies.

Technology and minimization capabilities have improved since then and will continue to do so. In addition, it is possible to find numerous and diverse information over the internet. There is almost an infinite amount of websites that enable online reading of books, periodicals and articles (for fee or free), and it seems that the number of these sites will only continue to grow. In order to find these sites, user friendly search engines were developed, so that nowadays most books, articles and periodicals can be accessed anywhere and anytime. The hardware has also advanced; notebook-size computers can be found on the market - lean, small, light and even flexible "reading tools" accompanied with reading programs that enable the downloading of books for easy and "en-lightening" reading.

When taking into account both the vast technology innovations as well as the prediction that we are heading towards "wall-less" libraries, one would assume that the library – as a primary source for accessing literature and knowledge – is no longer required.

Nonetheless, the last decade has witnessed the building of library structures of enormous dimensions around the world.

The question to be asked is therefore: are all the predictions wrong? Why are monumental library buildings being built if according to the forecasts the library as an institute will cease to exist in the future?

The purpose of this research is to examine the prospects of the public library in light of two simultaneous occurrences seemingly contradictory: on the one hand, the accelerated development of technology and the internet, and on the other hand, the worldwide building of enormous structures designated to be public libraries. Does erecting large and elaborate buildings suggest that public libraries are an essential social institute in future societies, or else do these buildings constitute the “The Swan Song“ of this institute? These are questions at the basis of this study.

The first and foremost question of this study is why huge and extravagant structures are being built as public libraries in light of the minimization capabilities and the development of computer technologies and the internet. The second question examines whether the formal change in the library structure was accompanied with content changes, i.e. whether libraries' function and services have changed. The third question examines whether the size of the structure affects its popularity, meaning - do libraries residing in large monumental buildings see an increase in the number of visitors.

The study combines two research methods: qualitative and quantitative. Interviews were conducted with 42 interviewees from various fields relevant to the research: fields of information and librarianship, architecture, city planning, sociology and futurism. We have also approached 24 library managers, in Israel and around the world, working in libraries residing in monumental structures built in the early 1990s and later on.

The research findings indicate that in all libraries residing in large extravagant buildings the number of library users has increased dramatically. In most cases, the numbers were duplicated and even more since the erection of the large building. This finding is extremely important in view of libraries' report that there is a decrease in the number of book loans and in reading in general.

Most of the interviewees advocate the need for a public library - even in a futuristic society controlled by technology and the internet. They all agree that the public library as a societal institute acts as a communal venue for recreation and leisure. They stress the need in social interaction taking place in a cultural setting that serves as an "urban plaza". Most interviewees (interviewees and library managers) agree that in future societies the public library should serve as a place for learning and that the traditional function of the library (book loaning and browsing) should be maintained. An additional function mentioned by the interviewees (though not so much by the library managers) is the centralization, organization and preservation of information accessible to the public - a sort of archive for culture conservation. Most of the interviewees perceive the importance of a public library in a future society and therefore see the need in a building accommodating the library.

When referring to the notion of a virtual library, most of the interviewees claim to prefer an actual library located in a building. They emphasize the importance of the experience of visiting a physical library: "a virtual library has the advantage of not leaving the house, but it ruins social interactions". Nevertheless, in reference to the size of the building, almost all of the interviewees express an objection to a library residing in a monumental building. Most have the opinion that the motivations for building enormous library structures are political, economical and exhibitionistic.

Furthermore, it was found that the new buildings, enormous and elaborate, facilitate offering additional services to the traditional services of a library - cultural and social. All

of the library managers, in Israel and abroad, assume the most important role of the public library is to constitute a recreational area, and almost all of them (96%) believe that the library should serve as a cultural center. Around half of the libraries report that relocating to a larger building has enabled offering new services that could not be offered beforehand.

This research concludes that the public library is a necessary and significant institute in future societies, less for the purpose of book loaning but more for the sake of catering to the public's need for a cultural venue, relatively quiet, where social encounters can take place in an appropriate environment. The new, large and extravagant building becomes an attraction site. The size of the building also assists in providing leisure and culture services. The size of the new buildings combined with the offering of new services have an obvious impact on public libraries' degree of popularity.

The public library, as a developing and an adaptive institute, continues to hold an important role in society and its functions are increasing and becoming more diversified "since mankind is perfecting itself and rediscovering itself on an ongoing basis, and that's just how society develops..." (לי, 2002)

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