

PUBLIC LIBRARIES NATIONAL NETWORK

The emancipation of a foundation project

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Exactly 20 years ago I was asked to build a program for the promotion of public reading in Portugal, which would be supported by a partnership between central and local administration, aiming to create and develop public libraries with all the modern requirements, then pioneering, in our subject.

The technical and financial support, conceived as program-contracts – which only after, were generalised for other purposes – was taken as a model for several more recent networks of cultural equipments, as it was considered a success case at a national and international level.

Having been asked to tell you a bit of this story, I can't however say it were all successes and that, if the majority of the strategic options were shown to be right, some happened that, being presented in valid time, were not considered to be a priority in political terms – giving privilege to quantity, which means, a faster coverage of all territory – and that to other propositions was not given implementation, not only because shortage of resources, but also given the overall difficulties, which resulted in lost opportunities.

It is clear today, thinking in all this experience, that it's easier to identify what would have been better to do, particularly if we ignore, with bigger or smaller good will, the temporal circumstances or the general context itself.

Illustrating this fact, it is certain that, on one hand, we lack cooperation habits to optimise the investments made by each one of the partners, on the other, the costs of the technologies, widely spread in the last years, are not yet today accessible to many of them, being financially, being in it's proper use since there is lack of human resources or they are insufficiently skilled.

The issue of agent qualification had been, however, one concern pointed in the initial report¹ – delivered in July 1986 and immediately approved by the Culture State Secretary – from the responsibility of the workgroup I coordinated and composed also by Maria Teresa Calçada, Joaquim Relvas Portilheiro and the architect Pedro Vieira de Almeida.

Being since the beginning a infrastructure creation plan, the architects contribution constantly assumed a big importance, always aiming for a better quality of the projects and an enhanced transformation of the different spaces to the functionalities required by the librarians, as here we intend to demonstrate.

This was how the primitive Portuguese Book Institute, restructured to host the new Program for Municipal Libraries Creation, under direction of the Services Direction created for the cause, started to attach to each one of these municipal projects a team composed by a librarian and an architect who follow and analyse the respective planning and construction, in their different aspects, until the public opening.

Belonging the work and the responsibility to the municipalities, it's the IPLB (Portuguese Book and Library Institute) duty to make sure the programmatic guidelines are respected, to which the appliance itself should follow to become selected. To do this it is being important, along the time, the collaboration of engineers from different specialities.

¹ MOURA, Maria José (Coord.) – Public reading: municipal libraries network: report. Lisbon: Culture State Secretary, 1986

One should underline the important support that is also given by the Regional Development and Coordination Commissions, associated to the project since the beginning to guarantee in the field its correct construction.

It has been, this way, possible, most of the times, to overcome different restraints, specially when it is the case of patrimonial valuable buildings which need to be improved and adapted for the outcome. In this situation, one should count not only with high and sometimes unpredictable costs, that rise above the limits posted on the program-contracts, and for law to be respected, more difficulties are created for both parties and even for the relationship between them, but also with higher maintenance and operational expenses, demanding much more personnel for an effective functioning, due to its excessive allotment.

Concerned with a proximity policy and attempting to bring the book and information closer to the populations, already today many Municipalities are establishing their own municipal libraries networks, essentially through others short ones, called Polo, but also Itinerant Libraries, specially since the Gulbenkian Foundation extinguished this service, that for decades highly benefited the Portuguese people, the vast majority of whom only through this way had access to books.

The access to information is a constitutional right and public libraries should had been not only part of a national information policy, as now offer a crucial contribution to what is called the knowledge society.

With this purpose, the more recent initiative from the institute is the launch of the Public Libraries Knowledge Network Project – financed by POSI (Information Society Operational Plan) which intends to bring municipal libraries on-line, through broad band connection, sharing resources and functionalities and submitting contents.

It's also unquestionable today the important educational role of public libraries and their support to life-long learning, keeping however the traditional information and leisure functions.

Portugal hasn't yet a libraries law, but has been trying to follow the guidelines of the Unesco Manifesto and to be open to the experiences described and defended in the IFLA guidelines in this field.

One of the public segments that always has been privileged through the program is children, realising, nevertheless, that it is necessary to go further in the teenagers motivation.

Also in consequence of this there is justification for an ever stronger articulation between public libraries and school libraries, as the launching of the network of these last ones - ambitioned for decades, as mentioned in our 1986 report – sustained itself pragmatically, particularly in the beginning and with good results, in municipalities that already had municipal libraries fit to cooperate and support this new effort from schools and the Education Department.

It's for long unequivocal the family environment importance in the development of reading and writing habits and this would somehow explain the indexes we detect between us. Hence the even more important role taken by the school and the bigger effort demanded to teachers and librarians, so that our society's structural needs could be overcome.

Beyond the campaigns that aim to bring the attention of the public opinion and most of all the mainly interested, a permanent, dedicated and imaginative work is necessary in schools and public libraries, so that, in a continuous and articulated effort we can lower not illiteracy rate, but also illiteracy in its different forms, which can compromise the future of the next generations, being this a problem that can't be solved in the short-term.

It may look paradoxical and not everyone will understand it in the same way, but we are some of those who believe that the more information is available, for instance, on the internet, the more difficult it is to transform it in knowledge and therefore more important it is the role of public libraries. It is certain that they were assigned with new functions, while others suffered modifications, dictated by users needs. This evolution is going to be emphasized, influenced not only by technologies but also by the continuous social, economical and cultural changes. Truth is that the library today it's also a meeting place, a place of freedom, not under the economical and consumers pressures of other places to where the populations are attracted without results of personal or group development.

I believe that is a symptom of ignorance to defend its announced death, once that, in all the developed countries, large or medium sized cultural equipments have been installed, much different today than just 20 years ago...

Therefore as well – and because we don't know exactly how public libraries will be in the future – it is crucial today to build spaces with enough flexibility, able to evolve and even grow. Spaces that allow to make profitable the significant investments they demand.

This should be a basic concern of a careful program that considers not only the country's circumstances, but also the goals this kind of collective equipments should achieve.

We will later address this program, exemplifying it with the presentation – from many others possible – of one case-study, the Almodôvar Municipal Library.

The Public Libraries National Network (RBNP) shows already a remarkable development and accomplishment:

-262 municipalities supported through three typologies of libraries: BM1 in municipalities up to 20000 inhabitants, BM2 between 20000 and 50000 and BM3 with more than 50000 inhabitants, corresponding to around 85% of the country's total municipalities;

-149 municipal public libraries built and working, for a total of 308 municipalities;

-113 libraries in project, building, or installation;

-84 libraries placed in rebuilt historical buildings, contributing this way to an improvement of the patrimony with architectural value;

-65 libraries placed in buildings built from origin, which constitute new references in the country's public equipments architectonical landscape;

-Around 120 municipal libraries have the School Libraries Support Service (SABE) working, establishing therefore a fertile inter-relation with schools, broadening the space and services of school libraries through cooperation with public libraries and establishing scale economies through the technical support and resources offered by these last;

In more recent years the development of the Public Libraries National Network (RNPB) program allowed, further than the support to the mainland municipalities, its extension

to the Autonomous Regions of Azores and Madeira, where 11 libraries are now in project elaboration or starting construction phase.

The spaces program² and the functional specifications in which the different libraries projects were based on evolved with time, corresponding to the innovations brought by information and communication technologies, leading to an important rise in the access to the available information.

The different types of spaces that characterize the programme follow a philosophy of public opening in the public spaces: lobby, multi-use room, adult section, children section with the tales room. All this respecting principles of proper articulation and functionality in the private spaces, correspondent to the internal services: work offices, meeting room, reception desk, document treatment and maintenance room and respective deposits;

The practical application of this plan has been done by means of program-contracts established with the municipalities. This has resulted in many architectural and collective equipments integration in urban universe experiences, contributing to a renewal and revitalisation of the local cultural life, often stagnated. The case we present illustrates perfectly these important aspects of library implantation and integration in the environment.

Almodôvar – A case study that illustrates the inter relation between library and the community

The Almodôvar municipality is located in Baixo Alentejo, Beja district, between Caldeirão mountain range and the plains of Alentejo, around 200km far from Lisbon. Cereal crops and cattle breeding are its main economical activities.

The Almodôvar community, with 700 souls, it's concentrated in the town with 3750 inhabitants and in small villages, such as Rosário and Fernandes, with approximately 650 inhabitants each.

The place chose to build the library was a piece of land by the town's historical centre, being part of a block located in an expansion core, which also includes other structuring equipments: the bus station and the hospital.

The project elaboration process began in 1998, having the construction lasted 2 years. The opening of the library happened on April 5th 2004. The building has two floors and the total area is 900 square meters.

-The library was installed in a building built for it. It is a successful situation in how the spaces appropriation logic followed the guideline of making the contents wisely available. In a way that in every place of the library we can always find the proper place to present and find the information and the documents in their different forms;

-Since the beginning the project support to program elaboration from IPLB was guided with this idea always present, in a perfect collaboration between architects and librarians. The aim is to give the library a precise functionality, allied to a clear reading architecture, in a central located building well placed in the urban environment;

-The integration of the Almodôvar library in the community was exemplary. In a municipality with no modern public library before, shortly after the opening, the library

² PORTUGAL, Portuguese book and libraries institute – Municipal libraries support program: 2004

became present in the local life daily routine, full with people from all ages, becoming so a real success case, having today 20% of the population as active readers;

-Most of all, the library brought – and this is a point not much mentioned in its merits – a new public meeting point, further than a place to access knowledge and information: a place for learning but also for gathering, for conversation, for discussing ideas;

-The municipality collective life integration and the different kinds of activities developed by the library also mean supporting other local institutions. Among those, the support given to schools and their libraries through SABE (School libraries support service) shows a pragmatism that has been taking public libraries to support the schools of the communities where they are located. Becoming this way a technical support and a physical extension of schools and their libraries, expanding information sources and the kind of knowledge available, more direct and through a stronger experience between students and the community;

-It's remarkable that in an interior town, an isolated place lacking almost everything, the library became the local cultural centre. The basic knowledge gap that, in a way, isolated the Almodôvar population was defeated. Today there is the possibility for any inhabitant to access an assemblage of knowledge and information democratically available;

-Nowadays, in a society of people always more isolated, the communities that can keep collective living alive are those that better survive and better live. The possibility of people meeting at the library, dedicating themselves to the ancestral activity of simple opinion exchange, talk and argue, on the same time having access to new information and culture, offers these societies a new understanding of the world. This is crucial for people to feel part of an active body, collectively identified and personalised. One community with its own personality.

As mentioned before, the Almodôvar library program was done in project and later in work based on the IPLB's Municipal Libraries Support Programme for Municipal Libraries of type 1. The project structure followed a logic model of space distribution to make it easily understandable by the public and to guarantee services functionality. From the solutions found we can describe some of its more relevant aspects:

-The lobby is an extension of the street, a public space that invites you in; an interior square that distributes the different functions, where library news and activities and local events are available;

-The multi-use room as an extension of the lobby, articulated with sliding panels. A place for discussion, for communication and small shows;

-The bar as a place for meeting and informal reading of newspapers and magazines;

-The adult section as a place to find different forms of expression, of culture and access to information, organized by theme, available for local analysis, domiciliary loan, auto learning and multimedia or internet access, etc;

-The children section as a space that stimulates and motivates youth inside the library, from recreational learning age to the teen years. Here all the demands for knowledge access can be foreseen, using the document archives and electronic research, making different forms of learning possible;

-The tale room, recreational space and small multi-use juvenile room, where stories are told or played, and images or music can be played;

-The internal services compactly organized in work and meeting spaces, functionally connected with the library public areas;

-The School Libraries Support Service – SABE – as a key service that broadened the library field of action in the relation with schools. This allowed a stronger inter-relation between schools and municipal public libraries with reduced means;

-The document maintenance and deposit as a platform of reception, treatment and distribution of documents;

Concluding, what is the future for the Public Libraries National Network and for the libraries themselves? In a way, as we observe, there is a remarkable development of the Network, on the other we are still far from the goal we proposed ourselves 20 years ago. 149 working public libraries already exist, but in some big cities like Lisbon or Porto we are still in an initial phase regarding the access to a real network of neighbourhood libraries. There are libraries in the head town of many municipalities but they lack however municipal networks to bring librarian services to clusters and isolated areas. One library in each municipality head town doesn't solve alone the access to all the population. Due to lack of resources many libraries work under the minimum services. The older libraries – some with more than 10 years – need to be updated and in some cases enlarged. The inter-relation with school libraries should be broadened and the support more developed.

We can say that a minimum service from the Public Libraries National Network corresponds to one library per municipality. However, the desirable development would only be truly reached when every citizen has the support of a library or a librarian service in its proximity.

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