

LIBRARY SPACES: NEW VALUES, NEW FUNCTIONS

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the change of library spaces generated by the advent of Information Age and some contemporary trends in their organization, with a particular reference to academic libraries. The possibility of the remote access to the library collections and services, via Internet, generated the first discussions about “library without walls”. At symbolic level, it’s the first change of the traditional library spaces determined by the digital environment. Afterwards, the changes affected also the physical spaces of the library, which had to adapt themselves to the new landscape of information and communication, including to the changes in users’ information behaviour. Today, library spaces have some new values and functions comparatively with those of the traditional libraries.*

Key words: *library buildings; library spaces; academic libraries*

1. Library - space and place

Library is both a *space* and a *place*. The difference between *space* and *place* is the same as in the difference between *house* and *home*. Space may be described in terms of dimension, shape etc. Nevertheless, place is appropriated by each human being through a personal experience that occurs both at physical and spiritual level: „place is so intimately associated with a person’s sense of being, belonging, and ownership” [1].

In the print age, the design of library spaces leads us to the idea of sacredness. One may speak of a mystic of traditional library buildings, which symbolizes knowledge, wisdom and learning [2]. This institution meant to keep humanity’s memory has a stability and sobriety which is reflected in the architecture of the library buildings and in the organization of interior spaces. Library of the print culture has as distinctive mark the presence of books, which are available through an intermediary - the librarian. It is a place of silence, because in library reading and studying spaces are in common; the solitude of intellectual effort made in community defines the reader of the print culture. Library is also a place that fosters contact between people with common interests and concerns.

With the information technology boom and the expansion of communication networks, libraries have begun to extend their offer in cyberspace. The possibility of remote access to library’s collections and services via Internet lead to the idea of “library without walls”. User’s perception on library, and also library’s perception about itself has changed. Library has slowly become a different place. Changes occurred in the perception on library also had an impact on spaces. Library’s spaces should adapt to the new information landscape, but also to the changes of the research and study methods, and implicitly, to the changes in user’s information behaviour. Today, they are vested with new values and they have new functions comparatively with traditional library’s spaces.

2. Library spaces in the Internet Age

Information technology has rapidly entered a library that was almost exclusively connected to the realities of the print culture. Inevitably, the speed of technological innovation and the pace of change exceeded the capacity of library's spaces to adapt themselves to the new reality. The profound changes produced by the online access to information made quite difficult the adaptation of old library's spaces. Nor new-made library buildings are any better: between the drafting of a new building and its lift it may take 4-5 years, during which it is likely that information technology and user's information behaviour to change significantly.

These changes that constantly occur in all activity fields led to the need of designing some buildings whose interiors are flexible and modular, allowing this way an easy adaptation to new functions [3] [4]. Consequently, traditional library spaces, characterized by stability and steadiness, are replaced today by spaces which have to respond to an imperative of "fluidity": "the growing fluidity of information is embodied in physical spaces" [5].

Therefore, library spaces are changing under the pressure of newer or modified functions that a library must have in the Information Age. Boone [6] lists several criteria that an academic library building must satisfy in order to be considered a „cybrary": it must have "intelligent or smart technology facility infrastructure", it must create an optimum balance between people spaces and "thing" spaces, it should be adaptable, it should offer some learning and study spaces appropriated to the new teaching and learning methods, it should offer a set of services meant to support the collaboration between librarians and professors a.s.o. For example, this is what space from an American academic library (Ferris State University Library for Information, Technology and Education in Big Rapids, MI) could provide in 2001, when opening: „electronically equipped study rooms (for groups or individuals), teaching and meeting rooms, multimedia labs, instructional studios, a technologies lab, distance learning rooms, audio and editing studios, audiovisual workrooms, and a computer graphics studio", and also „300 computer jacks throughout the facility available for laptop docking" [7].

To summarize, a modern academic library should provide, in addition to reading rooms, other spaces with various functions such as: spaces for individual or group work and study, spaces dedicated and/or appropriated to the use of new media, spaces meant to support the teaching process, socialization spaces etc.

Individual work spaces are an alternative for users who need perfect quiet to study. On the other hand, the group work spaces, islands released from the tyranny of absolute silence, allow students to solve certain seminar assignments which require teamwork and help them develop communication skills and collaborative spirit.

Also, more and more, library building is now seen as a facility supporting an increased role in higher education with classrooms, meeting rooms and computer labs. A survey on physical changes of 177 American academic libraries in 1995-2002 shows that one major change was the addition of collaborative study spaces: conference rooms (41,1%), computer labs (31,1%) and seminar rooms (31,8%) [8].

In the last decades, the importance of libraries as socialization spaces has grown. As stubbornly pointed, a library must play the role of community centre. Rizzo [9] shows that contemporary libraries must „meet the changing functional requirements of a community, but also its enduring social and emotional needs". Going back to the distinction made between space and place, we may say that it is not enough for academic library to adapt its spaces to the new realities of the Information Society; in order to really prove its utility and stimulate the community's members to use its services, it must become another *place*, in which the austerity of the study may join the opportunity of socialization, in which the two main reasons a student goes to a library - study and research, on one hand, and, on the other, relaxing - should be equally stimulated. In Ray Oldenburg's terms [10], library must become a „third place", alongside home - „first place" - and work - „second place"- in which people must feel free to enter and stay as long as they wish. For this, it must supply more spaces where student may relax and communicate.

In parallel to space (re)organization, we mustn't forget that in a multifunctional labyrinth, as the contemporary library is, the importance of guidance is fundamental for the user: „the capacity to really find his way inside a building is obviously the first demand in order to achieve other objectives of higher level” [11]. Traditional library was an easier place to appropriate because the functions of its spaces were fewer and clearer. Today library needs to fix some landmarks in order to allow the user to reach in time the publications or services he wants, which has benefits for the library image.

Finally, when we discuss about today library we mustn't forget that it is defined on both physical and virtual level. The mark that the library lets in WWW, through its website, through its online services, through its presence in Web 2.0 and so on, represents an element of personalization at least as important as the building architecture and space organizing. Library's identity in the virtual space contributes to the projection of a new *place*.

3. The importance assigned to the library spaces and to the opportunity of socializing in library by students from the most important Romanian university centres

A study [12] made on students from the four biggest Romanian university centres - Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj and Timisoara - shows, among other, the importance they assign to the spaces, respectively to the opportunity of socializing, as reason to use an academic library. One of the questions that subjects had to answer was: „How important are the following reasons, when you decide to use an academic library?” The reason „library's reading and study rooms” was considered of *high* and *very high importance* by 71,23% of the 810 questioned students, while „the opportunity to meet/discuss with colleagues/friends” was considered of *high* and *very high importance* by only 37,28% (See Figure 1). This proves that, for Romanian students, academic library's spaces are important from other reasons than its potential to stimulate socialization. The result is not surprising, considering that, generally, our academic libraries don't pay yet much attention to this subject.

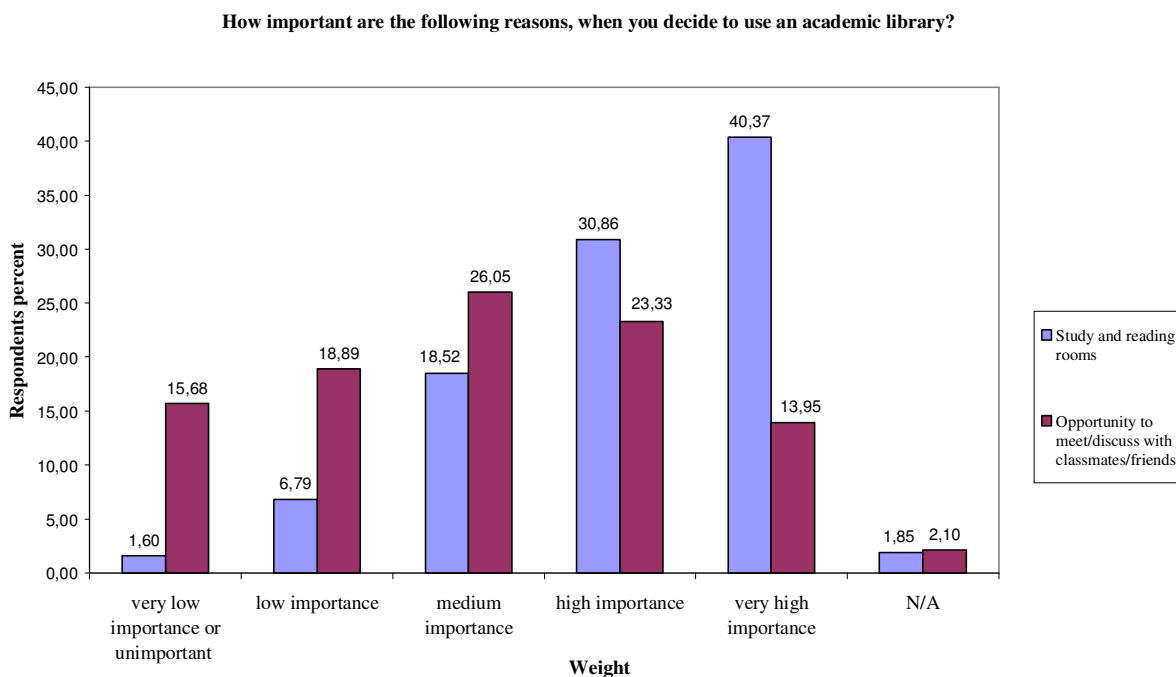


Figure 1. *The importance assigned to the library spaces and to the opportunity of socializing in library*

4. Conclusions

The evolution of contemporary library's spaces is closely connected to the evolution of society. Facing the omnipresence of the electronic information and the new profile of information user, library's spaces couldn't stay unchanged. New functionalities of spaces respond to the new functions of today library. A process of "secularizing" the space, slower than in other domains, is undergoing at libraries level. To become a „lived space", library must quit a part of his universality and sacredness "in order to turn its face to the reality" [13].

With decreasing frequency of library collection's use, rethinking the values and functions assigned to library's spaces represents one of the greatest chances for this millenary institution to adapt itself. The basic idea is that the users must be persuaded to enter the library also for other reasons than using library's collection: the possibility of using library's facilities, of attaining some personal and/or professional objectives, the opportunity of spending time in a pleasant way by establishing a contact with other known or unknown persons or just for using library as a space of refuge and contemplation. But for this, library must adapt more than just its spaces; it must adapt its access policies, which must be other than the conservative, rigid and restrictive ones, specific to the traditional library.

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