

Interview to Santi Romero
“Rethinking Library Spaces at the Information Age”

“ARGUS”

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1. How do you envisage the restoration or conversion of old buildings when they are transformed into a new library?

To identify what for me would be the optimal architectural solution for the restoration of an old building for a new use, I will refer to cases related to historical buildings, those which have an architectural quality and a historical prestige awarded by the community.

I believe that the result must be a building that respects the architectural concepts that were the basis of the original project, in whichever era it was built. However, the intervention to be carried out in the present has to respond to the new requirements of use. Put briefly, for me, a well-restored building is one that is beautiful and practical, but also one where the historical moments at which the interventions took place can be easily identified. For this reason I believe that restorations which simulate old constructions are less appropriate than those that respect the extant building but employ techniques and materials from the moment in which the intervention is taking place.

This may seem very complicated in the case of library architecture, where what is required are wider, more visible and more flexible areas. We architects are all too aware, however, that the success of the operation has a lot to do with the architect's talent and his capacity to understand what kind of library must be built.

There are clearly certain types of building that are more difficult to transform into libraries than others, such as single-family dwellings, or other constructions with fragmented spaces, distributed on many floors. It is therefore essential to undertake a detailed study that permits comparisons to be made between the requirements of the new facilities and a building's possibilities for adaptation. I think there should be a favourable diagnosis of the building's condition, its capacity for renovation and the urban, architectural and social interests of the

reutilisation. Given the complexity of these interventions, it is also advisable that the adopted solution should answer more to technical requirements than to political agendas.

2. What should be the strengths of a building destined to be a library today?

These days we cannot imagine a building that is not flexible, accessible, comfortable and sustainable. The challenge we face presently is to create architecture that can fulfil all necessary functions and that can be adapted at the pace of changing social and technological demands.

Therefore buildings should be conceived as containers which allow such flexibility, where continued creation within different zones is feasible. Such zones should not be impersonal, cold or unstimulating, but rather welcoming and comfortable. I'm thinking of architecture with a high usage of interior-design-related tools.

Another issue is the exterior image, the urban impact that a library building should have. It seems to me that there are two currents of thought. According to the first, new libraries need to shed their representative image and be transformed into something more dematerialised, an architecture that does not burst into the scenery but that merges into it. The second current considers that the social meaning of a library requires a building with a certain physical presence in the city. I believe that we have to go move in this second direction, although we should be prudent and not revert to bluntly iconic architecture.

3. How should the question of the reduction of space devoted to collections be apprehended? Should the areas be reduced? Or should the space be organized differently?

Currently, libraries are not only an area for information and investigation; they are a place to study, to meet people, an area for integration, enjoyment, connection and exchange. Given the evidence indicating the growth of digital collections and virtual users, I believe that libraries' spaces should be rather more directed to people than to books.

Up until now, calculations to measure libraries were based on the number of documents, the exhibition system, the number of workplaces, the distance between furniture, and so on. I believe that libraries now should be measured in

less numerical parameters. Those savings made from the reduction of physical collections should be re-invested in increasing the social role. It is, however, difficult to judge with which percentages we have to work; I think that each situation should be analyzed separately.

As far as organisation is concerned, it is not enough just to reduce a certain area or establish a different layout. A well-organised library is, and will continue to be, one that has an access area from which you can easily enter the different zones. The qualitative element that we should pursue is that areas be easy to modify, to put together and to separate according to new demands.

I would like to finish by mentioning one further consideration. The challenge for the architect who plans a library is reduced if quality advice specifically concerning library architecture is available. It is worth assuring a good result because, in general, construction costs are just as high for a poorly-organised building as for a well-organised one.