

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN HERITAGE BUILDINGS: TYPES AND EXAMPLES

The paper is based on the experience gained during the last years by the Diputació de Barcelona, which is the Library Service of Barcelona Provincial Council. In the province of Barcelona, libraries are a municipal service so the Library Service does not administer the libraries, but rather, facilitates library networking and administers library services for municipal councils.

Once democracy had been restored in Spain, the cities once again came to value their architectural heritage. Consequently, during the early years (especially after the '80s), town councils provided many heritage sites to house libraries. Specifically, over the last ten years, we have intervened in 34 historic buildings amongst a total of 101 buildings.

Basically, we have intervened in the following types of buildings:

- The *masia*, or Catalan country farmhouse, which is a feature of traditional architecture.
- The town house, or civil town building, that often commands a privileged position in the town and can be distinguished because of the nobility of the materials.
- Nineteenth-century and early 20th-century industrial buildings, that tend to be large, with a regular geometry, and were intended to accommodate large loads.
- Exceptional buildings such as an old hospital or convent, that usually have very specific shape and dimensions.

A large number of heritage buildings are contemplated in library planning in our cities, and often the location of libraries has been in places that are less than ideal. We'll probably have to analyse deeply each case, with the final goal of taking the right decision when trying to locate a library in a heritage building.

Here we try to provide some outlines from an architectural point of view to help to take the decision, to complement the librarian criteria.



Tecla Sala, l' Hospitalet de Llobregat

From the examples of Can Mariné, a masia in the Horta district of Barcelona, Tecla Sala library, housed in a former textile mill in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, and Joan Triadú library, placed in an old convent in Vic, we can say that:

- Libraries benefit from being located in places which are focal points for the community.

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- Historic elements can enhance the spaces in public libraries: they provide an exceptional quality which is very beneficial to libraries. Full advantage should be taken of this synergy between the heritage building and the library in such a way that both benefit from it.



Can Mariné, a masia in the Horta district of Barcelona

The solution built in Can Pedrals library in Granollers, housed in an old masia, is very uncompromising since it introduces a new structure, and completely dispenses with the previously existing one. It was possible to proceed in this way because with the exception of the façade and some few elements, the building had no heritage value. So, it was possible to build a library which has generous interior proportions, and is easy to distribute and administer.



Biblioteca Torres i Bages, Vilafranca del Penedès

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If, on the contrary, it had been decided to preserve the former structure, we would have ended up with a library with many walls dividing the interior, thereby forming small rooms which would have been difficult to administer and hard to access. This is the situation of Torras i Bages library in Vilafranca del Penedès, housed in a Gothic building dating from the 14th to the 17th centuries, where recent refurbishments have opted for minimal alteration, have been on a small scale and have respected the existing structure to the maximum.



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The lack of an integrated architectural project, and the succession of minor refurbishments that has led to this unsatisfactory situation. It may be that an in-depth study is needed to analyse the heritage aspects and the possibilities for architectural intervention in line with what is required for the proper management of a library.

The case of Manresa library, housed in an important civil building dating from 1906, is in some ways similar to that of Vilafranca del Penedès: the architect was up against a rigid geometry, and it was not possible to remove existing walls and redistribute the stairs, lifts, corridors and rooms. In this case the strong character of the building's architecture did not allow any reorganisation of the space to be considered.



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El Casino, Manresa

In contrast with urban buildings such as those we've seen, industrial buildings are usually larger structures, with a regular and repetitive geometry, large openings, and abundant capacity to support heavy loads. The interiors of such buildings are spacious and well lit: they allow freedom for the distribution. Usually the roof is supported by timber trusses, a type of structure that allows walls or columns to be widely separated. Old structural features such as this can be used as a feature of the architectural project, to lend character to the space occupied by the library.



Vapor Badia library, Sabadell

Vapor Badia library in Sabadell, Can Fabra library in the Sant Andreu district, in Barcelona, and Roca Umbert factory, in Granollers are good examples of industrial buildings being refurbished as libraries. In this type of buildings the architect has a much easier job when it comes to distributing the spaces, and in the end the management of the library facility will be improved. In short, this is a type of building that calls for a relatively non-aggressive intervention on its structural system, normally one that is reversible.

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Roca Umbert factory, in Granollers

But, still, we found a problem with such large spaces, and that is the difficulty of giving each section its own character and differentiating the various areas. In such cases there needs to be a very strong, well-thought-out plan for the furnishings and signage, since the architecture itself has created very isotropic and undefined spaces.

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Can Fabra library in the Sant Andreu district, in Barcelona

So, in terms of the type of building concerned we can come to some very general conclusions that might be helpful. (Still, every individual case calls for a specific analysis, which might imply a solution that would be very different from that of another case, apparently similar).

In the case of large isolated houses and urban civil buildings, the advantages come from the fact that they are organised as a group of contiguous rooms:

- it is easier to differentiate the different areas
- and there is better acoustic control.

But the disadvantages are also the result of the fact they are organised into rooms:

- little flexibility for distribution
- poor user accessibility to the documents
- often a lack of natural light
- and, finally, difficulties for management,

In the case of industrial buildings, the advantages we obtain from the undifferentiated space are:

- greater flexibility of distribution
- good accessibility for the documents
- better natural lighting in many cases
- and, finally, the easier management (because there is good visibility and circulation can be organised in a clear way).

On the other hand difficulties might arise, as we have seen, in differentiating the spaces by means only of the furnishing and signage, and in acoustic control.

Finally, no single conclusion can be reached in the case of exceptional buildings; everything depends on the particular case in point.

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In conclusion, then, while on the one hand a heritage building might offer clear advantages as a public library (good location and accessibility, the fact that it is well known to the whole community, that it is a striking building, etc.) it must never be forgotten that on the other hand such a building may severely restrict library management, according to the type of building concerned and the type of intervention required.

We sometimes hear it asked what the total surface of a heritage building is (to see whether the library we want will fit into it). But before deciding to use it as a library a detailed study of the building is needed, one that goes much further than merely checking how much usable space there is in it. The criteria employed in such a study must include:

- a historical and heritage analysis
- the architectural possibilities
- and the functional requirements of proper library management.

Such a report will let us be better-informed about the decisions we are taking and their consequences for the library facility.