

## The Paradox of the Research Library

„... The research library is an accumulation of the old, destined to be an instrument of 'making it new'. That is the paradox of the challenge to research librarians... „

*By professor, dr. phil. Thomas Bredsdorff*

I shall never forget the awe with which I approached a research library for the first time. I shall never forget the mixed feelings of admiration and inferiority with which I first approached the library of my professors and academic role models.

I did not dare ask questions. Out of the corners of my eyes I intensely watched my enviable elders at either side, who knew exactly what to look for, which forms to fill in, and how to do it. Learning how to behave in a library is like learning how to adapt to any other social grouping, only more so. And those who have adapted, those who know how to behave - in the library and elsewhere - are those in power.

That was my experience at the time.

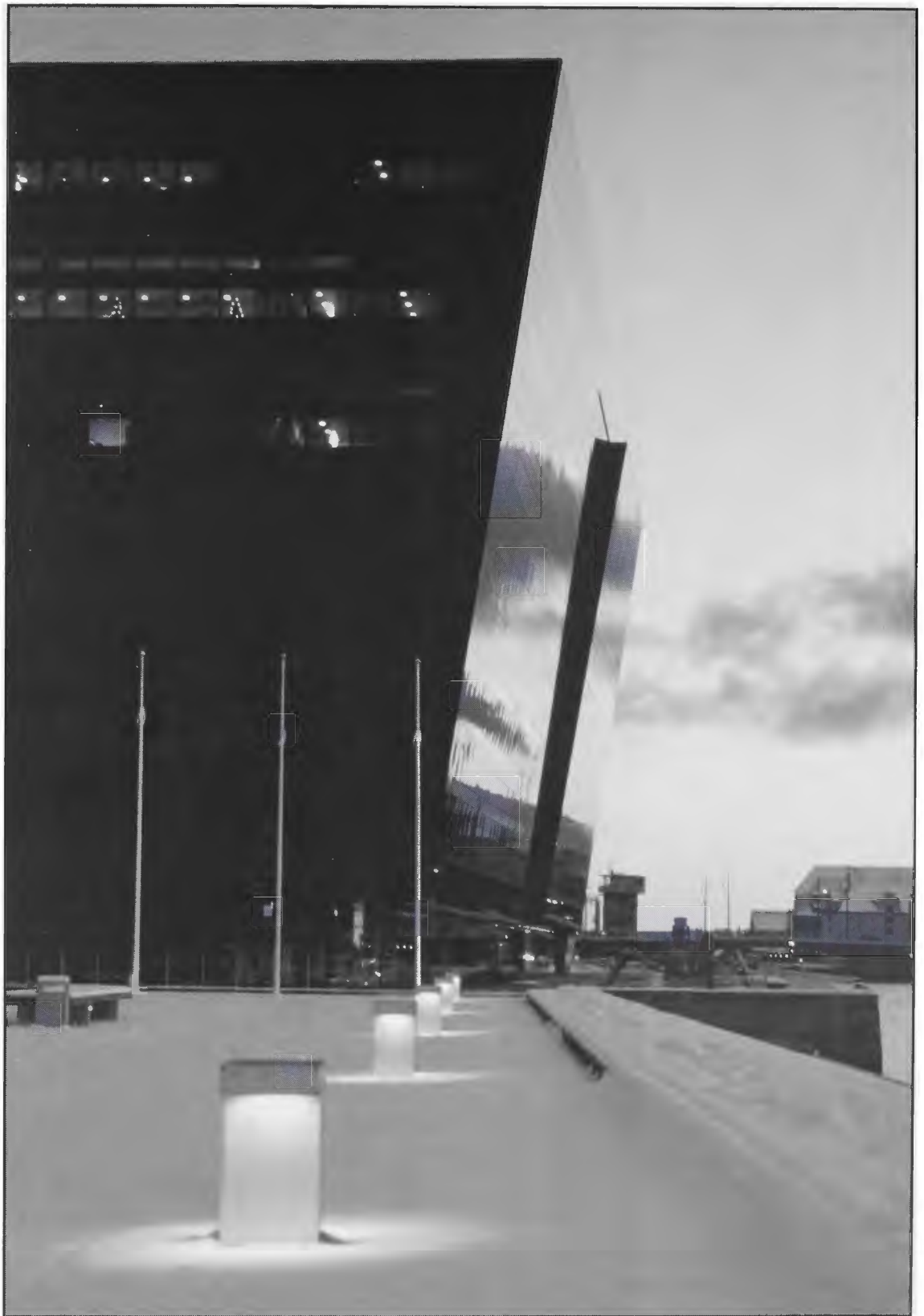
I remember that I decided to go to the municipal public library before my next visit to the Royal Library, in order to find out exactly what I was looking for - in other words to make sure that I already knew the answers when, as a young student, I put my questions to the research librarian, who might otherwise feel, I feared, that he

was wasting his time, trained and appointed as he was to handle genuine research questions put by proper researchers, not by amateurs like myself.

Looking back, many years later, I am sure most of this took place inside my own mind and nowhere else. I have hardly ever met anything but friendly and helpful librarians, here and elsewhere, prepared to deal with and take seriously the most naive and unprofessional questions. But I am sure, too, that it was not only inside *my* mind such things happen. I speak for many, in fact for all the absolute beginners, whom we tend to forget once we are beyond the beginners' stage.

But we shouldn't. In a certain, very fundamental sense the perfect research library is the library that knows how best to handle beginners and cater to their needs. Because true cognitive advances happen only to scholars who have maintained some of the beginner's knack for groping in the dark, for taking risks, and for practising the noble art of serendipity - I am sure you recall the term, coined by Horace Walpole in the 18th century, after the Prince of Serendip and his wonderful aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally.

The real challenge for the research library - now and, even more so, in the future - is how to cater not only to those doing routine work with known requirements, but also for those who make finds, those who have the intellectual potential for calling the paradigms of the day into question. Among the latter - that precious group of people who will challenge our present ways - are the beginners, the new-comers, those not yet adapted to the received way of doing business.



*The Royal Library. (Foto: Det Kongelige Bibliotek).*

### Knowledge is Power

The famous phrase 'knowledge is power' is normally attributed to Francis Bacon. But surely thousands must have realised that truism without his assistance, both before and after his day. The awkward feeling descending upon the young student entering the research library for the first time is a direct effect of Bacon's dictum: the people around me know everything, I know nothing, poor little me, how powerless I am.

My next experience of a grand research library took place only a few years after my humiliating first encounter with what has later become my second professional home, The Royal Library at Copenhagen. When still in my early twenties I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship to go to Oxford, England. And there I had the great fortune to be admitted to the Bodleian Library.

Once again I was visited by an intense feeling of insufficiency. As a foreign student enrolled at an institution at the margins of Oxford University I was not allowed to wear a black academic gown like the rest of the users of the library. Hence I felt revealed from the moment I entered. My academic nakedness was the visible sign of my insufficiency. I felt unfrocked.

But I also got an inkling of the power that one obtains through knowledge. Well, maybe knowledge is too grand a word for the experience I have in mind. I was doing work - undergraduate work only, of course - on D.H. Lawrence and I realised that, as a certified user of the Bodleian library, I was allowed, under proper supervision, in the rare book reading room in Radcliffe Camera, to get access to a book of prints of D.H. Lawrence's paintings,

which - owing to one rather graphic picture of Leda's encounter with the swan - was not deemed appropriate for the eye of the general public. And here I was, no longer just an ordinary member of the general public but one of the chosen few who could get access to a forbidden book.

Back in the junior common room at the college in the evening, I was able to hint at details of the forbidden picture. People stopped their conversation and listened. All of a sudden I had become somebody. Through the library I had acquired power.

Not a very admirable sort of power, I admit, not the sort of power that one is proud to exercise. It was not until, yet a few years later in my career, when I got to work at Widener, the university library at Harvard University, that I saw the light and realised the true liberating power of the well-organised research library.

### Open Access to the Stacks

Two features of the admirable Widener Library opened my eyes to the true potentials of the research library, way back in the early 70's of the previous century: open access stacks and multiple cataloguing. The latter term (which I am afraid is my own coinage) needs explaining. But let me begin with the former, the **open access to the stacks**.

I realise that open access raises serious security questions which are none of my concern, at least not at the moment. That is probably why this was the first time, outside of public libraries and small departmental ones in the university, that I encountered the possibility of browsing in the stacks of a huge library and hence the immense emancipatory power bestowed on the browser.

I was then beyond graduate school and the Ph.D. degree, engaged in work on my doctoral dissertation. By then I knew the ropes within my chosen field. But no matter what is at the centre of one's attention, there is always, by definition, a periphery. The wider and deeper your central focus of attention, the larger your periphery where you touch on fields of knowledge that you know only peripherally. If, as a matter of duty, you decide to focus on the periphery, thus making it the centre of your attention, you will only end up with an even larger periphery. There is no escaping this plight.

**A**t the beginning of your career as a scholar you may be under the illusion that one fine day you will know what there is to know within your field and you can then play safe. Later in life you learn that such a belief is an illusion. The more you know, the closer you get to what you do not know. And yet, if you are ever to finish a study, you have to stop somewhere and suggest rather than prove what might be the case beyond your scope.

This is where the open access stacks come as a godsend. In my own case, I, who was - and still am - a student of poetry and fiction, not a theologian, at some point in my study was led on to Martin Luther. I had two options, I could either start all over, hoping at some point to become an expert on Luther; or I could spend as much time as I could spare on the subject without losing sight of my main topic. I opted for the latter, realising in the process that nowhere could I have spent that limited time as profitably as at the open shelves at Widener.

I simply placed my chair in front of the several square metres of 'Luther' for a couple of weeks, and then browsed and

browsed, checking tables of contents, sniffing summaries, checking out conclusions. I got what I needed without losing sight of my goal.

The lesson to be learned is this: the better the possibility of **browsing** the better one purpose of the research library is served - **one** purpose, not all purposes, but still one that is important and often ignored, because it is the procedure used by amateurs. It is also, I insist, a procedure that remains essential to research at any stage in the life of the researcher - except the stage where all steps are matters of routine and the research therefore is a question of accumulating knowledge according to known standards rather than the cognitive equivalent of what Ezra Pound demanded of the poet: 'make it new'.

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### Multiple Cataloguing - Links before the Electronic Age

**T**he second feature, whose usefulness in the process I learned at the Widener Library, was what I have termed '**multiple cataloguing**'.

From where I used to work I had got accustomed to the idea that normally a book is registered in the catalogue under two headings: 1) the surname of the author, and 2) its subject matter - the latter, subject matter, being the result of the decision of the librarian in charge of that particular field of knowledge. The reason for this restriction is easily understood. A book - the physical entity: the book - has to be placed somewhere. Once it is placed there, it cannot be placed anywhere else, since it is



One of the main reading rooms at the Widener Library at Harvard University. (Foto: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Billedsamlingen).

impossible for physical objects to be in several places at once. The traditional catalogue reflects this truism. So did the Luther shelves in front of which I was able to place my chair.

But what is true of physical reality is not necessarily true of virtual reality, and a catalogue may be seen as just that - even a pre-electronic catalogue, with printed slips pasted onto the pages of leather bound volumes. At Widener, at Harvard, Cambridge, Mass., I learned the potentials of virtual reality (although the term was not invented yet, or at least not known to me). At Widener I learned that the possibilities of cataloguing for subject matter were endless and may be used without the library losing

control in any damaging sense of the word. There were useful Luther references that could not be discovered by placing one's chair in front of the Luther-shelves in the open stacks. They could be obtained from that marvellous catalogue.

Once I got wind of the multiple cataloguing method - *catalogue sans frontières* - I tracked one particular book within my field that I knew well and found out that it could be found under no less than 8 different headings, simply because experience had proved that 8 different types of interest might benefit from that particular book. And the proof had been gathered, not by continental,

Hegelian speculation, but by good old Anglo trial-and-error.

I devised a test. I suggested to the librarian that the book in question would be useful to scholars looking for information under a 9th heading. »No problem,« said the friendly American librarian. »We will add that reference at your request. We will make yet another copy of the little slip with the bibliographic data of the book and glue it into the catalogue volume you suggest since we trust your information that this particular book will serve the purpose number 9 that you mention.«

What I am talking about is of course what later, in our electronic age, came to be known as **links**, although we did not know the term at the time. The advancement of knowledge often means combining pieces of information that have been accessible for ages but have not been combined - or combinable - before. A useful research library is a library that makes available the most imaginative and the most useful links.

My mind boggled at the notion of linking long before the computers. The simple idea of making available any link that anybody thought useful, as practised at the Widener Library, opened a vista of possibilities. Democratisation and innovation rather than computerisation is the name of that particular game. It is at the core of what a research library is about.

I have no doubt that we shall see an explosion of linkings based on the Internet in our 21st century. But owing to my early experience at Harvard - long before anyone had even dreamed of e-mails and the Net - I have always thought of the well and imaginatively organised research

library catalogue as a model of the Net, rather than vice versa. A 'browser' - or maybe it is a 'search machine' - nowadays means a software device that allows you to combine any piece of information with any other at a very high speed. But except for the speed and the number of links the idea of the phenomenon was there already, way back in the archaic pre-computer days of my youth when we browsed and searched inside the research library.

The research librarians ought to keep in mind that they are the models rather than the products of the computing revolution. The challenge for them is to stay in the vanguard, always remembering that it is human minds, not electrons, that design the computer and the links it is to provide.

But of course there is no point in links unless there is something to link. A catalogue without books is of limited value. Which leads me to the question of the holdings of the research library. What books ought to be in it, and according to what principles is the library to be restocked in times of penury - a question which ought to be a concern of even affluent libraries, since every library is going to be hit by adversity at some time or another?

What, in other words, is a complete research library?

### **Research libraries as rooms for relevant information**

Let us go back in time, to the mother of research libraries, the library of Alexandria. The official story, European version, is that the Arabs burned it because they did not cherish the values that we hold high. In one version (by Alfred Butler, in *Arab Conquest of Egypt*, 1902) Omar, the caliph who ordered the burning of the library, is supposed to have said about



*The Radcliffe Camera, Oxford. It forms part of the library and stands close to the „Tower of the Five Schools.“ (Foto: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Billedsamlingen).*

the books it contained: "if what is written in them agrees with the Book of God, they are not required; if it disagrees, they are not desired. Destroy them therefore."

It is worth pointing out in passing that the, essentially racist, anecdote is probably less than accurate. The library had been the object of several onslaughts before the arrival of the caliph. When Julius Caesar came to the aid of Cleopatra he burned his ships in Alexandria's harbour as a defensive measure and the library suffered what the Pentagon today would have termed collateral damage. Later, Christians went on a rampage and destroyed pagan literature in Alexandria, and yet another portion of the holdings of the famous library was destroyed (my source is the volume of essays, ed. Roy MacLeod, *The Library of Alexandria*, Tauris, 2000).

Whoever is to blame - and probably bloodthirsty warlords and ideological zealots of both Muslim and Christian persuasions will have to share the responsibility - books got lost. It has been estimated (by the classicist Rudolf Blum) that as little as one per cent of all classical Greek literature has survived to the present day. A considerable portion of the 99 per cent were lost through damage done to the Library of Alexandria one way or another.

In the 19th century, and still when I was a young student, the notion prevailed that in principle all printed matter may be preserved and made accessible. It is a noble ideal, surviving in the still existing principle of statutory deposit of publications ('pligtafleivering'), which idealistic librarians desperately try to update so as to include what is 'published' on the Internet - a noble but quite unrealistic endeavour, since it runs counter to the very idea of the Net.

The statutory deposit and the ideal of totality rests on an invisible hierarchy, the hierarchy governed by publishing companies and the forbidding costs of publications. Only what has overcome those two obstacles is really 'published'. Only with two such obstacles as a filter could anyone ever dream of knowing, storing, listing 'everything' within any field. On the Net there are no such obstacles, hence all sorts of rubbish are instantly available anywhere to anyone.

Which puts the research librarian back into the position of an arbiter that otherwise might have disappeared. As the media of so-called publication grow ever more democratic and ungovernable, the librarian acquires an ever increasing, indeed an almost scary, authority as decision maker. Since the ideal of holding everything within any field becomes an ever more nostalgic dream of our Victorian ancestors the librarian's function as arbiter becomes an ever more visible reality.

An enlightening parallel between the research library and the publishing house may be drawn. In a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* the grand old man of American publishing, Jason Epstein, has ruminated on the coming revolution in books (NYRB April 27, 2000), which seems perhaps more ominous to publishers than to librarians. If all information should happen to go electronic, the librarians at least can keep themselves busy cataloguing and creating links between sites. But what is left for the publishers?

Well, a number of important tasks, according to Epstein, one of which is strictly akin to that of the librarian: the role of sorting out, of guiding, of putting one's imprint on information and thus have it to





*Bodleian Library, Oxford. (Foto: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Billedsamlingen).*

stand out and become visible among the enormous amount of information foisted upon us from everywhere.

We all regret the tremendous loss to the flames of Alexandria, no matter who lit the fire. Yet where would we have been, had all the now lost 99 per cent of Greek literature - and of all other literature of the ensuing centuries - remained intact? We are accustomed to seeing the incineration at Alexandria as the epitome, or allegory, of vandalism. It might also be seen as an allegory of time:

Books get lost in time, one way or another. In olden times, before Gutenberg, the enormous costs of copying provided a perfect sorting mechanism. Books that were not used, simply did not get copied, and hence were lost to the mice. We often forget that advances in knowledge rely not only on the gathering of useful

information but also on the discarding of useless information. Getting informed means getting rid of useless information - so as to make room for relevant information. We rightly hate the indiscriminate discarding of information which the infamous fire at Alexandria normally symbolises. But we must face the fact that the discarding of information is part and parcel of the process of making sense out of chaos.

Having described the endless piling up of information on the World Wide Web, with no meaningful discarding of it in sight, Epstein concludes that nevertheless there are strong grounds for optimism:

“The critical faculty that selects meaning from chaos is part of our instinctual equipment and so is the gift for creating and re-creating civilisations and their rules

without external guidance. Human beings have a genius for finding their way, for making orderly markets, distinguishing quality, and assigning value. This faculty can be taken for granted. There is no reason to fear that the awesome diversity of the World Wide Web will overwhelm it" (p.59).

### The task of the research library

If a publisher facing the information explosion can be this optimistic I see no reason that a research librarian should be less hopeful. Although the functions of both librarian and publisher will change they share the task of assisting their fellow humans - readers and researchers alike - in the never ending task of distinguishing quality and assigning value.

The task of the research librarian - and the mission of the research library - is, I admit, perhaps the more difficult of the two. Seeing that the ideal of total holdings - say, of all periodicals in any given field, let alone of all books - is vanishing beneath the horizon behind us, the research library must make ever more pressing choices. Yet at the same time it must leave as many linking possibilities open to its new, i.e. young, users who have different ideas and approach the library with feelings of inferiority because they are outsiders and yet also with feelings of supremacy because theirs is the future: They know that taking care of the heritage means not only cherishing the remains but

interpreting them differently from their predecessors.

All of which amounts to the conclusion that the task of the research library of the future is going to be even more paradoxical than it always was.

That is to say, by way of summary, the task of the research library is

1) making sure that **everything** is available;

2) seeing that making everything available is impossible (owing to the shortage of funds and the exponential growth in information) the research library must make sure that **something** is available and that that 'something' is the best available;

3) seeing that the choice of 'something' to buy and store and leaving out something else is based on **received values** it must also do its utmost to make sure that **other values** can be sifted from the links and the materials they hold;

4) they must attend to the needs of the **established** scholars who do business in established ways, and yet remain open to the **next generations** who will challenge such ways and change the paradigms.

One can only cross one's fingers and wish the research librarians good luck in an enormous, and enormously important task, a task which is at once impossible and indispensable.

Note:

Artiklen er en festforelæsning om det klassiske bibliotek i moderne udgave, holdt ved åbning af de europæiske national- og universitetsbibliotekers organisation LIBER's 29. årskonference på Det Kongelige Bibliotek den 28. juni 2000.