

The University Library in Warsaw – Symbols and Climates

by MAREK BUDZYNSKI

The competition design for the library originated in 1993 in the fourth year of the new Poland. A time of hope, muddle, and confusion between the new and the old. For me these were years when I felt a strong urge to seek a new way of relating to the reality of the times, to formulate and declare my beliefs, and it was a time of a straightforward fight for survival.

In general I try to follow a direction of what we call sustained development. The atmosphere of space and the symbolism of forms of the library are a result not only of this imperative, but also a fascination of the team of designers by the idea of the University to have a library which links free access to books with formal access via a catalogue and librarians, together with the possibility of accessing information from foreign university library collections by computer. Equally exciting for us was the way the procurement of the project was financed, and associated with this the connection of the space occupied by the library with commercial space.

The basic project decision is the spatial layout of the building, which results from the ideas I mentioned above, and planning regulations, which limit the height of the building and impose a building line in the surrounding streets. The building itself takes up 100% of the building plot with its elevations running along the site boundaries. It has two underground levels and four above ground. On the lowest level, 8 metres underground, are parking spaces and maintenance and plant rooms, 5 metres underground is a floor designated as reserve space for the expansion of the book collection, used presently as letting space for commercial purposes, at the moment it houses The Hula Kula family entertainment center.

From the ground floor – situated around 80 centimetres lower than the original ground level, the building is divided into two basic parts, which are joined only by the roof. One part – from the side of the Vistula river is occupied by the library, the other from the side of the city, is taken up by

commercial space. Both parts are connected by an internal arcade, a so-called „street”. It is a space, which is a symbol of the unity contradictions, a space in which various, often-conflicting events can occur. Thanks to Robert Rzesos’s commercial drive this part has undoubtedly come to life, and equally undoubtedly at this stage has begun to overpower the library. I wonder if the University will realize what is happening and will find the will and strength to counter-balance this process.

All the floors above and below ground are joined by seven communication shafts, containing service ducts, lifts, staircases, and utility areas.

This spatial layout has its exterior and interior.

The exterior tells us of the coexistence of building with nature and culture, it aspires to be a symbol. It comprises the roof and three so-called ecological facades.

The town planning regulations placed the Public (Botanical) Gardens next to the site of the Library. We proposed uniting the two entities. The Gardens – a symbol of the unity of contradictions between nature and culture, surround and cover the exterior of the Library, its roof and the three so-called ecological facades, making the function biologically. The character is attained by a system of copper elements which form a trellis for climbing plants and drain rain water from the roof on to the plants, and by the green staining of the concrete elevations by copper patina. These plants growing naturally are supposed to be an ornament for the Building. The fifth element of the exterior – the façade from the side of the city known as the „culture” façade, talks of links with the past, of the variety of different civilizations, and of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian roots of Polish culture. 8 tablets with 6 different alphabets and musical and mathematical codes, as well as the form of the whole façade itself aspire to symbolize these ideas. This façade also unites the building with the life of the city which flows by the six entrances into the internal street – to the space connecting and dividing the commercial and the library part of the building and the greenery outside. This system of entrances and the symbolism of the façade of the library superimposed on the commercialism will stop to think, and their system of values will be modified towards balancing the interests of the I and the We (that is of the individual and the interests of society) and that they will be reminded that the Great Tradition talks about Us together.

The interior of the library is an isolated world, with its own particular artificially created climate in which a book is as important as its reader, a spiritual world of culture. The space of this world is formed like every Euclidian space along three mutually perpendicular axes, which indicate

connections and associations. The first is longitudinal, it indicates the connections of the Temple of Knowledge with everyday life, and leads from the main information hall, and thence to the main reading hall. The second axis, at right angles to the first indicates associations with Nature, and with the park, which enwraps the library space.

The point where the two first axial lines meet becomes a starting point of the third, vertical axis, symbolically indicating the association of culture and the universe. This is an axis of Faith, an axis of transcendental values.

This is an intentional shaping of the spatial layout, to make it easier to reach a state of the sacredness of culture, a reminder of the necessity of aiming at the unity of the truths of reason and revelation.

On these three axes around the information hall there is a network of individual associations with the books. The network of passageways between the bookcases on the three levels linked by the stairs and lifts creates a city of books with its own space, culminating in Agora – the information hall. Moving around in this space denotes its fourth dimension, and gives one a clear feeling of time in space. It strengthens the associations of the individual with culture as a whole, and helps us to find our place in the infinity of associations, which surrounds us. The storage space inaccessible for the reader together with deliveries is at ground level, under the library's open access area. There is a zone of book conservation workrooms and auxiliary offices situated on all levels alongside the Wislostrada and Lipowa Street.

The way in which the above ideas have been materialized has been determined by a low budget and therefore every architectural element is purely technical. The structure, made of reinforced concrete and steel remains fair-faced, partitions are of plasterboard, floors are covered with carpet and ceramic tiles. All the services are visible, indicating how technically complex the maintenance of an appropriate climate inside the library space is. The basic spatial effects are accentuated by the use of light, both natural and artificial.

In conclusion, I must say that the basic problem of the project was and is that the basic functional and spatial ideas of the design were so ambitious that they forced everyone taking part in the procurement process to develop and expand together with it. As all this has been taking place in Poland in the middle of a transformation, and we all know what that means, the amount of time and effort expended to achieve the required goal has been much greater than it should be, and this is why we are now at the stage where the library is beginning to operate in an unfinished and not fully equipped building. This is a state, which inspires the understandable displeasure of the user, but at the same time unfortunately it creates the temptation to abandon original con-

cepts. It is a fight to retain the integrity of the whole design idea. I believe that the people at the University are fully capable of accepting this as their own idea, and defending what is in these circumstances a rare case of the unity of ideas and space, making the world of culture sacred.

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