

Individual Reflection

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During the excursion to Stockholm, we had a chance to visit two buildings we have been studying for the past few weeks – the Bredenberg Department Store and the Stockholm City Library – in their current situation. It was intriguing to see how the layer of the fourth dimension – time – has shaped the architecture. The department store that once presented itself in the Nordic nights now loses its iconic neon lights and signboards and closes its door to the public. The Stockholm City Library, on the other hand, has undergone a more evident change in terms of its use.

The role of "library" typology has changed throughout time. Tracing to the origin, libraries were once materialised representations of human knowledge of the world. Then, they evolved into urban infrastructures fostering the exchange of ideas. Back in the day, "visiting the library" used to be a knowledge-acquisition ritual. However, nowadays, there are many other ways of retrieving information, and access to libraries is no longer a privilege.

Architecturally, the Stockholm City Library is similar to the Beinecke Rare Book Library in its celebration of book collections by making the bookshelves a central feature of the space. Asplund distinguished the library from its surroundings through the composition of basic geometric forms as a metaphor for the mind (Wrede, 1983). In our earlier research, we used physical models to recreate the scenes in the City Library. By comparing these images – the archive photos, the recreated scenes, and the current settings – it is clear that although the architectural shell remained the same, the interior and its occupants are now different. Back then, the library was filled with middle-class people, and the reading was quite formal. However, it currently serves a mixture of locals, migrants, and tourists from different backgrounds. The activities are more casual: seniors reading newspapers, students using laptops, friends meeting in the café, children playing, etc. The City Library, despite its name, now feels more like a community library for its neighbourhood.



(Top to bottom)

Fig. 1: Stockholm Library, Children's reading room, archive photo

Fig. 2: Children's reading room, 1:25 physical model recreation

Fig.3: Children's reading room, current condition in use

Ambiguity, therefore, arises. The monumental architectural language of the City Library no longer corresponds to the variety of users and activities it now accommodates. This highlights two aspects to consider: people and time. How do various groups of users interact with the library at the same time? Will they have different encounters with this library over a more extended period? Furthermore, how can a contemporary library adapt to this ever-changing nature of society and culture? And how will the architectural interventions of the Stockholm City Library respond to all these? These questions might be the starting points of the following design/research stage.

Asplund, at his time, could not foresee today's drastic changes in socioeconomic and cultural context. Similarly, we cannot predict how the role of a library will evolve in the future. Therefore, we must be aware that our current architectural proposal may not be the ultimate solution. This requires the architectural intervention to leave a certain level of flexibility and to position itself in the passage of time. Eventually, it will also become a part of history.

Hence, it is interesting to explore the contrast between permanent and temporary elements within the design, allowing the City Library to alter its functions and materials over time. For example, traditional features (book collections, reading tables) and contemporary additions (café, gathering space, space for relaxation) may have different spatial atmospheres due to different scales, materials, heavy/lightweight constructions, and furnishings. The juxtaposition between old/new library spaces, traditional/contemporary ways of reading, permanent/temporary structures...will create tension within the architectural intervention and open up new design possibilities.

Bibliography

Wrede, S. (1983), *The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Image sources

Fig.1: <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/594289/viewContent/3517548/View>

Fig.2: by Haoyu Wang

Fig.3: by the author