

New library buildings and services in France and Germany
A report of a study tour 22-29 October 2006

A small group of British and Irish librarians and their two guides and interpreters (Chantal Morell and Gerlinde Buck) undertook a weeklong study tour of libraries in France and Germany at the end of October 2006. With some sponsorship from the French and German Institutes, the group were able to visit a total of eight, mainly new, public libraries and one medical library in the two countries.

The study tour website (www.goethe.de/mmo/priv/1579056-STANDARD.pdf) provides an exterior image of most of the libraries that were seen and also gives a brief account of each library and its services. It is probably worth looking at this website first of all.

Further images of and information about individual libraries - there is often an English version - can usually be found on each library's website (see the tour website for links). An additional gallery of pictures submitted by tour participants is appended to this report.

It was not all library visits, however. There was an opportunity for an instructive (but cold) visit, plus tasting, to the Taittinger Champagne Cellars in Rheims, and a chance to visit the famous gothic cathedral in Cologne. Then there were the culinary and liquid delights of both countries.

This report adds to the study tour website details by drawing out one or two impressions of each library building before going on to bring together some of the planning and design themes and issues that were raised by the tour.

France

Bibliothèque municipale, Georges Pompidou, Châlons-en-Champagne

A surprisingly large, modern L-shaped building behind a relatively narrow 'false' frontage that matched the stone facade of the adjacent street buildings. The glass-fronted public areas of the library contrasted with the white brick of the four floors of book storage.

In contrast to the mainly open plan arrangement of the other modern libraries seen on the tour, Châlons had a peaceful and beautifully furnished room (well lighted both naturally and artificially), for the study of rare and historical material that included manuscripts, maps, photographs and postcards.

Bibliothèque municipale à vocation régionale (BMVR) de Troyes

The library's outstanding internal feature, and taking up a great deal of the ground floor, is La Grande Salle. A long rectangular room shelved wall to ceiling (17 shelves high) on opposite long walls with the library's large rare book collection. A wide walkway around the La Grande Salle is used as exhibition space and is devoted to a history of the book (and the library itself) using material from the library's collection.

The other main feature of the ground floor is the spacious children's library (with some space on the floor above), and a newspapers and magazines area.

This is a highly glazed building of colourful and distinctive design, particularly as regards its roof that overhangs the library entrance. This becomes the undulating ceiling of the upper floor. The library is fronted by a large public space behind which is an attractively laid out car park. However, without signage the building has a certain anonymity - a leisure centre perhaps?

Troyes is a Bibliothèque municipale à vocation régionale and is one of 12 regional public libraries (BMVR) acting as a balance to the centralised resources of the national library in Paris. Like other BMVRs in Poitiers and Rennes, for example, Troyes has benefited from state support of 40% towards the cost of its library building.

Multimedia Library Cathedrale, Reims

A controversial design at the time, the library stands opposite the public space fronting Reims Cathedral, and thus has echoes of the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library as regards its site. Indeed there are stunning views of the cathedral and its square (undergoing restoration) from the upper floor of the library. It was said that the library's façade (given the view outside) was 'inside' its building.

For a major building in an important location, its entrance is rather low-key but leads to a spacious hall with staff desks either side. The main part of the library lies straight ahead but the entrance hall also provides access to a reading area (newspapers, magazines reference books and Internet access) and to a small auditorium with raked seating (200 places) used as a cinema and performance space.

Multimedia Library Carnegie, Reims

This is a Carnegie Foundation funded public library building to take the place of that lost in the devastation of the First World War. Now replaced by the city's new library opposite the cathedral (see above) and recently refurbished, it houses local and regional material as well as rare books and incunabula.

Built in the art deco style of the 1920s, and with a semi-circular rear portion for storage, it has a wonderful array of period design features both inside and out.

Although the library's catalogue is online, the small galleried catalogue room close to the entrance has kept its many wooden catalogue cabinets. This preserves an important historical artefact but is an indulgence that many libraries would or could not emulate.

Multimedia Library Croix-Rouge, Reims

With its arresting angular library exterior, this library has some design similarities with the somewhat larger library that would be seen at later at Münster. The building was rather spoilt by its location beside a rather large concrete water tower.

An interesting service was that geared to employment and training and offering information, books and a selection of websites.

Germany

Central Library, Cologne

Built in the late 1970s, this spacious six-storey building is, as might be expected, much more conventional than any of the more modern public libraries seen on the tour. With its well-stocked subject floors - the music library with its grand piano and keyboard is particularly noteworthy - it seemed like a typical representative of a major city library or academic library of its period. However, it was the one library on the tour that had gone furthest down the road of self-service, both as regards issue and return.

Asked as to what he would do differently in a new building, the librarian replied fewer windows, a better entrance area and better flexibility for the location of computer workstations.

German Central Library for Medicine, Cologne

This is the largest medical library in Europe - it also serves the university - and operates a major international document delivery service. The library is of seven-storeys and in two buildings linked by a bridge.

A very precise architect's brief, as regards module size, distance between shelves, floor loading, etc, had lead to a spacious, functional and flexible library but perhaps at the expense of aesthetic excitement.

Dortmund Public Library

The outcome of an architectural competition is this striking, semi-circular library building, with a glazed façade, that links with a more conventional rectangular building behind.

As at Münster, described next, but with a slightly different solution, the architect has created a street leading up to the library, passing its entrance and then going under the linking part of the two buildings.

Within the library the Artotek provides quality pictures for loan; they are housed in sliding storage cases. This service was not seen elsewhere on the tour and was once very fashionable in UK public libraries.

Münster City Library

Here the library is divided into two parts by a library street - from which there were views into the library - and linked at an upper floor by a bridge across the street. The library's form thus represented the organisation of the library into popular and more purposive parts.

The ground floor houses a café and newspaper room near the entrance while the rest of the floor was given over to popular print materials, with a children's library and media area below this floor.

Across the library bridge in the other half of the library is the standard, classified stock. The neatness of the shelves here and fewer readers (on a busy Saturday) than elsewhere in the building suggested that this major area of the library was being underused.

But it may also represent the planned 'noise' to 'calm' division of the library.

France & Germany: library themes and impressions

Space and staff

All the participants were struck by the generous space provision found in French and German libraries, even the oldest and the smallest, in comparison to those in the UK and Ireland. Staffing also appeared to be more generous.

Levels of use

In spite of such space provision, public libraries were not used to the same extent as in the UK and Ireland.

Glass buildings

Buildings with mainly glass walls (and roofs) are clearly a current architectural fashion and one that helps put the library on view to passers by, although they tend to look better at night when the lights are on. However, even the most well regarded buildings suffered from leaks and problems with temperature control. This meant in summer that cooling is expensive and in one library it was necessary to close the top floor because of temperatures in excess of 30°C. Another library had cleaning problems. Even the late 1970s German building was considered to have too much glass. As one librarian put it: 'A beautiful building but we have problems'.

Colour

Except for coloured upholstery, libraries could be colourless, or, as appeared to be fashionable, rely on a largely black, white and grey colour scheme. However, red was used as a consistent decorative feature of Cologne and blue in the medical library.

Furniture and shelving

Metal shelving, black in some instances to go with the colour scheme, seemed to be preferred. Wooden shelving, which was found in the final library to be visited, came as something of a change, although once again it contrasted with a black and white interior decor. Tables, seating and light fittings at desks were well designed and of good quality and sometimes imported from Italy or Portugal, for example.

Signage.

Unless to identify issue desks, etc, little overhead signage was to be found in library interiors. In two cases this was because the architect concerned did not like such signage. Street guiding to the library was not noticed and in some cases signage was absent from the exterior of the building itself, or poorly located or of an insignificant size. One library could easily have been taken for a leisure centre.

ICT

Computer provision, providing the usual services to readers, was a feature of the libraries that were visited but it was never felt that

the technology had an overwhelming presence, as in many UK libraries, and detracted from books and other media.

Issue and return counters

Traditional in and out barrier-like counters were to be found in only two of the visited libraries. Generally speaking, counters were long desks facing the library visitor or to one side. Sometimes there were separate issue and return desks that also served other purposes, e.g. registration.

Self issue and self return

Little evidence of self service, except in the oldest library visited which had installed self issue terminals and a separate return unit (of Danish manufacture) that delivered returns to a sorting room.

Flooring

While carpet was used as a floor covering, it was not universal and hard surfaces such as stone and wood were used, although the latter was not always hard wearing.

Book transportation system

Two of the libraries visited had a book transportation system to convey books from the stacks to service points in the library. In the public library, the design of the building was predicated on the use of such a system but at the time of the visit it was out of order. This meant that staff had to visit the stack themselves to retrieve items.

In the medical library, the librarian was satisfied with the Swiss system that had been installed, although wanting a faster vertical movement of the containers.

Other points

Escalators were installed at Dortmund Library, taking people up through the centre of the building. **Story-telling** rooms or spaces were found in both German and French libraries, that at Châlons is a multi-purpose, enclosed circular space but open at the top. **Comic books** were a significant stock feature of both French and German public libraries. **Exhibition space** was a notable feature of French public libraries.

Thanks

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