

Preface and Acknowledgements

A commonplace sight in our villages, towns and cities for over a century and a half, the public library built-form in Britain has strangely never been the subject of an extensive architectural history. This book begins the process of rectifying that omission by providing a socio-architectural history of British public library buildings between 1850 and 1939. A surprisingly high proportion of this large set of urban civic buildings remain intact, to one degree or another, and, moreover, still function as libraries. Thus, in addition to providing a historical assessment for its own worth, as well as in the interests of highlighting the heritage and continuing value of public libraries, we have thought it important to evaluate the potential of extant historic libraries for modernisation, focusing on attitudes to renovation and to the blending of the 'historic' with the 'new'. Often regarded with strong affection, and highly valued as local monuments, these buildings are frequently outdated and difficult to adapt to current needs. Their historical development is of considerable interest in itself, and also a key to understanding how best to handle their future.

We seek to rescue the historic public library building from a perspective that in the past has all too easily denigrated it. The mass construction – for that is what it eventually became – of early public library buildings is to be celebrated as a successful exercise in social engineering, an unprecedented effort by a public-sphere movement to persuade citizens, in a consensual way, of the importance of knowledge in an increasingly open and modernising society (we have deliberately used the term 'social engineering' as opposed to the narrower and misleading term 'social control'). More precisely, the provision of what amounted to over one thousand library buildings in the period 1850–1939 was an exercise in what Karl Popper called 'piecemeal social engineering' – social engineering that was incremental and continually amended in the light of experience and new knowledge, a scientific approach to planning social change, in this instance via the free provision of books, information, education and knowledge, that reflected the essence of the public library as an institution of progress and scientific inquiry.

The emergence of the world wide web, e-books, e-journals, MP3 technologies and other multiple audiovisual opportunities has sharply increased fears that the book and other printed artefacts, the mainstay of the traditional library, may become obsolete. However, the book has many qualities that in the foreseeable future will ensure its survival: it is portable, convenient to use and tactile; and each publication retains a strong individual identity. In addition, the printed word in the form of the commercial magazines is booming (although the more ephemeral and perishable product of the daily newspaper is having to fight hard for its existence in the digitally networked world). If the world of print survives, so will libraries.

Our world is increasingly virtual, feeding our desire to live flexible, mobile, information-rich and entertainment-soaked lives. Yet, paradoxically, the love of 'place', including our appetite for so-called 'third places', offering comfort, distraction and social interaction away from home and the workplace, appears to be intensifying. Internet shopping has exploded, but it is the supermarkets that have become the cathedrals of our age. The giant computer and iPod retailer Apple has the option of selling all its products on the web, but it has also opened a string of prime-location stores on the high street and in the shopping mall. Similarly, although the information world is heavily computer-mediated and -networked, suggesting a threat to our five-hundred-year-old print culture, the notion of the library as a place, and questions over how best to design that place, have recently fired the imagination of local planners, librarians, architects and the general public, each grappling with the issue of how a library should look and what it should contain as it moves from being a book fortress to an emporium of multi-formatted information. Not since the library philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie a century ago, which led to the appearance of hundreds of new library buildings, has interest in library design, including its heritage and the renovation of old libraries, been so high.

The gestation of this book has been long and complicated. It began twenty years ago when our library-design research paths fortuitously crossed. In the academic world collaboration, partnership and interdisciplinarity have become all the rage. In this regard, the co-authored nature of this book, the participative work that has underpinned it and our anchorage during the research in different and contrasting universities (Liverpool and Leeds Metropolitan), hits the mark. However, ours has not been a contrived co-operative exercise, aimed at ticking 'academic performance' boxes. Rather, our project has evolved organically, built on a friendship, a knowledge of, and respect for, each other's work and a shared interest in past library architecture that goes back two decades.

Following the initial discussions we had, all those years ago, on the history of library architecture, which sowed the seeds of our present collaboration, we went our separate ways. Three things coalesced to bring our academic paths back together. Firstly, in 1991 the Library History Group of the (then) Library Association (now CILIP: the Chartered Institute of Library and Information

Professionals) began to seek ways of promoting the understanding and, where possible, preserving the surviving physical heritage of libraries and librarianship (for a brief time there was talk of a museum of librarianship, for example). A working party was established to consider how this might best be affected. It identified the library building itself as the most profitable focus of attention, especially as, at the time, some concern was being caused by press reports of the closure and even demolition of early public library buildings. In 1992 a second working party, under the chairmanship of John Crawford, considered the matter in more detail. Initially, the ambition was to undertake a survey of historic library buildings to be published as a series of printed directories. After an unsuccessful search for funding, the Library History Group resolved to continue with the planned surveys on a smaller scale, using volunteer surveyors from among its members to cover smaller areas of the country. This resulted in local projects in Yorkshire and Humberside, co-ordinated by Bob Duckett, and in Edinburgh and South East Scotland, directed by Toni Bunch (more detail about these projects is at the end of Chapter 1). The working party had laid down some basic methodology for the proposed project. This consisted of a definition of a 'historic library building', for the purposes of the project, as: a building, or part of a building, even if no longer used as a library, which was purpose-built or used as a library in an architecturally distinctive fashion for a long period ('long period' naturally having a subjective meaning especially in terms of libraries constructed in the 'recent' past). A set of database fields and a classification of types of library to be used in the collection of data were devised. Some experiments were made in collecting and inputting data to establish the time needed for this task. Based on a sample of thirty-three records, compiled from a combination of secondary sources and a questionnaire, it was concluded that by using these methods one person could create and input about 1400 records a year. In 2002 a report of the efforts of the Library History Group in connection with these matters was prepared by Elizabeth Quarmby Lawrence (see the last paragraph of Chapter 1).

Secondly, in the late 1990s, paralleling initiatives by the 'New Labour' government and the library profession sparked by the advent of the world wide web, and the need to build a 'new library network' that took account of this, the future of library buildings became a hot topic. The Library and Information Commission's *New library: the People's Network* and *Building the new library network: a report to government*, published in 1997 and 1998 respectively, although primarily prompted by a desire to celebrate the virtues of cyberspace mediated by libraries, served to draw attention to the future of the library building. New flagship library buildings began to make their mark, such as the Peckham Public Library (2000), winner of that year's Stirling Prize for Architecture.

Thirdly, 1998 saw the formation of the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council). The Board's relatively healthy resources as well as its broader view, compared with that of the Library and Information Commission and

the earlier British Library Research and Development Department, of what research in the field of library and information science could comprise, encouraged us, against the backdrop of the renewed interest in library buildings and the excellent groundwork laid by the Library History Group, to apply to the Board for funding. Our application (made jointly to those panels in the Board responsible for architectural history and library and information science) was successful and work began on the project in early 2004. We were fortunate enough to find an outstanding research officer for the project, Kaye Bagshaw. Kaye supported the project throughout, attached to Leeds Metropolitan University in its first year and to Liverpool University in years two and three, and for a residual period thereafter. With a number of years of experience in the library of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Kaye straddled, to the benefit of the project, the two fields that underpin the book: architecture (specifically architectural history) and librarianship (specifically library history). We are grateful for her assiduous work, not only in collecting evidence and constructing an invaluable database of historic public libraries, but also in her co-authorship. We also thank the Arts and Humanities Research Board/Council for its funding, including a period of research leave for each of us to help bring the project to a written completion.

The project comprised three phases, or elements. Firstly, a database of over 1000 buildings was assembled. This will prove to be of use to current planners and practitioners, as well as historians. A shortened version of the database appears in an 'appendix' gazetteer here. We anticipate that the database will eventually be made available electronically, searchable by a variety of fields and subjects. Secondly, partly based on evidence gathered for the database, we have produced this first book-length socio-architectural history of the early public library in Britain. We do not claim to have addressed every aspect of the subject and certainly haven't tried to cover, or even mention, all of the '1000-plus' libraries we identified. Instead, we view the history, as well as the database, that we've produced as a springboard for further research either by us or others. In the third phase of the project, in keeping with our interest in historic library buildings *now* and in the *near future*, we mounted an investigation into the current role of, and attitudes to, historic public library buildings. This last phase of the research included a mass observation of public library buildings (our thanks to the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex) and a series of 'case study' visits to renovated libraries.

We believe the book will find appeal amongst practitioners, academics and university-level students in both librarianship and architectural studies. No doubt scholars in the broad field of cultural studies, as well as history, will also find interest in the story we have told. Readers will find the book to be well sourced, its arguments based on a rich array of 'primary' evidence.

It is not possible to list individually the large number of local repositories we have visited to obtain our evidence; the identity of most can be gleaned from a scrutiny of the notes. We nonetheless wish to express our gratitude for the assistance we have received from numerous local studies libraries

and record offices, from the Scottish National Archives (regarding Carnegie records) and from the Thomas Parry Library, Aberystwyth University (which holds an extensive archive on library buildings). In addition, we would like to thank all those who have granted permission to include their illustrations in this book. We have made every effort to contact and acknowledge copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements. It would be cumbersome to list all the librarians, archivists and other individuals who assisted in the compilation of the database and the gazetteer by answering e-mails, sending information and even taking photographs. Bob Duckett, whose contribution we've noted above, sent small packages of information and images on an almost monthly basis. We know that Kaye Bagshaw found Cathy Dempsey, Robert Elwall, Jolanta Kent, Brian Glover and all the enquiry desk team at the RIBA Library extremely helpful, as were the librarians at the CILIP Information Centre which provided her with a 'home from home' for many months during the first two years of the project. Finally, we thank Pip Trevorrow (Leeds Metropolitan University) and Peter Richmond (University of Liverpool) for their editorial assistance, and Boyd Rayward for reading the manuscript and commenting on it.

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