The Aesthetics of Libraries and Reading Rooms

Marek H. Dominiczak*

Libraries are a permanent feature in the cultural history of the world. The earliest, being collections of clay tablets, date back to 2600 BC (1). Library buildings were features in early town planning, in towns such as the Hellenistic Pergamum in Anatolia (today’s Turkey) and Alexandria in Egypt (third to first centuries BC), both collections being widely famous in the ancient world. It is said that there were 28 libraries in Rome in the fourth century (1). After the fall of the Roman Empire, monasteries became the most significant book repositories. The books were collected and copied there from the seventh century onwards, but spectacular Baroque libraries were built in Benedictine monasteries as late as the 18th century. In parallel, from around the 11th century, libraries appeared in the new institutions: the universities. They became central to universities, and today often are an integral part of the image of a particular university, such as the Trinity College Library in Dublin, where the Book of Kells is displayed, the Bodleian Library at Oxford, or the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard. Libraries also serve wider cultural and political functions, ascertaining national emphasis on knowledge and culture; there is the Library of Congress in Washington, the British Library in London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, to name only a few.

Although the aesthetics of a library cannot be separated from its function, one can look at their reading rooms much like one would look at an art installation, (2, 3). On the one hand, many books in a library can be works of art in their own right. On the other, they exist in the context of the architectural form of the building that houses the collection. These two aspects form the composite aesthetic that complements—and often augments—the scholarly value of a library.

Fig. 1 shows the library in the Benedictine Abbey of St. Gall, in St. Gallen, Switzerland. The Abbey was founded in the eighth century by Saint Othmar and was a seat of Abbot Princes, forming a minute principality that belonged to the Holy Roman Empire from the 15th century to the beginning of the 19th century. Subsequently it became an episcopal see. The abbey library houses one of the most significant medieval collections in the world. It holds 2100 manuscripts and altogether contains around 160 000 volumes. It has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1983 (4). Many of the manuscripts have been digitalized (5).

The building in its present form was completed in the 1760s in a Rococo style, also known as Late Baroque (6). Like Baroque, Rococo integrated architecture, sculpture, and painting (7). The architect of the St. Gall library was Peter Thumb (1681–1767), who belonged to the so-called Vorarlberg group working in Southern Germany (6, 8). The wall piers visible on each side are characteristic for the group’s style. A curved gallery runs along the walls. The ornamental plasterwork is by Johann Georg Gigl (1710–65) and the woodwork by Brother Gabriel Loser. The illusionistic ceiling paintings, which address faith and Christian scholarship, were created by Joseph Wannemacher (1722–1780) (9).

Note how many rich, variable textures constitute this interior: paintings and plasterwork, the wood of the shelves and galleries, and of course the rows of books. The books add verticality to the image, and this contrasts with the curves of the gallery. It was argued that in a museum exhibition the space forms a context that modifies the meaning of the display (10). Here, the architectural context creates a cocoon, an isolated microcosm that enhances the atmosphere of learning.

Umberto Eco, in his essay on libraries (which, incidentally, predates the explosion of digital technologies), argued that they should not be just functional spaces for reading and book storage but need to become inviting places for readers to spend time in (1). There are spectacular contemporary developments in library design, such as the Seattle Public Library completed in 2004 by Rem Koolhaas (OMA partnership) and LMN Architects (11). However, aesthetics is not universally considered; there are also many libraries that have all the charm of an interior of a ship’s container.

The digital culture has modified the function of libraries. The need to reconfigure them to accommodate new technologies creates an opportunity to improve library aesthetics and create socially inviting spaces. Libraries and reading rooms have an important cultural and academic function, irrespective of the future of the conventional book.
Author Contributions: All authors confirmed they have contributed to the intellectual content of this paper and have met the following 3 requirements: (a) significant contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (b) drafting or revising the article for intellectual content; and (c) final approval of the published article.

Authors’ Disclosures or Potential Conflicts of Interest: No authors declared any potential conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Jacky Gardiner for her excellent secretarial assistance.

References


DOI: 10.1373/clinchem.2013.218321