

# The Librarian and the Evaluation of a New Building. The University of Oslo Library and the Georg Sverdrup Building: Does the building support new challenges and new expectations?

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## INTRODUCTION

The [University of Oslo library](#) was founded in 1811. It is the largest academic library in Norway, and has four branch libraries on different campuses in Oslo. The [Georg Sverdrup Building](#), named after the first head of the library, Professor Georg Sverdrup, was erected during the years 1996 – 1999 on the main university campus. The architect was 'Telje Torp Aasen architects' in Oslo. It is an impressive building of high quality materials, with six storeys and 29.730 m<sup>2</sup>. It has given the main campus new qualities and new areas, outdoors as well as indoors, and became a brand mark for the university shortly after the opening.

The library occupies approximately 23000 m<sup>2</sup> of the building, the rest is for auditoriums, teaching rooms for faculty use, cantinas, an exhibition room and working rooms for researchers who can apply for a room for a period of time. The largest of the four branch libraries, the Library of Arts and Social sciences, and the Library Director and his staff, is located in the new building.

The Library of Arts and Social sciences was established in 1999, and is based on four former faculty libraries. It has now a permanent staff of approximately 90 persons, and collections of about 2,5 million volumes. The library serves four faculties and the University Museum of Cultural Heritage, and is open for public use.

## USER PARTICIPATION AND INFLUENCE ON THE BUILDING PROJECT

The building project was a successful project when it comes to keeping the budgets and time schedule. It was also a success from the library's point of view when it comes to participation in the process and influence on the solutions. In Norway, the program and the costs of all new university building projects have to be approved by the Ministry of Education and Research. The Directorate of Public Construction and Property - the state building authority - is responsible for the building process, the economy and the appointments with the architects and consultants. A large institution such as the University of Oslo, who is responsible for the use and maintenance of its buildings, was given an important and central part in the planning process.

The university director established a project group and a steering committee with participants from different departments of the university shortly after the winning project was awarded. This secured a competent staff to meet the challenges and describe the user demands during the process. The library director established also a local project organization. At times, almost half of the library staff that now work in the new building was engaged in different projects and planning activities. For the library, the building project was only one of the activities. Over a period of 4 years we established a new organization and restructured and moved 60 kilometres of books.

It is a challenge to plan a building that will last for several decades. You have to stick to realities and leave the crystal ball behind otherwise somebody else will make the decisions while we discuss the future. We experienced some of these endless discussions, but they were never allowed to cause unwanted delays.

To secure a common basis of understanding between the university and the different professionals in the building project, especially the architects, we developed a simple area classification and a diagram that shows the necessary connection between different functions in the building. This was a very challenging and important stage, and in my opinion we succeeded.

The functions were divided in three main groups corresponding to zones in the building:

## **A. Public area outside library check-point**

A1 Lecture rooms and auditoriums

A2 Cantina, cantina kitchen, conference room

A3 Service area; reception, hall, toilets, cloakroom and carrels

A4 Exhibition room

## **B. Areas in the library with public access**

B1 Communication area; circulation and information

B2 Collections with open access and reader seats

B3 Institute collections with restricted access

## **C. Areas in the library without, or with controlled public access**

C1 Administration

C2 Staff area

C3 Closed stacks

C4 Technical functions, bindery, utility entrance, post-handling room, room for data-servers, e.o.

The architect solution is close to our description of the connection between the zones.

## **THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE BUILDING – PLANNING PRINCIPLES**

First of all the university did not want the building to be a technological experiment, but to fit into existing technologies and solutions for data network and heating that was used in other buildings on campus.

At the library, we were influenced by ‘The 10 commandments’ by the English architect Harry Faulkner Brown, as many other library planners were at that time. We wanted maximum flexibility in the library with few, simple planning principles to secure that future changes in services and organization should not be prevented by fixed building constructions and solutions:

- a building construction that does not fix the main functions of the library >>> large open areas
- easy access to the different functions for the users >>> simple floor plans in the public areas
- easy access to contact points for the electricity and data network >>> almost 1300 contact points in the floors
- small amount, if any of fixed furniture >>> none of the rooms or counters are part of the building construction
- general and adaptable arrangement of the staff areas that would support future changes in the organisation and working methods >>> very few rooms are dedicated to special functions, and we have common working areas in the corridors all over the staff area
- effective internal transport of books and people >>> 8 lifts; 5 internal and 3 for public use
- a possibility of future extension of the library within the building >>> the floors all over the building can carry the weight of books
- The library opened in September 1999. We have experienced that the building is an inspiring and good place to work for the librarians as well as the users. It has also proved to be adaptable to reorganizations of some of the collections and to extensions in public access to former closed stacks.
- The total amount of daily visitors in the building is hard to estimate. 4000 is not far from the truth, and we can probably double the daily use of the whole building.

## **WHAT WENT WRONG?**

In fact nothing very important went wrong – but there is no story about a library building without some confessions. We experienced a severe water leakage before we even had moved into the building. There were also some condensation and heating problems that lasted for about a year, and leakage from the roof. Flat roofs in Norway usually cause problems during autumn and winter season with heavy rain and snow melting. In September last year some of the ceiling panels fell down and we had to limit the access to the library for some weeks during the repair. None of these accidents had anything to do with the user contribution to the plans, and fortunately nobody got hurt.

When it comes to our own planning we did some mistakes or miscalculations, but none of them are connected to the building itself: there were some misunderstandings about the depth of the shelves. They are deeper than necessary, and the passage between them is a little too narrow. There are only 85 cm between the shelves (cc 150 cm), but as far as I know, nobody complains.

Immediately after the opening we experienced that students do not behave as we expected. They simply refused to use the cloakrooms. This started a fight that the library decided to end after a while. The problems we expected with bags, jackets and wet umbrellas all over the place seem to have vanished, and many of the users prefer to use the cloakrooms after all.

There were rather severe discussions with some researchers about security of books and theft. They did not trust the alarm system in the beginning. Some smaller changes in the entrance area seems however to have solved the problems.

We established one help-desk on each floor in the public area. They are difficult to staff in times of staff reductions, but up to now reorganization has been avoided.

As I said earlier; students never behave the way we are planning for. From the beginning, the library was planned as a research library, with collections and services for academic staff and graduate students. The collections of prescribed books and services for undergraduate students were offered in special student libraries. But - the building is attractive and new, with excellent reader facilities - and it soon became a general student library. After some expression of disapproval, the library and the staff have adjusted to the fact that the undergraduate students have come to stay.

As I will tell you later the university now successfully refurbish the student libraries and some of the large, traditional reading rooms in the faculty buildings, to provide the students with suitable working places adapted to new ways of teaching and studying.

I will now take you through some of the changes in library services that we knew would come, and then the new challenges and expectations. I am happy to say that most of it can be faced without rebuilding. The building supports a wide range of changes that have already started.

## **CHALLENGES – KNOWN DEVELOPMENTS**

### **1. The change from closed stacks to open stacks**

We planned for 500,000 volumes in open stacks and 1,5 million volumes in closed stacks. The opening of some of the closed stacks for public use in 2000 was the first test of the building support of changes. In fact no extensive building changes were necessary. Infrastructure and staircase access for the users to the opened rooms could be used unchanged, and only small changes in the automatic door security installations were necessary.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that rooms for closed stacks are not as friendly and nice to stay in for the users as rooms that are planned for public access, and some users only reluctantly used the facilities. Security precautions have been discussed - among them a possibility to give a warning before closing time, and surveillance cameras, but up to now nothing has been carried out. Telephones were put up from the beginning.

### **2. The change from librarian-supported service to self-service**

We planned for self-service lending of books in open stacks and stacks that we would open within short time. Approximately 600,000 volumes were alarmed by the time we moved, and the self-service lending machines installed. After a short period with assistance from the librarians, the regular users manage on their own. But since the building is large and they easily get lost between the shelves, we are now testing a system that will extend the catalogue system with an electronic map service to lead the user directly from the signature of the book to a floor and shelf map.

Planning for a self service book return system was a high priority activity in 2003, and is now in function. A part of the lending counter has been rebuilt. This was taken into account when we planned the working area behind the counter, and has caused no problems.

### **3. The extension of the physical collections with electronic journals, textbooks and electronic reference databases**

The changes from physical to electronic collections will probably lead to increased need of working places with electronic equipment for the users. Building changes will not be necessary - all reader seats are prepared for data cabling, and can easily be connected to the electronic network. In addition the university prepares for a wireless network. I assume that the need of area for book storage will be reduced, and give more space for reader seats and teaching facilities in the future.

## **NEW CHALLENGES – AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT**

The central location of the building exposes the library in a quite different way than before. Not only because of the new building, but the identity of the university library as an organization was visualized on the main campus for the first time in 87 years. We expected to get a different and broader attention from the university administration and academic staff after moving into the new building. Although, we hardly expected an interest, attention, and at times control of minor details that we experienced the first years. We know now that this interest partly is caused by a new awareness of the library as a strategic instrument for the university, and we indeed welcome that.

New challenges for the university caused by changes in the budgeting system and other major educational reforms have raised demands to the quality of the studies. Changes in the academic grade structure and new teaching and learning methods are results of that. The universities in Norway are more exposed to competition than before, and the library will therefore constantly be challenged to provide services that will increase the competitiveness and attract more students to the University of Oslo. In the future the library will face new challenges and we will have to change direction.

### **1. From a student library to a learning centre**

The university has started to refurbish the old, large reading rooms and student libraries as I said earlier. Two projects are finished, and one will be finished this autumn. The idea of 'learning resources centers' is not new, and many libraries have developed such centers already. At the University of Oslo we have managed to attract the necessary partners to secure that the students will get library services, information technology and help-desk functions in the same place without reorganizing the supporting units. Access to electronic lectures and teaching materials are now provided through the student system. Combining adequate support from the teachers, the learning centers already create an inspiring digital learning environment for the student. After a period of some years when the students seemed to prefer working in the cafeterias they are now back in the refurbished reading rooms. In the future I foresee and expect a pressure on the working areas also in the Georg Sverdrup Building, and then our flexible solutions will be tested.

### **2. From a service library to a teaching library**

To plan for self-service in the library has not only been necessary as a result of lack of staff to meet increased user demands, but it is also the result of implementation of new teaching methods at the university. The university administration is aware of the responsibilities the university has to secure the students knowledge of, and skill to use electronic library and information services as a part of their studies. The library is expected be responsible for this education, and that is really a challenge. It will no longer be enough to offer courses to the interested student as we now do, but we must take responsibility for their skill.

This will lead to increased need for suitable teaching rooms, and new roles for the library staff. Our libraries purchase more and more computers for teaching purposes, and we offer a special designed education program for our staff to increase teaching skills and self-reliance in teaching situations. In addition to a specially designed teaching room in the Georg Sverdrup Building, we plan for adequate teaching facilities in the learning centres

In the future the library will also be responsible for handling electronic archiving and publishing of the electronic documents produced by the academic staff; including lectures and other documents the library is not used to handle - this however is another story.

## **WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT**

Georg Sverdrup Building. <http://www.admin.uio.no/ta/plan/bygningene/bl27.html>

University of Oslo library. <http://www.ub.uio.no/>