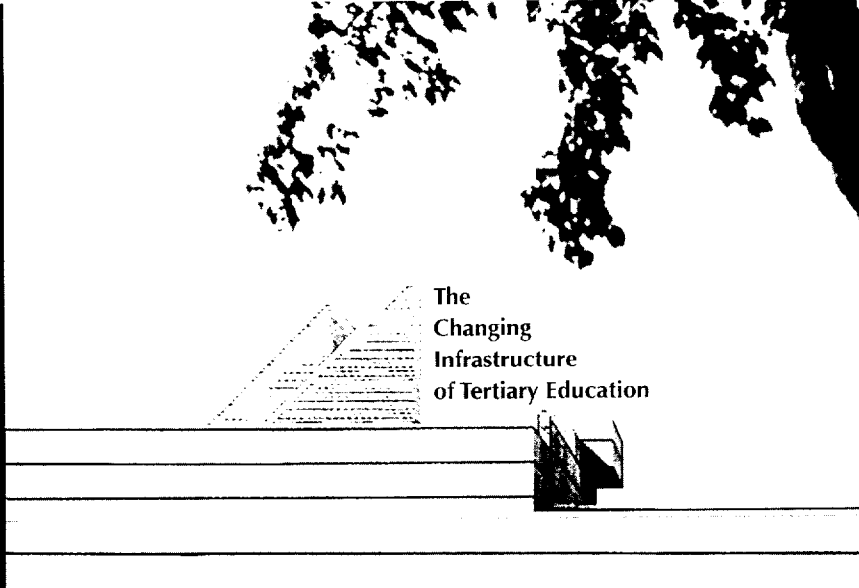


# PEB *EXCHANGE*

THE JOURNAL OF THE OECD PROGRAMME ON EDUCATIONAL BUILDING

- 6 New York's School for the Physical City: Architectural Design Concerns
- 8 The Library of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*, Belgium
- 11 The Changing Infrastructure of Tertiary Education – FEATURE
- 22 Debate: Wired Versus Wireless
- 25 Book Review



ISSUE 40 JUNE 2000



# BELGIUM, THE LIBRARY OF THE ULB: AFTER FIVE YEARS IN USE

## Project and architecture

The project to build a new library at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) arose because library resources and services had become scattered across the campus, due to a lack of space in the original library building. The facilities and services needed to be adapted to the evolution of library management and to the needs of a growing number of users. Building a new library was also motivated by the university's educational objective to increase student autonomy and to stimulate critical thinking and individual research. The project took shape in the early nineties, thanks to a grant from the public authorities.

Centralising the humanities resources and integrating the scattered libraries into a single building was considered the most effective solution in terms of human and material investments. According to norms provided by the Atkinson Report of the University Grant Committee, the number of seats required was estimated at 1 780 (*i.e.* 1:7 students); and with a surface area per student of 1.65 m<sup>2</sup>, the total library surface required was 13 000 m<sup>2</sup>. It was determined that a major extension to the existing building would provide a 26% saving in capital over the cost of building a new library from scratch. However the ground surface available for an extension was greatly limited.

An extension was designed in the shape of an isosceles triangle; a symbol of critical thinking and elevation, it was particularly adapted for a library, and it perfectly fit the site. The resulting volume is open, welcoming

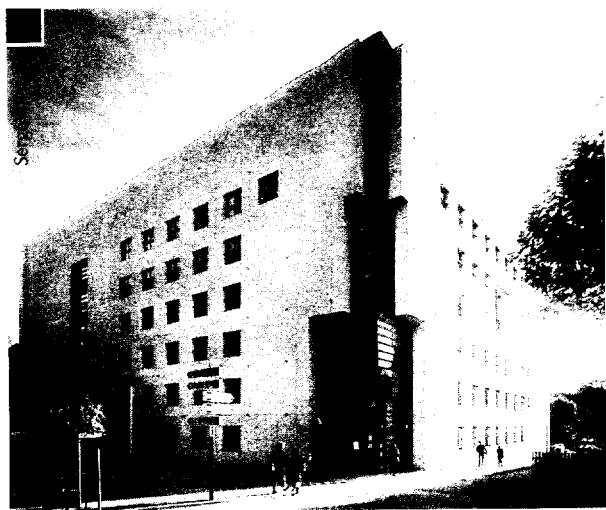
and light. Its original form contributes to the curiosity that a library should arouse.

The new nine-floor library building was inaugurated in September 1994. The entrance leads directly to a floor underground (Level 2), the welcome area. By building underground, it was possible to extend the surface area in order to include the many services needed for users: a welcome desk, a spacious reading room with a double-storey ceiling and high windows letting in light, a circulation desk, a multimedia area, a 100-seat auditorium equipped with up-to-date projection equipment, an inter-library loan service, etc. A passage leads to the old building which houses a periodicals collection and specialised "seminar rooms", as well as the general library management centre (administration, purchase department, logistics and computer centre). Further underground, Level 1 of the new building houses the book reserve devoted to document conservation and equipped with an automatic document transport system, for shipping books throughout the reserve and to any floor. The upper levels of the library, which provide direct access to bookshelves, are divided thematically: Level 3 is devoted to reference books and bibliographical CD-ROMs, whereas Levels 4 to 9 are each devoted to different areas of the humanities.

On each triangular level, the user finds the same functional areas in the same place. An information desk and a librarians' office are located near the elevators and a photocopier is in the acute angle. The bookshelves are in the reading room in the centre of each floor. Seminar rooms and working rooms are located along each side of the right angle of the building. Seminar rooms are small classrooms containing reference books in a specialised subject, where research workshops can take place. Working rooms have individual workstations for researchers; these rooms have proven functional and flexible in adapting to new needs. On Level 5, for instance, the working room has been turned into the Electronic Economics Library, a specific research area for final year students and researchers in economics. The room is equipped with eight PCs providing access to selected electronic information resources; it is managed by a university graduate, in collaboration with the Faculty of Economics. On Level 6, the working room has been devoted in part to computer-assisted language learning; this area is accessible only to language students and is managed by an assistant from the language department.

## Infrastructure and resources

In the new library, 1 700 seats and 102 workstations are available to users. Workstations provide access to



the library Web site which has practical information about the library, a description of the resources available, a thematic search tool and links to the library catalogue, to 18 networked CD-ROMs, to electronic journals and to selected resources available on the Internet (e.g. library catalogues in Belgium and other countries).

The UNICORN library management system, installed in 1997, allowed the reorganisation of cataloguing and simplified the purchasing procedure. The system also allows students to renew book loans themselves.

More than 400 000 volumes of the humanities library are listed in the catalogue, 45% of which are available on the shelves, in addition to the current-year issues of 2 500 journals. However, the catalogue includes only 80% of the whole library collection. The remaining 20%, stored in the reserve, still needs to be included, but this task requires more human and financial resources than the operating budget allocated to the library allows.

## Usage

Each level of the library, approximately 1 300 m<sup>2</sup>, is managed by two or three librarians. In addition to collection management, they ensure that equipment (photocopiers, workstations, elevators, etc.) remains in working order, calling upon the technical service when necessary. They also ensure, as far as possible, that security regulations and library rules are respected. Despite the librarians' repeated efforts, mobile phones have become a real nuisance and it is sometimes difficult to maintain an acceptably low noise level. The problem of noise is increased by the traffic of people attending courses given in the library.

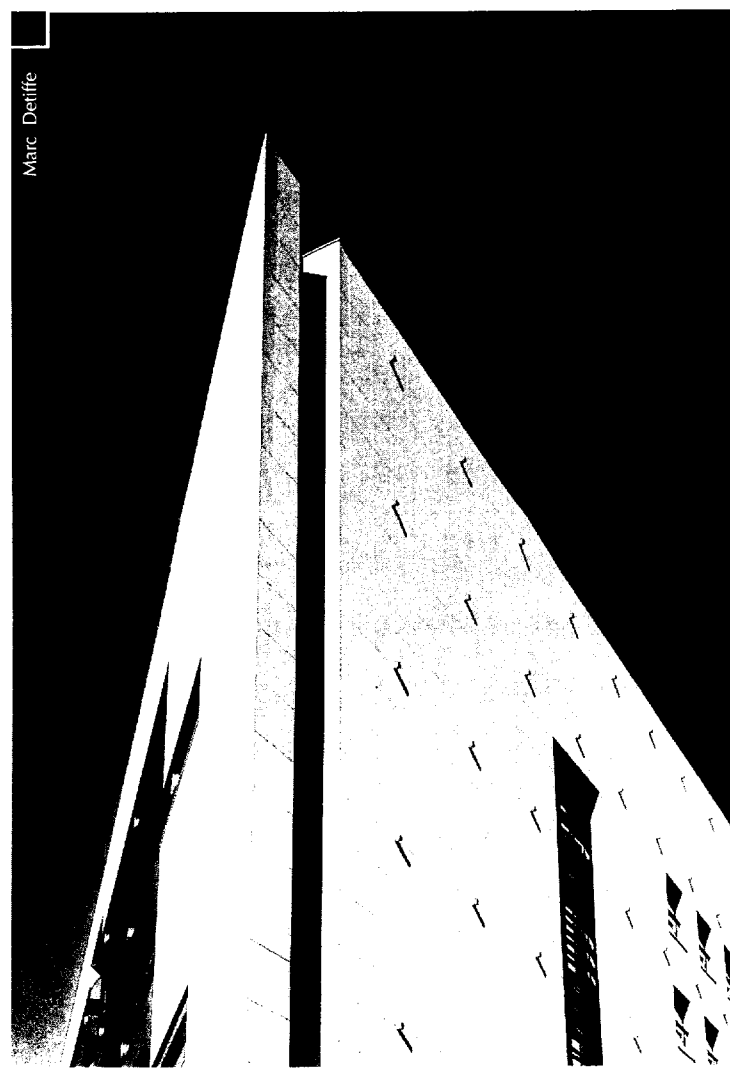
Due to the continuing growth and diversity of electronic resources, user training has become an important mission of the library. Training consists of a visit of the library, an introduction to the collection organisation and a demonstration of the on-line catalogue and other electronic information resources. Originally the training sessions were general and intended for students of any subject. They have now been adapted to specific categories of users. Sessions are organised in collaboration with teachers from the different faculties, and each focuses on well-targeted resources.

The new library is a place where all ULB students come to work and study, not only students of the humanities. The opening hours vary according to needs: when class is in session, the library is open until 8 p.m.; during the period prior to exams, the opening hours are extended until 10 p.m.; a restricted schedule is applied during university holidays.

An automatic access barrier counts the number of entries. During the year 1998/99, there was an average of 4 000 entries per day. However this number can exceed 7 000 entries a day during the busiest months: December, March, April and May. These months correspond to the two periods of the year when students are preparing for exams (which take place in January and in June). These figures emphasise an important function of the library as a place for study. However it is in October and November, and from February to April, that the number of books borrowed monthly is at its highest. The average number of loans during these months may reach a 61% increase: in 1998/99, more than 14 000 books were checked out during the busiest month! It can reasonably be inferred that students are intensively using the library documentation during these months to prepare reports, final year theses or dissertations, before they start preparing for exams.

## Difficulties encountered

During periods of intensive use, it is difficult to keep the library clean and quiet. The situation worsens during the late opening hours when library staff is reduced. Additional support from the university security department is required to handle discipline problems.



The multiplicity of areas open to the public on each level further contributes to security problems, as the library staff cannot be present in all the areas. This surface fragmentation and the free access to books can be directly linked to the high number of missing books, despite the anti-theft detector installed at the exit door. It is now envisaged to install an access control device that would restrict library access to registered members. This is intended as a deterrent measure, since there is no proof that books are stolen by external people.

Finally, computer access to information resources had to be reorganised. Providing access to the Internet on all the workstations limited access to the library catalogue, as users tended to monopolise the workstations to surf the Internet or use their e-mail. Therefore, Internet access has been removed from half of the workstations. Another measure was taken to restrict Internet access to university students and members only, by requiring them to enter a password.

## Conclusions

The intensive use of the new ULB library exemplifies the diversity of the library building functions. The library cannot be restricted to simply providing access to information; its functions include providing adequate and sufficient study areas for students as well as individual research and work areas for researchers and professors.

The library is also a place for teaching. First architecturally, it includes seminar rooms which contain reference books in specialised subjects and where research workshops can take place. This functional role of the library meets the university's educational objectives by favouring personal research and critical thinking, rather than *ex cathedra* teaching methods.

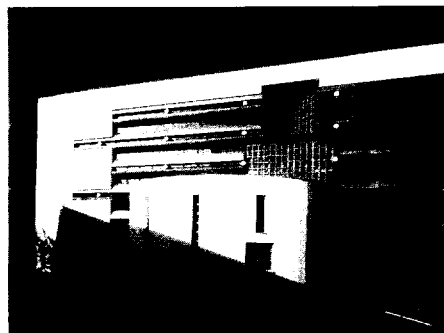
Secondly, by means of its staff, the library participates in teaching activities by providing training in the use of library resources and tools. Not only must the library provide access to paper and electronic resources, but it must also provide its users with the means to use them. As electronic resources increase, it is more crucial than ever for the library to fulfil its role as intermediary by facilitating user access to resources, and therefore developing training activities.

In addition to these fundamental functions, the library contributes to the organisation of scientific and cultural events. Its well-equipped projection room is highly solicited for conferences and demonstrations while an exhibition area is permanently devoted to various book-related themes. As the library also hosts a desk of the multimedia library of the Belgian French-speaking community, it has become a dynamic, cultural place where people like to gather.

Serge Brison



Serge Brison



Five years after its opening, the library's success is undeniable and this success contributes to an additional, yet unexpected, function of the library as a model both in terms of its architecture and its structural organisation.

## References

- Bisbrouck, Marie-Françoise and Daniel Renoult (1993), *Construire une bibliothèque universitaire. De la conception à la réalisation*, Editions du Cercle de la librairie, (Collection Bibliothèques), Paris.
- Bisbrouck, Marie-Françoise and Elmar Mittler, ed. (1997), *The Post-Modern Library*, ed. Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria.
- Devroey, Jean-Pierre and Christian Brouwer (1995), *Bibliothèques, Les bibliothèques de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles depuis sa création et la Nouvelle Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines*, Bibliothèques de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels.
- Edwards, H.M. (1990), *University Library Building Planning*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey – London.
- Metcalf, Keyes D. (1986), *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings*, 2nd ed. / by Philip D. Leighton and David C. Weber, American Library Association, Chicago.

Article contributed by:

Christian Brouwer and Françoise Vandooren  
Libraries of the Université Libre de Bruxelles

50 avenue F. Roosevelt - CP180

B - 1050 Brussels

E-mail: [cbrouwer@ulb.ac.be](mailto:cbrouwer@ulb.ac.be), [idooren@ulb.ac.be](mailto:idooren@ulb.ac.be)

<http://www.bib.ulb.ac.be/>