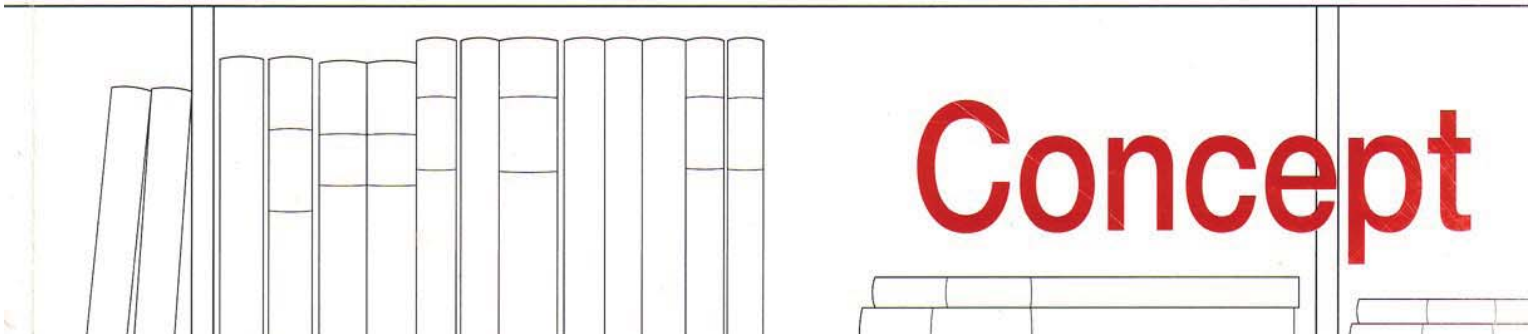
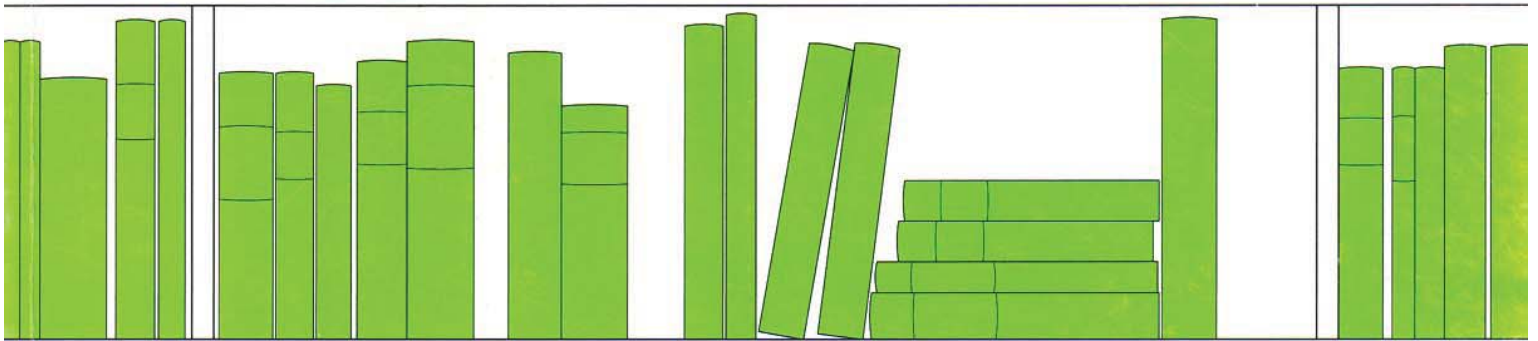
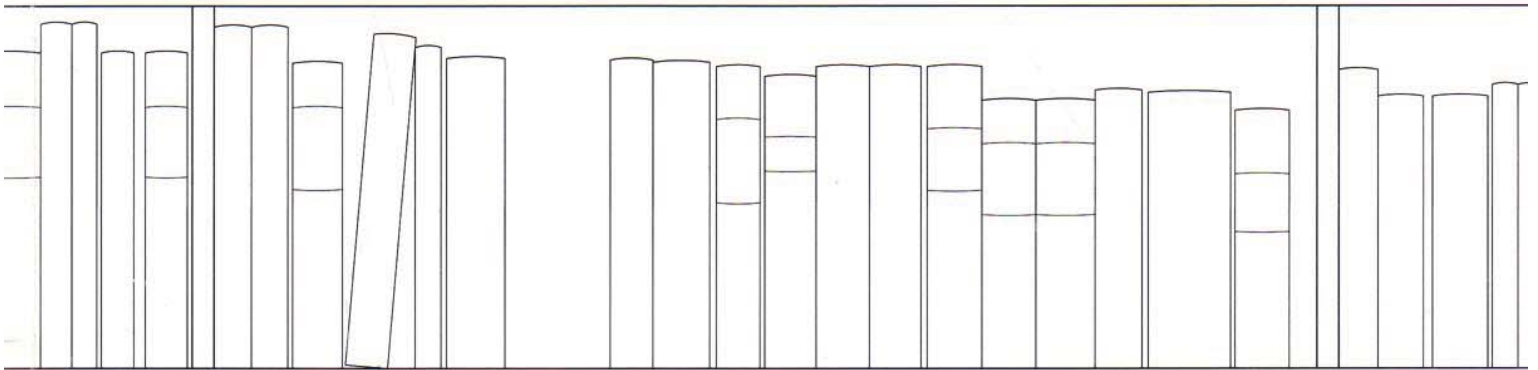
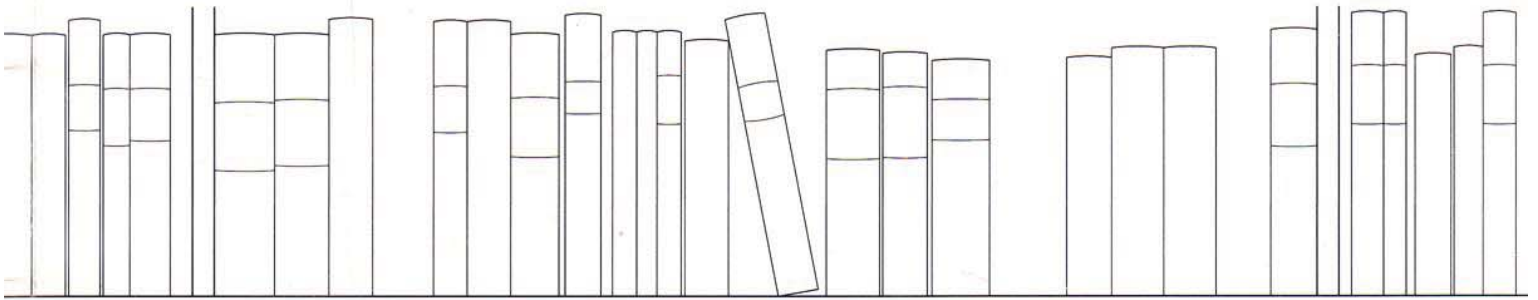


ISSN 1614-4600 · MAY · JUNE  
£12 · US\$20 · €17 · A\$30

English Edition

# DETAIL

Libraries · Review of Architecture and Construction Details · Vol. 2005 · 3



Concept

## Datascape – Libraries as Information Landscapes

Anna Klingmann

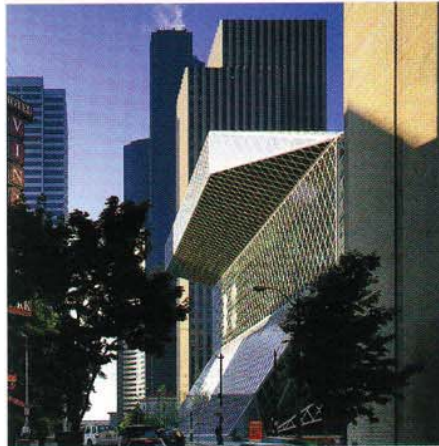
“...the idea of accumulating everything, of creating a sort of universal archive, the desire to enclose all times, all eras, forms, and styles within a single place, the concept of allowing all times to exist at a single point, a point that is nevertheless outside time, inaccessible to the wear and tear of the years, according to a plan of almost perpetual and unlimited accumulation within an irremovable place...”

Michel Foucault: “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, 1967

In the course of history, the spatial configuration of libraries has changed on many occasions and may be seen to reflect the rise and fall of cultural and political hierarchies. At the same time, the actual modus operandi of the library has remained essentially the same. Libraries are places where knowledge is stored, ordered, preserved and passed on. The relationships between these various functions constitute a dynamic whole that complies with the prevailing concepts of the scientific and power structures of the day.

As Michel Foucault has shown in his investigation of heterotopias, a close relationship exists between the system of knowledge as a means of exercising social control on the one hand, and the dominant power within specific local contexts on the other. Libraries are, therefore, always a territory that is disputed between the various power structures, with other factors such as economic conditions, technological innovation and above all the social production of knowledge also exerting an influence.

In his work “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge”, Jean-François Lyotard argues that the status of knowledge, subject to the influence of new information technology and new economic factors, has changed radically since Western societies entered the post-industrial age. Information is, therefore, controlled by the same economic principle that governs the relations between the producers and consumers of



commodities and the commodities they produce and consume: in other words, the value. Knowledge today is produced – and will continue to be produced in the future – to be sold. Similarly, it is consumed now and will also be consumed in the future in order to be turned to account in new production.

In both cases, the goal lies in exchange. As a result, the increasingly commodity-like nature of knowledge also has an effect on the perception of the public realm, thereby forcing cultural institutions to reconsider their relations with private undertakings and civil society as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

According to Lyotard’s argument, the increasingly mercantile nature of knowledge must ultimately imperil the existence of libraries as a basic public institution that, until recently, was closely identified with the principles of the democratic nation state. For if knowledge is to play a significant role as an informational commodity in the future in the worldwide competition for economic power, as Lyotard predicts it will, one must ask whether and to what extent the library as a public institution will be in a position to offer some form of political resistance to the increasing value of knowledge as a commodity. Indeed, one begins to question whether libraries in the future will be able to provide an independent platform for critical debate, and to what degree.

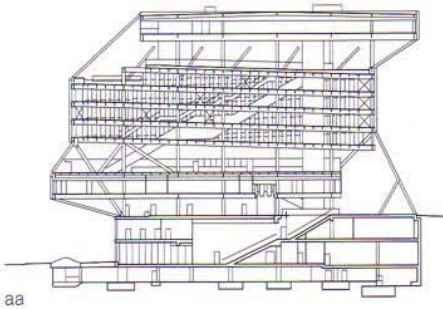


### *Information as a commodity*

The computer, which is available at a reasonable cost, combined with the spread of online services, is simplifying public access to international databanks. As a result, direct access to information is not only modifying our relations to the territory (by overcoming the reality of distance); it is also changing our definitions of “private” and “public”, which are reversed through the computer screen. In that respect, the Internet has altered not only our perception of knowledge, but also our relationship to the physical territory. Information exchange takes place via a non-hierarchical, interactive network, in which the difference between author and reader is diminished and where the divisions between information, the public realm, communication and commercial services are dissolved. Cultural themes are pervaded by commercial services that relativize knowledge and turn it into a commodity. By affording access to a vast array of informational sources throughout the world, the Internet has drastically changed the way in which we perceive printed matter: it is complemented by other sources of information, especially in the form of visual data. The World Wide Web, which is increasingly controlled by commercial undertakings, provides the user with a holistic environment in which information is combined with entertainment and where data are assimilated into a comprehensive experience through the superimposition of images, sound and text. In this light, knowledge has become the most important commodity in a new experiential economy that capitalizes on the overlapping forces of culture and commerce.

Since the generation of information itself is increasingly dependent on multinational capital, libraries will be influenced by the effects of internationalized investment, production and consumption. The library, therefore, will have to be perceived anew as an integral part of world culture – as a complex entity in which the convergence of economic structures and cultural projects manifests itself. Without doubt, the social identity of





Central Library in Seattle;  
architects:  
Office for Metropolitan Architecture,  
Rotterdam  
Rem Koolhaas, Joshua Ramus  
LMN Architects, Seattle, John Nesholm

Floor area: 38,276 m<sup>2</sup>  
Area for books: 12,820 m<sup>2</sup>  
Construction costs: approx.: \$165.5 million  
Computer places: 400  
Media stocks: approx. 1 million  
Capacity: approx. 1.4 million  
of which approx. 25 % in stores

Section  
Floor plans  
scale 1:1500

- 1 Entrance
- 2 Cafe/Shop
- 3 Lecture hall
- 4 Open-shelf area
- 5 Office
- 6 Foyer:  
"living room"
- 7 Conference room
- 8 Open-shelf  
"spiral"

Conceptually located between the commercial network of international concerns and the public requirements of the city, the library in Seattle becomes an urban hybrid that mediates between the two realities: the local context of the city and the displaced network of the international concerns. Since the library functions as both a public and a private undertaking, it is shaped by the needs of the local community and, at the same time, sponsored by international Internet companies.

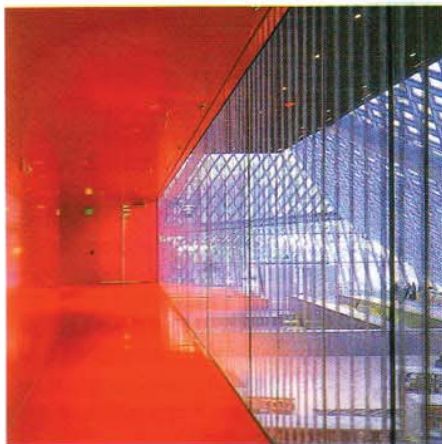
The shopping mall is a building type in which public interests are effectively mingled with private ones – with the urban element manifesting itself in the scale of the

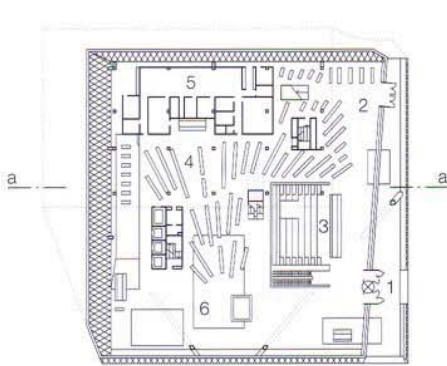
architecture. In recent years, the diversification of the commercial programmes of shopping malls (which now also incorporate cultural events) has transformed them into centres of urban entertainment. They have become a prototype for a new form of urbanism and help to create a sense of identity in two different ways: through the fact that visual symbols are effectively reconfigured to become brand goods; and that conventional programmes become atmospherically enriched experiences.

One might say that Koolhaas makes reference, through this increasingly close bond between cultural and commercial activities, to the modern form of urbanism. By comprehending the shopping mall as a paradigmatic building type of the privatized city, he matches its strategic organization and atmospheric characteristics to the library. That is why the programmatic choreography plays a decisive role in the overall concept of the library. While Koolhaas tries to allow as much flexibility as possible, he also underlines the various functions of the library through spatial demarcation. In this way, he is able to formulate spaces for experience, while at the same time offering users a clear sense of orientation.

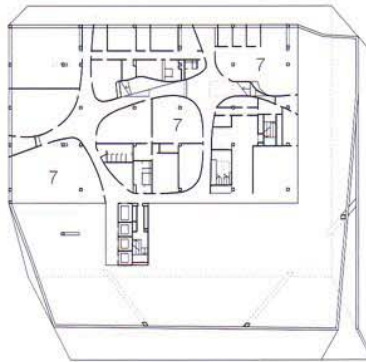
Functionally, the building is articulated into a number of distinct compartments. By linking related points of emphasis to form "thematic" realms, five levels were created, each with a specific, programmatic core and a special ambience. These are distinct from each other not only in scale, but also in terms of the materials used and the lighting conditions. The five floating levels that can be distinguished in the 11 floors of the library follow a logical order: parking facilities in the basement, a bookshop on the ground floor, meeting spaces on the third level, and finally two levels for books and the administration. Inserted between these are public magnets – so-called "attractors" – which create programmatic links to work, communication and play and which, in their role as special units, complement the functional needs of the library. The first "attractor", situated between the parking level and the first

administration level, contains a children's library, a large hall for public events, a multilingual collection of books and an informal encounter zone. Above this is the entrance hall, conceived as a public living room, which conveys a sense of privacy mingled with social activities. The electronically animated glass floor could be understood as an extension of the adjoining street space, although it also clashes with the seating groups that seem to float on Persian rugs and which convey a sense of intimacy. Illuminated from below, the floor is reminiscent of a constantly changing advertising hoarding that announces the various events in the library. The next "attractor", which is planned as a heterogeneous level for encounter, combines areas for technical training with discussion spaces. On an intermediate level on the fifth floor, there is a "mixing space": a location for the exchange of information, where all reference works as well as library services are accommodated. In the overall design of the building, special importance is attached to the area for librarian services, which is organized as a place of personalized communication, in contrast to the impersonal services of search machines. Immediately above the "mixing space" is a boulevard that winds continuously upwards, seamlessly linking the various collections of books and embodying the idea of strolling in an urban context. Via this spiralling ramp, visitors walk past almost the entire stock of books – some 780,000 volumes. Only the upper levels of shelving contain books, however, so that there is space to double the stock in the course of time. Set apart from the electronic cataloguing system, this department allows visitors to browse happily among the works on display, while at the same time enjoying views out over the city. The ninth floor opens out to form a large reading room – in the traditional sense of that term – set beneath a glazed roof. Finally, there are two further levels with offices laid out around an atrium. In addition to the dramaturgy of presenting the various programmatic items, the scope for visual identification plays a major role in

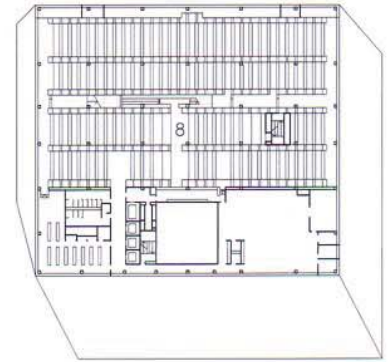




Third floor



Fourth floor



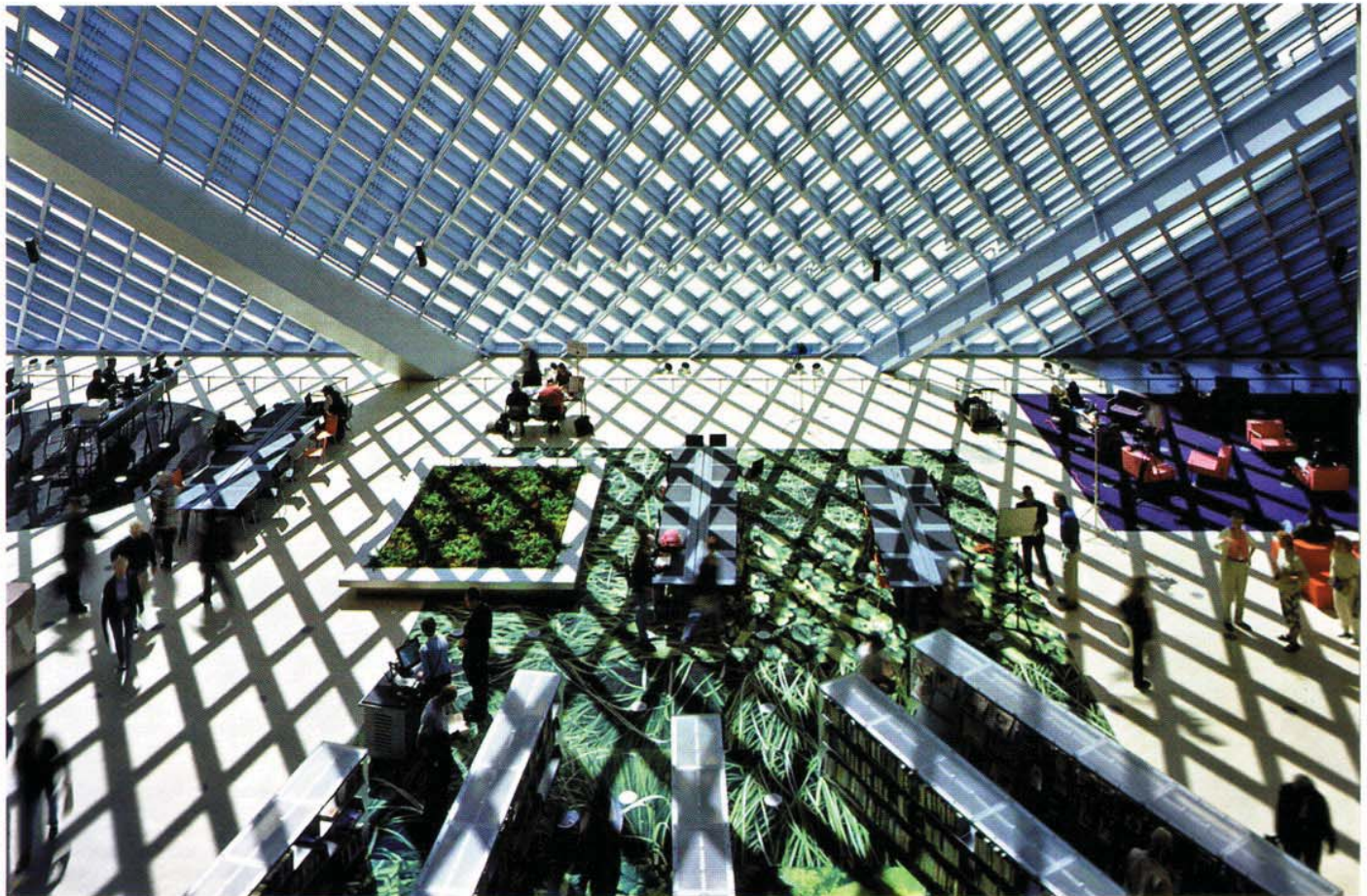
Seventh floor

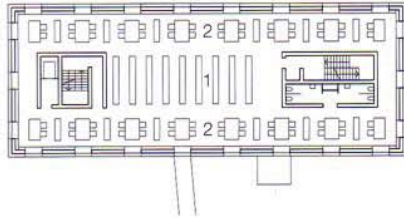
creating different moods. Identity is generated through images, surface effects and materials, and this extends the potential of the spaces for accommodating various events. A close collaboration with Bruce Mau's Canadian studio for graphic design helped to make the surface treatment an integral part of the overall architectural concept. The internal linings and external cladding of the building, using materials of different quality and texture, and the subtle presentational strategy for different media throughout the building ensure a cohesive overall impression that is nevertheless based on diversity. The library in Seattle can already be seen as part of a global network

of up-and-coming economies where contextual conformity in the classical sense is avoided. Rather like the shopping-mall type, the Seattle library forms a self-sufficient urban entity that seems to be detached from its location. The project possesses a strong symbolic dimension, since it shows a new understanding of its context: as an experience that has been turned into a commodity and that is matched to the needs of various user groups.

If one accepts that the library functions as a signifier of public identity, a complementary approach can be discerned here to that adopted by Herzog & de Meuron in the university library in Eberswalde, despite the dif-

ferent dimensions, context and construction brief. Whereas Koolhaas recreates the identity of the library by extending its programme and casting it in a symbolic form, Herzog & de Meuron fluctuate between the construction of a physical reality and a more indeterminate materialization of signs and symbols – as a formalization of information in the manner of a media facade. In this respect, the project is conspicuous for its attempt to make the surfaces of the building the dominant element of the design. The outer skin, as the plane of articulation between inside and outside, between the public and private realm, is boldly elaborated as a three-dimensional interface of visual



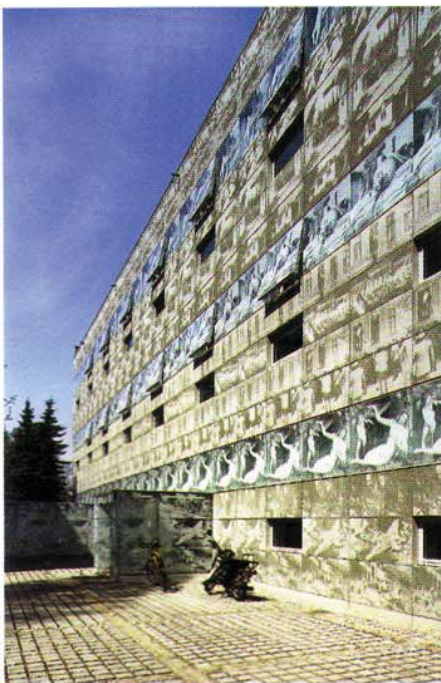


University library in Eberswalde;  
architects:  
Herzog & de Meuron, Basle

Standard floor plan  
scale 1:750  
1 Open-shelf area  
2 Reading places

Library in Eberswalde:  
Floor area: 1,380 m<sup>2</sup>  
Construction costs: €4.35 million  
Computer places: 12  
Computer points: 42  
Books: 162,000  
Open-shelf areas: 700 m<sup>2</sup>/62,000 vols.  
Store: 450 m<sup>2</sup>/100,000 vols.

signifiers. Designed in collaboration with the artist Thomas Ruff, the facade is printed with a range of photographic images of press cuttings from the past 20 years, thus forming the background to a complex iconographic programme. Produced in a screen-printing process, the images cover both the concrete slabs and the glazed surfaces. As a result, the facade has a homogeneous appearance, despite the use of different materials. At the same time, this unity disintegrates in view of the multivalency of perception suggested by the printing process. If the library resembles a “decorated barn” from a distance, on closer examination, one can distinguish the individual images; while these, in turn, dissolve at close quarters into a pixelated pattern.<sup>2</sup> The surface becomes an operative instrument that no longer holds the promise of some hidden meaning for the observer; it is more likely to overwhelm him with a number of different effects seen simultaneously. In other words, the richly varied skin of the building is contrasted with a



simple formulation of the spatial programme. Unlike Koolhaas's project, the library in Eberswalde shows a certain resistance to programmatic innovation. Since the book stores, like the administrative functions, are housed in the old library building next door, the brief for the new structure confined itself largely to the requirements of a conventional open-shelf library. Divided into three identical reading rooms stacked on top of each other, the building elevates reading and writing to the primary activity in the communication of information.

In Eberswalde, there is no indication of a broader programmatic interpretation of the library as such; for example, in terms of its infiltration by other, electronic information media. The new information technology installed as part of the spatial redesign of the library in Seattle, in contrast, has a clear impact. In addition to the book – once the sole means of communicating information in this context – a wide range of other media are coming to assert themselves. For that reason, according to Koolhaas, libraries in the 21st century will have to be transformed into stores of information that “aggressively orchestrate the coexistence of all available technologies”. That is why he has the ambition “to transform the library radically from an institution devoted exclusively to books into a space of competition between different media”.

The increasing use of new information technologies creates a growing need for social encounter. Koolhaas therefore establishes a convincing correlation between the duplication of the information media on the one hand and the increasing demand for spaces for personal experience on the other. The argument is also underpinned by a pragmatic concept. Since the storage of information takes up less space, in view of the greater use of digital media, more space becomes available for social programmes. In the light of this, the library may be understood as an integrated environment that facilitates a smooth transition from virtual forms of information exchange to physical spaces for communication.

#### *Questions of distance: criticism and complicity*

Both projects concentrate less on the library as a commodity than on prevailing methods of consuming knowledge. From different perspectives, they reveal the changed status of knowledge by making the prevailing methods of its consumption the object of a critical game. In this way, a certain distance is achieved from the very economy that seemed to hinder them.

Taken together, the two strategies outlined here delineate the challenge with which the library may be faced in the 21st century: the recovery of critical platforms for the generation of knowledge in a socio-economic environment in which knowledge has become a commodity. This calls for a process of disarticulation: the redefinition of cultural concepts and the reclamation of political positions. At the same time, a process of articulation is also involved: the communication of content and form, specific signifiers and institutional frameworks.

According to Walter Benjamin, criticism is always a matter of maintaining the correct distance in order to regain an autonomy of intellectual practice capable of lending form.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the library has a responsibility to keep critical spaces open. Faced with a phase of intense compression of time and space, which has a confusing effect on politico-economic conduct as well as on cultural and social life, the library has to provide a new platform for discursive practice.

Anna Klingmann works as an architect and communications consultant in New York and teaches at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Her book “Branding Architecture” will be published by MIT Press in 2006.

This article was published in an unabridged form in “Bibliotheken Bauen – Building for Books”, see page 263.

<sup>1</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François, “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge”

<sup>2</sup> Adam Hubertus, “Ordnung, Schmuck, Welt”, in: Archithese 1/00, Zurich, 2000, pp. 66ff.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, Walter, “Reflections”, Demetz Peter (ed.), New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 85ff.