

IMAGINATION AND PARTICIPATION

IMAGINATION AND PARTICIPATION: NEXT STEPS IN PUBLIC LIBRARY ARCHITECTURE

At the end of last year, the Dutch publishing house nai010, has published 'Imagination and Participation', in which authors Rob Bruijnzeels and Joyce Sternheim explain their view on the future of public library architecture. Central question in the book is how public libraries can respond to social change and what effects this has on the architecture of new library buildings.

WHY THIS BOOK?

For a long time, the prevailing opinion was that library buildings would become obsolete by the increasing digitization of information. Nothing could be further from the truth. Visitor numbers continue to grow, making public libraries one of the most visited cultural institutions worldwide. This also increases the appreciation of the library as a public space, those scarce places where people of all ages and from all walks of life can enter without being obliged to buy or consume anything. A place where you can really meet the other, where people can pay attention to each other's thoughts and ideas and to the community they are part of. The realization that such a public space is essential for the social and cultural vitality of a community leads to a true renaissance of library architecture. All over the world, impressive new library buildings are being built, often designed by famous architects. Every city wants its own icon, a characteristic building that attracts a large audience and thus also acts as a driver for area development. But do these buildings truly represent a new vision of the role of the public library? We see futuristic buildings that, on closer inspection, are quite traditionally furnished. The archetype of the library in ultra-modern packaging. On the other hand, we encounter flashy buildings that are able to accommodate a wide range of activities, but are hardly recognizable as a library because the collection has been given a minor role.

Such divergent interpretations can be considered illustrative of the public library's quest for a new identity. A quest that is mainly initiated by the social changes that affect libraries at their core. Public libraries are confronted with the massiveness and omnipresence of the Internet and social media, with increasing inequality and polarization and a decline in sense of community. Complex issues that require a next step in the development of the public library. The traditional process of distributing information by selecting media and making them accessible to the public is no longer deemed to be sufficient. The accessibility and availability of information sources is important, but even more important is the creation of meaningful coherence between those sources. It is precisely by organizing this cohesion that the public library can distinguish itself. This not only concerns the presentation of a collection or the interaction between users and collection, but also the interaction between users and the presentation of the results of that interaction. Therefore, the public library's innovation mission is much more comprehensive and complex than the application of new information technologies. It concerns the redesign of processes aimed at stimulating and supporting active citizenship and participation. But how will these new processes manifest themselves in the library building of the future? A building in which various forms of interaction take shape, but where the collection has a different but still prominent role? Finding solutions to this architectural challenge requires not only imagination and knowledge of the essence of public library work, but also the expertise of architects and specialists in the field of public space and cultural placemaking.

SIX THEMES

The richly illustrated book consists of six themes that are of course related, but readers can browse through the book in their own way according to their interests.

TRANSITION: I HAVE TO CHANGE TO STAY THE SAME

With this quote, artist Willem de Kooning emphasized that he could only stay true to his passion if he continued to change and evolve. The same is true for public libraries. A future strategy can only be successful if the library remains true to its classic cultural and social values. But what then is 'the change' and what is 'the same'? In our vision the library should not just be aimed at personal development, but at supporting the community as a whole. It means expanding the focus from lifelong learning to lifelong participation. It calls for a library that enables people – supported and inspired by the collection – to enter into a dialogue with each other about social issues that affect both themselves and the local community.

VALUE: CATHEDRALS OF THE MIND; HOSPITALS OF THE SOUL; THEME PARKS OF THE IMAGINATION

The fact that public libraries fulfill a unique role in society can be attributed to a number of distinctive qualities. Naming these qualities more explicitly helps to further clarify the position of the library in society and in the urban environment. The library is a place where people from different backgrounds and with different opinions can meet face-to-face and exchange thoughts and ideas. A place where people feel free to start a conversation and reach mutual understanding, while being surrounded by sources of knowledge and inspiration: the collection. But also a place where people get the idea that they can grow, and give new direction to their lives.

Descriptions of the library as a meeting place, a 'Third Place' or 'living room of the city' do not do justice to the meaning and complexity of what takes place in the library. A better description is 'heterotopia', which literally means 'other place'. It is an in-between space, where you can develop yourself, and where your perspective can change through interaction with other people and other cultural expressions. Such a different characterization naturally has consequences for the architecture and layout of the building, but also means that the library can claim its own place in the urban infrastructure. Two recently built Dutch libraries (Forum Groningen and LocHal Tilburg) demonstrate how a different local context results in two very different concepts.

TYPOLOGY: THERE IS NO ARCHITECTURAL FORM UNIQUE TO THE LIBRARY

Architects and art historians use typologies to identify common features or guiding principles of buildings. It is a way of looking systematically and objectively at commonalities or resemblances between buildings. Recognizing and using typologies can give direction in the design process of a new library building. It is a way of 'reading' and understanding existing library buildings; it provides references and ideas. Library buildings are constantly reacting to changes, such as the growing size of the collection, the introduction of new media, the way media are stored, lent and secured and the way in which users can consult and use that media. It's no longer about the appearance of a building - the stylistic features, the architectural style to which it belongs or the immediate recognizability - but about the question of how the library functions inside. Designing the public library of tomorrow has therefore become a challenging task. If librarians and architects are complementary partners in this process, it can lead to new, jointly developed typologies. A wonderful challenge in which the librarian becomes an architect. And vice-versa. The best of both worlds!

PARTICIPATION: MAKING THE WORLD SAFE FOR QUESTIONS

For a long time, the primary process of libraries was aimed at passively offering a good collection. Collections were put together with great care and users could choose from them according to their own insight. Key points of this model is the accessibility and distribution of information, which is probably no longer sufficient in times of information overload. We are faced with a choice: should we focus on improving the existing distribution process or should we focus on what is truly valuable; the library beyond the information overload?

The Ministry of Imagination, - the design collective we are part of - designed a new work process in which knowledge creation and sharing are central. The essence is that the library searches for the knowledge, creativity and imagination that is present in the city. It is a process that starts with inspiration, with good questions, surprising and sometimes unusual collection presentations. Visitors are encouraged to respond and share their own associations. What knowledge do they have to add and what new perspectives will then arise? If the results of this are systematically shared with other visitors, new connections, new meanings and new insights are constantly created. It is a new, cyclical process of inspiration, creation and participation. In this new library process, the collection has an active and versatile role that goes far beyond passive presentation. To start with, the collection is used as an incentive to explore themes or questions. It then serves as a source of knowledge and inspiration. Subsequently users are invited to explore their own perspectives and experiences. At that time, the collection functions as working material for creating new meanings. The addition of these newly acquired contexts to the collection provides new inspiration. The collection thus develops into a living archive that shows what topics have been researched and to what knowledge and insight this had led.

The main principle here is that library users and cooperating partners can contribute to the programming and various parts of the process, based on their own quality and expertise.

Constructing or renovating a library building is a unique opportunity to apply these principles. To make all activities literally visible in the building, an open-plan design is needed, in which functions are integrated as much as possible. In our designs we prefer to use the typology of a landscape that consists of a collection of diverse 'biotopes', which are connected to each other, but each with their own ambiance and appearance: open en accessible, so that people can see what is going on there and are more easily tempted to join in. With spaces that command silence, while others stimulate liveliness and social contact; spaces where you can enjoy art, music and literature; and spaces that invite you to produce something yourself or to demonstrate your talents. The collection - as an important source of knowledge and inspiration - is omnipresent, and

the makerspaces - where the collection is used as work material - deserve an integrated placement as part of the public space.

IMAGINATION: DON'T START BY REDESIGNING THE IMAGE; REDESIGN THE ACTION

Building or renovating a library is complex, because many decisions have to be made in a short period of time. Therefore it's important to formulate some basic principles to guide the design process. We call this a 'program of imagination', because it inspires us to make the right choices. In this program we distinguish five important areas of attention:

- A new library is an investment in the future. But we can only build for the future if we know what the essence - the mission - of public library work is.
- Public libraries are operating in a significantly changed context that needs to be adequately explored. It is important to make these transitions insightful, beyond the issues of the day, the hypes, or the trends: what are the fundamental changes in our information society?
- Changes in society and new technologies require a different way of working, with a central role for the user, a different use of the collection, and new forms of collaboration. What role will collection, users, partners and programming play?
- A new way of working results in different programming, which also places new demands on the architecture and layout of the future building. What does this mean for the spatial arrangement and the placement of the collection? What makerspaces will there be? And what do other partners add to the building in terms of functionality?
- Will everything work as planned? Start experimenting, because the best way to find out is to explore other ways of working in a laboratory for new library work, where all kinds of concepts and ideas can be tested, together with users.

INSPIRATION (THROUGHOUT THE BOOK): CONVERSATIONS WITH ARCHITECTS

Dutch and Flemish architects attract attention with striking and innovative public library buildings. Their designs are valuable sources of information and inspiration. We spoke with them about their vision of the public library and asked them how they look back on the design process.

- Jo Coenen: OBA, Amsterdam (NL) en Centre Céramique, Maastricht (NL).
- Chris van Duijn (OMA): Seattle Central Library (US), Qatar National Library, Doha (QA) en Bibliothèque Alexis de Tocqueville, Caen (FR).
- Francine Houben (Mecanoo): Library of Birmingham (GB), Tainan Public Library (TW), New York Public Library Stephen A. Schwarzman Building (US), The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library (US), New York, Martin Luther King Library, Washington (US).
- Winy Maas (MVRDV): Boekenberg Spijkenisse (NL), Tianjin-Binhai bibliotheek (CN), imaginaire Brabant Bibliotheek 2040 (NL).

- Vincent Panhuysen (KAAN architecten): Utopia, Aalst (BE).
- Michiel Riedijk (Neutelings Riedijk): Rozet Arnhem (NL) en Eemhuis Amersfoort (NL).
- Gert Kwekkeboom en Rick ten Doeschate, Civic: LocHal Tilburg (NL).
- Kamiel Klaasse en Pieter Bannenberg, NL Architects: Groninger Forum (NL).
- Ralf Coussée en Klaas Goris (Coussée Goris Huyghe architecten): Bibliotheek Waalse Krook Gent (BE).

FINALLY

Libraries will continue to be essential to the social and cultural vitality of a community. Due to technological and social changes, the library will have to innovate continuously, and this requires buildings that enable new forms of library work. An innovative architecture is needed, in which architects and librarians challenge each other and learn from each other. The library is worth it!

More background information about the book is available on the website:

imaginationandparticipation.com

In the USA the book is available through [Artbook](#)



Rob Bruijnzeels and Joyce Sternheim are librarians who have been concerned with the transition of public library work for quite some time. In November 2019, they received the oeuvre award of the Victorine van Schaick Fund from the Royal Dutch Association of Information Professionals for 'their unwavering contributions in word and deed to Dutch public library work'.

