The Architecture of Libraries in Italy:
Scenarios, Strategies, Opportunities

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As an architect who has been designing libraries for many years, often working side by side with librarians, I had the opportunity to examine up close the situation of libraries in several parts of Italy, particularly in the North. Over the last few years, after decades of almost complete stagnation in Italy, too, there has been a growing public and social attention towards public libraries. Italy is lagging very much behind in this sector: a backwardness which manifests itself above all in a scarcity of legislation and adequate funding, and the lack of far-reaching programmes throughout the country to promote this service. Not to mention the habit of underestimating the impact of cultural services on social and economic development.

Last but not least, the collective imagination of the Italians holds an image of public libraries as dusty deposits of books, useful only for students, shrouded by an aura of sacredness and silence. It should be said, however, that libraries themselves struggle to keep pace with the changing needs of their users, in terms of service models, opening hours, languages and styles of communication. Furthermore, Italian libraries all too often limit their field of action to what they still today consider their only core business, the book and the promotion of reading, neglecting the other aims detailed in the 'UNESCO Manifesto for Public Libraries': information, permanent training, cultural socialisation, and entertainment.

The Italian experiences of the last few years, however (Pistoia, Bologna, Pesaro, Vimercate, Aosta, Genova, Rovereto, just to mention a few, but above all many smaller new libraries built in small towns), are proof that something is changing. In this sector, in Italy it is *supply* which creates *demand*, and new libraries, if well designed, always meet with unexpected success.

In Italy, despite the centuries-old tradition of the many great ancient libraries, and despite the fact that the so-called 'popular libraries' were already in existence at the beginning of the twentieth century, the so-called 'public library' is a fairly recent institution, whose development began in the Seventies, following the transfer by the State to the regions of the functions of library coordination at local level. But on closer inspection, the public library in Italy is actually much younger, since in the

Seventies it was just a multi-purpose cultural centre, whose activities were not necessarily connected to reading or information services. It was in the Nineties that the public library consolidated its identity as a service for the community, linked above all to reading and as a support for scholastic and related activities.

In the last ten years there has been a renewed interest in libraries on the part of the public administrations. Much was done in certain regions in particular: Between the years 2000 and 2008, 115 libraries were opened or completely renovated in Emilia-Romagna, 140 in Lombardy and 49 in Tuscany. In just 3 years, between 2006 and 2008, 22 libraries were opened or restructured in Piedmont. And although the work is proceeding very slowly, projects for two large libraries in Turin and Milan are underway.

Despite this, however, the percentage of active users out of the population remains modest, around 20-25 % in the best cases. This is laboriously gained thanks in large part to children and students, while the Italian average limps along at an impact index of around 10-13 %.

On the other hand, it is difficult to see how the situation could be any different.

Before asking ourselves how to increase this percentage, we should perhaps ask ourselves why a person should go to a library; teenagers, young people or working adults in particular. It does not necessarily follow that these people are able to go, given that most libraries are only open during the week or during office hours.

Let us begin with a few figures. According to current statistics, a percentage of between 55 % to almost 70 % of the Italian population buy and read less than one book per year (excluding school books); approximately 40 % buy one to three books a year, while approximately 9 % of the population buy more than 5 books per year. More than 10 % use the television as the only instrument of information. Italy is in 22nd place in Europe as regards the reading of daily papers and periodicals.[1]

From these statistics emerges a simple but important reflection: If a public library merely offers services linked to reading, in Italy it will appeal to barely 20 % of the population, including students and children.

If a public library (referring in this case only to the 'public libraries' and not to university or conservation libraries) offers an efficient and effective service, but one which is aimed *only* at a small part of the local community, then it risks being a *poor* investment.

Secondly, libraries often become a public service which, although 'for everyone' by definition, actually ends up being for a few categories of users (children, students, the elderly, etc.), selected not on the basis of a considered choice, but as a consequence of other factors, such as opening hours or the location of the building. To give a

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1   Cfr. Ricerca Mondadori/IPSOS *La crescita diseguale. Leggere e comperare libri in Italia 2003-2005*; *Comunicazione e Media*, in *Rapporto annuale sulla situazione sociale del Paese*, Fondazione CENSIS, 2006, pp. 517-570.

simple example: A library open in the morning but closed on Saturday and Sunday afternoon will exclude all of those who work (artisans, office workers, professionals, tradesmen, etc.) and who represent the 'productive class' of the community, who will therefore have no roots in the library itself. In this way the library does none other than confirm itself as a place of study and a storeroom for the lending of books.

In order to survive and re-launch its role, the public library must change. The public library must seek to broaden its 'target' of reference, establishing more strongly its function of social condenser intended for the promotion of cultural policies, focusing on the implementation of information services and the traditional *reference* services on one hand, while seeking to find space in the sectors of cultural entertainment, leisure time, and permanent training on the other.

But it is not enough to create libraries and increase resources to attract people to use them. It is necessary to create pleasant places which arouse people's curiosity and tempt them to return.

In addition to the services linked to books and to reading, a library should be capable of attracting different types of users for the very fact of being a public place where it is pleasant to go and to linger, one offering a variety of services linked to culture and to information, where visitors can obtain information on all aspects of everyday life, learn new skills and abilities, meet friends and discover new things, cultivate their hobbies, attend leisure courses and take part in cultural events.

Otherwise, the library will never be able to compete with the numerous other private and commercial activities competing for the same groups of users, at the same times of day. We only need to go into any large bookshop or media store to see people reading, consulting magazines and newspapers and drinking coffee, without necessarily buying. Or to think how the shopping malls have become the main places of social meeting and aggregation, especially for certain age groups (in Italy approximately 17 % of young people spend their free time solely in shopping centres).

The library must become a catalyser of urban life: on the one hand a training and information workshop, an access door and an instrument to guide us through the multi-media universe, to bridge the digital divide; on the other hand a place to meet, communicate and consolidate our sense of belonging to a community.

I believe that in Italy the public library will play a decisive role in the near future, at the crossroads between the option of taking on an important role as social catalyser or risking disappearing altogether, superseded by other 'public' services, whose commercial aims are more or less clear.

The organisation of its services, the quality and variety of its documentary legacy are necessary but insufficient conditions to make a library effective.

Since going to a library will soon no longer be a necessity (since we can easily access an ever-greater number of documentary resources in different ways), then it must become a pleasure. To this end, it is clear that the library must be an attractive

place, able to stimulate the creativity and learning of its users, it should be a 'third place' (recalling the words of American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989[2]) where it is pleasant to go and to linger. To this end, the architecture of the building is crucial, not only to permit the efficiency and functionality of the services offered, but also to attract new users.

Indeed, the efficacy of a library also depends very much on the choices made in architectural and planning terms, from its location within the city to the planning of the external spaces and the façades of the building itself, the interior spaces and their distribution, the furnishings and their arrangement.

As well as their obvious functional value, the architectural choices also play a key role in communicating an image, a 'perception' of the library. The library building must be able to capture the attention and the imagination, remain in the memory, possess an evocative power which makes it a point of reference for the community. The library must have '*imageability*'[3], a kind of iconic pregnancy, to assert itself as a cornerstone of the city, an urban sign, depository of the identity of a city or a community, an urban icon in the collective imagination. Indeed a public library can become an important vehicle of political-cultural communication and a valid instrument in urban planning strategies, allowing an administration to leave a 'tangible sign' of its work and to start up processes of urban and social requalification. In large metropolises and small provincial towns alike, libraries can become focal elements of 'urban marketing', strongly influencing the development of a city.

The *imageability*, therefore, is in my opinion a key concept of the architecture of a library, in order to be successful. Let us look at some other aspects.

Another key aspect is its *articulation*. Articulation means the *composition* of the formal elements which define the architecture of the building. It means correctly dimensioning the parts which compose it, to create an organised sequence of places suitable for hosting the functions it was intended for. It means organising the spaces and routes in a hierarchical manner, making it easier for visitors to find their way, and simplifying the work of the librarians.

A good articulation also includes planning of sequences of rooms of different shapes, heights and sizes, creating a spatial experience which is fascinating and constantly changing. The articulation of the building is not only concerned with its

2   Ray Oldenburg, *The Great, Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts*, and *How They Get You Through the Day*, New York: Paragon House, 1989; Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories about the "Great Good Places" at the Heart of Our Communities*, New York: Marlowe & Company, 2000.

3   *Imageability*, coined by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City* (1960), "is the quality of a physical object, which gives an observer a strong, vivid image." This can refer to a monument, a building, a park, and a city among other things. Imageability is not the same as iconography, as it pertains to one's ability to instantly recognize an object, than the singularity and formal aspects of the object that cause recognition.

functionality, but should also appeal to the imagination of its users and their taste for exploration and discovery.

Let us think, for example, of the Viipuri Library by Alvar Aalto (1935); although not very large, this apparently simple building is in reality extremely well designed, with a complex network of routes distributing and connecting different functional areas in an extraordinary spatial sequence. Or the Münster Library (Bolles+Wilson, 1995), where the functional programme translates into the division of the complex into two asymmetrically constructed bodies (*Nahbereich* and *Mittelbereich)*, separated by a pedestrian walkway and joined by the reference bridge and the spaces of the underground level (*Fernbereich).*

In the Utrecht University Library (Arets, 2005), the abstract and very simple stereometry of the building reveals a complex internal articulation, which plays on the overlapping of the different levels, the open spaces and the box-shaped spaces facing the full-height atrium, connected by ramps, staircases and bridges.

And, last but not least, let us think of the Staatsbibliothek of Berlin, (Scharoun, 1964-78). Here, the foyer under the huge storage block provides access to the open-shelf reading room: a multi-form 'interior landscape' in which the study spaces, distributed on several levels like "plates" (Scharoun), look on to the large hall.

Other examples of a complex articulation include the Seattle Library and the European Library of Information and Culture in Milan (BEIC).

The latter is a project which my office itself (alterstudio partners srl, Milano) is working on, together with the German Bolles+Wilson GmbH of Münster.

Illustration 1: European Library of Information and Culture, Milan (Bolles+Wilson, Alterstudio partners, AHW)

The building is like a sort of 'vessel' of culture, run aground in the centre of Milan, whose large central atrium is an 'urban interior' open to the city and looking out over a park. The 5-metre high basement encloses conference rooms, a teaching centre, a media forum, the children's library with its garden, and parking areas. Over the

main atrium, welcoming the visitor, are the three departments (Arts and Literature, Sciences and Technologies, Human and Social Sciences). The 'BEIC Box' hosts the 'browsing area', the reference, the open shelves and some reading spaces. The bridges that host reading and studying spaces on sloping terraces stretch out towards the light and the city. This project re-evokes the very atmosphere of Scharoun's library in many ways, its different levels connected by bridges and stairways, jutting into the huge atrium.

In the current scenario it is very difficult to forecast the social and cultural needs which libraries will have to satisfy in twenty years' time, or which technical and functional requirements the buildings will have to meet. For this reason, the key word for some years now seems to have been *flexibility*, but flexibility alone is not enough to guarantee the quality of the architectural result and its functionality.

'Flexibility' must not, for example, mean that each space in the library must be the same as all the others, or be interchangeable with them, such as in the logic of the large warehouse/container. Indeed, a neutral and generic flexibility may not guarantee full efficiency: A space designed for all uses may in reality not be truly valid for any of them, and it could prove expensive or inconvenient to make every part of the building meet the same requirements. What's more, an excess of flexibility could lead to the creation of environments lacking in attractiveness, devoid of that *aura* fundamental for a place such as a library. An excellent example of flexibility is a supermarket or an industrial warehouse, and indeed some libraries have deliberately taken on this connotation.

More than flexibility, it is perhaps necessary to talk about the *adaptability* of the spaces to new uses and new requirements, some of which may be completely unforeseen at the time of building. It is fundamental to try and design a space which could be used in a completely different way in future. The architectural form should not only permit different uses and purposes, but should suggest, provoke and evoke new individual interpretations and possibilities for its use. So instead of the concept of flexibility, I prefer that of *multifunctionality* and *evolution*, in other words, an ability and *openness to change* in response to the changing needs of its users, as an *openness to different interpretations*, depending on the expectations and desires of those who use those spaces. The library is a growing organism (it is the fifth law of Ranganathan). The library must be able to evolve without trauma, adapting to the changing cultural and information needs of its users, service requirements and technological developments.

One project, much smaller than the BEIC, on which my office is working and in which we are aiming for articulation and flexibility, is that for the new library of Samarate (Varese), not very far from Milan, including also an auditorium. The new complex will be located in a residential area, next to the educational centre. To further increase its attractiveness, the project proposes to create also a system of squares and green spaces, including various commercial activities from the area, which will

Illustrations 2 and 3: New library of Samarate, Varese (alterstudio partners)

The building complex consists of the compact body of the auditorium (with a glazed foyer overlooking the street and a stage which can be opened to the outside for use in the summer) and that of the library, more articulated. The architecture of the building plays on the contrast between full and empty, light and dark, the smoothness of

the polished metal and glass and the roughness of the plaster. The two bodies (which can be built in successive phases) are separated by a public gallery that takes to the park and to the library entrance. The volumes in burnished copper, jutting out on to the square, seem to rise over the windows of the auditorium foyer and the library. Asymmetric, a high monolithic element rises up in opaque glass (containing the stairs and the lift, as well as the shafts for natural ventilation), illuminated in the evening with colours, images and videos. As regards the interior articulation, the focus is on maximum flexibility, with large open spaces and furnishings on wheels. In addition, the auditorium hall (with mobile seats) can also be used as a multi-functional space, for celebrations, events and exhibitions. The heart of the complex is the 'Information Piazza', with its double height, facing the adjoining garden. Here there are the cafeteria, the Music&Cinema section (with a specially-equipped room for listening to music and viewing films), news, actual topics, fiction and the newspapers area. The counter is barycentric (with an office and stockroom behind), and controls access to the children's section, to the teaching rooms (these too are flexible and modular), to the rehearsal rooms for music and to the first floor, where the open-shelf section and study hall are located, with an open gallery and reading terrace.

One last issue it is worthwhile examining talking about the library design, is the re-use of historic or disused buildings as public libraries.

It is an issue of great significance especially in a situation such as that in Italy, where city centres normally lack free space (apart from demolitions) and green areas and open public spaces are usually scarce, while there is usually an abundance of under-used or abandoned historic buildings. For these reasons, the practice of re-use very often seems almost an obligatory choice when creating a new library.

However, I believe it is necessary to carefully examine the pros and cons, since locating a public library in a pre-existing building may prove to be a profoundly erroneous decision. In my opinion, the re-use of existing buildings may give satisfactory results in the case of a favourable location and a suitable typology of the building. In fact, too often it is decided to locate a library in a certain building simply because it is available, without considering its location in relation to the routes taken by the city's inhabitants and to the surrounding area's activities. It is also essential that the building type is suited to the intended use, in other words a building which permits an adequate flexibility of the interior spaces and which is not subject to too many restrictions in terms of distribution, structure, historic or artistic peculiarities.

The functional organisation of a library inevitably clashes with the characteristics of a pre-existing building in terms of the morphology and distribution of its interior spaces, which can often be modified only minimally. Spaces which are too small and fragmented, or too large without the possibility of being divided, lead to a betrayal of the prescriptions of the functional programme, affecting the organisation of the service and the planned dimensional standards.

From this point of view, although buildings such as villas and palaces are often used as libraries, they are actually rather unsuitable for the purpose. Other buildings are much more suitable, such as for example ex-convents, which are often located in the city centre; often they are not subject to excessive artistic restrictions; they are sufficiently big so as to host other public functions (exhibition halls, museums, conference rooms and cultural centres); they have rooms of various types and sizes, particularly suited to hosting the functions of a library (reading rooms, deposit areas, private rooms, offices, common rooms, etc.), and often include green areas (cloisters, gardens and vegetable gardens).

One case involving the re-use of an ex-convent is the new public library of Pesaro, which was opened in June 2002. The particularly friendly, 'modern' and captivating appearance of the building was achieved thanks to incisive and only partially conservative renovation works, which modified both the interior and the exterior of the building. The library has become very famous in Italy, and has enjoyed great success. The idea behind the library is that all its functions are placed along a kind of internal 'street', which crosses the whole block, (music, cinema, young people, children, cafeteria), where visitors can walk freely. On the ground floor, housed in an evocative room with brick vaults, is the non-fiction collection, where the shelves are arranged to create reading rooms. Adjacent to this section is a long glazed veranda which looks out on to the internal garden, with carrels for individual study. On the upper floor is a vast room with wooden trusses, and an open reading gallery looking out over the garden. The fiction section is here, as well as newspapers and magazines. This space has been designed as the 'salon' of the com-

Illustration 4: New public library of Pesaro (D. Guerri)

munity, with armchairs for reading and talking. The bookcases are on wheels, making them easy to move and allowing for various uses of the room (which often hosts themed conferences, reading days, musical evenings and meetings with authors etc.). Finally, there is a study room, quieter and more sober: a broad frescoed corridor illuminated by overhead skylights.

Other buildings which lend themselves well to being re-used are disused industrial buildings, which very often manage to give a contemporary feel without losing the memory of the place and the past. These buildings usually have large interior spaces, often fairly high, which permit a great degree of flexibility and the creation of galleries and mezzanine floors. There is usually a great deal of natural light, and except in rare cases, it is possible to modify the façades or roofing and install stairways, lifts and systems both inside and outside the building without compromising its structure.

One project involving the recovery and conversion of an industrial building to a library is the new library of Pistoia, which will see the recovery of the warehouses of an ex-Breda industry, with the creation of large and luminous internal spaces, with skylight wells and inner courts to bring in light and natural ventilation.

Illustrations 5 and 6: New library of Pistoia (Pica Ciamarra Associati)

Another interesting project is that of the new library of Moie, a small town near Ancona, where the library is housed within an ex brick-kiln, elliptical in shape with a Hoffmann kiln. The building has been restored, with the restoration of the structures in wood and steel. The interior is a large open-space, with a gallery for the reading stations and bookshelves, with informal furnishings and elegant finishings.

The concept of *imageability* should not be neglected even when transforming an old building. Indeed, we should not underestimate that a public library housed in a historic building can confirm the idea of the library more as a place of memory and safeguarding of the past than a workshop of knowledge, information and future.

We must be particularly careful, for example, when using old school buildings, unless we can deeply change the image of the building architecture. This is the case of the new library of Cinisello Balsamo, near Milan, where only the façade remains of the historic building, and the building itself has been raised with an added glazed storey.

One last case I would like to describe is another project my office is working on, the new library of Meda (Milano), which involves the re-use of an ugly existing building, of no worth, but which had the advantage of occupying a central position, opposite the building where the library is currently housed, as well as belonging to the municipality.

Illustrations 7 and 8: New library of Meda, Milan (alterstudio partners)

Despite all the existing constraints (first of all the structure), the project rethinks the container as made for the content, building two additional storeys, modifying the façades and the morphological and material characteristics, to achieve an expressive architecture capable of communicating the new public mission of the building. Everything combines to define the function of a new 'urban condenser': its design and materials, the colours of the façades, the wide windows overlooking the street. As all floors have a small surface, five levels were needed to develop the structure. To make
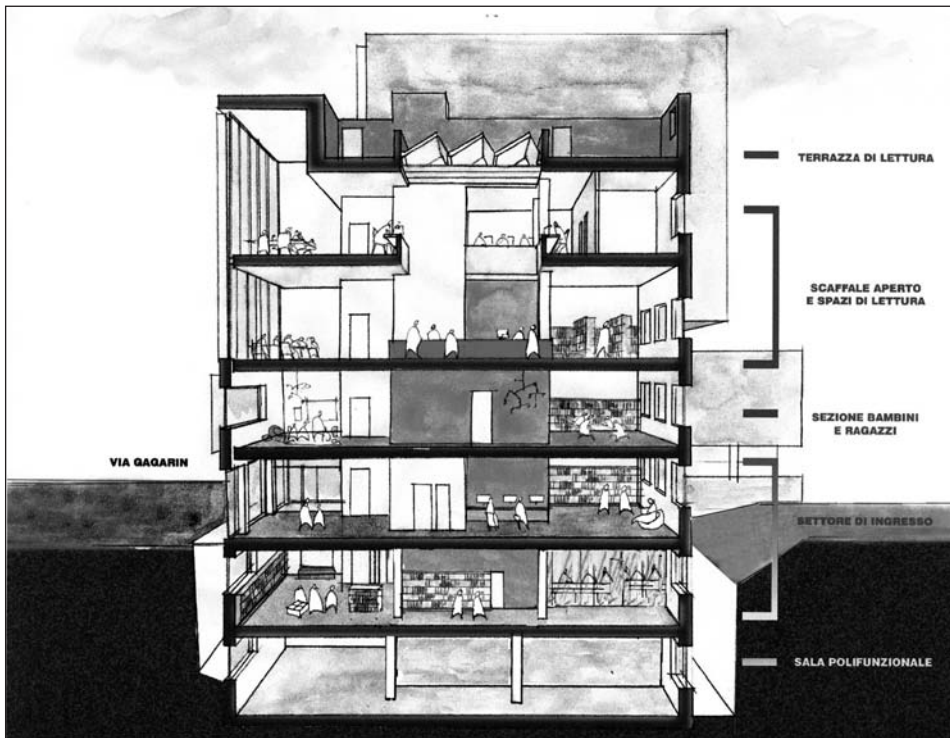
Illustration 9: New library of Meda, Milan (alterstudio partners)

up for this unfortunate internal articulation and to invite users to explore the whole building, each floor overlooks the adjacent ones and there are double height spaces. The 'browsing area' (novelties, music and performing arts, topical issues, newspapers) is located on the ground floor and on the first underground level; the second floor hosts the children's department; open shelf areas and some reading spaces occupy the third and fourth floor; on the second underground level there is a conference and party hall and a warehouse. The building is completed by an equipped study room on the first underground floor (with a view of the gardens) and a panoramic reading terrace.

In this case too, despite the need to respect the restrictions imposed by the re-use of a pre-existing building, the attempt has nevertheless been made to pursue the criteria of *articulation*, *imageability* and *flexibility* we talked about earlier. But, most of all, we tried to make the public library the *living room* of the town, where everyone is welcome and everyone feels at home.

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