

**Report on a Two Week visit to Academic Libraries in and around  
Berlin  
20<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> August 2007**

**by Alison Wilson**

In August I stayed in Berlin for ten days in order to look at academic libraries that have been built recently or are under development. This was the sequel to a tour of German libraries in 2003, when I visited, among others, new libraries in Goettingen, Erfurt, Jena, Magdeburg and Dresden Universities. My objectives were to discover trends in design and usage and to draw conclusions about good practice in library planning and design. On both occasions I found a surprising mixture of innovation and tradition, much ingenuity in tackling difficult building sites and an encouraging confidence in the importance of library buildings for reinvigorating institutions and communities. I will give a brief summary of some of the libraries I visited.

**Philologische Bibliothek der Freien Universität Berlin**

Architect: Foster and Partners.

Date of opening: April 2005

The new branch library of the Freie Universität, which brings together the books of eleven departments, is known as 'The Brain', because of its oval ground plan, domed outline covered by a fibre-glass 'skin', and central cortex of reader services. The architect, Lord Foster, is famous for his unusual and spectacular designs, and this is no exception. The wide span steel structure covers five open-plan floors and supports a mixture of glass and metal panels. The fabric underneath this obscures any external views but allows light to flood into the whole area, even penetrating to the basement. The floors are the reverse of mezzanines, connected by a central staircase and stopping short of the 'walls'. Continuous desks are placed round the gently curving edges, so that readers look down into a void and across to the pale grey, tent-like surface covering. The books are very compactly arranged towards the back of each floor in simple rows with less than generous space between them. This is a library that makes an impact from the architectural lines of the building, not from a display of its holdings. Colour also has a part to play. Against the white desks and grey carpet a great splash of mustard yellow hits the eye around the glass entrance doors. It is a shock to open the door to the washrooms and find an even more intense yellow-green paint on the passage walls, while on the top floor luxurious bright red armchairs invite people to relax under the dome.

Foster has fulfilled his brief to accommodate 800,000 volumes on open shelves and 650 users in work spaces networked for laptops in an area of just over 6,000 square metres. This alone is impressive use of the limited space available. He has also managed to fit in a print shop in the basement, 3 scanners, and equipment for multimedia and disabled clients in other parts of the library. The core houses toilets on each floor. However, apart from two central counters and a small workroom, all

library operations take place in the University Library, linked by a corridor. This is not entirely convenient. A seminar room and group study room are also outhoused.

Librarians were much involved in the planning of the building and were able to persuade the architects to compromise on some points, for example initial thoughts of a red carpet throughout were rejected as impractical, and architect-designed shelves were felt to be unnecessary. Nevertheless the strict symmetry and proportions meant that the information desks could not be made as wide as the staff would like. A common problem in Foster's libraries is noise, which in this building spreads through to all floors from the entrance and enquiry points. Up above, the automatically controlled louvres open and shut with a grinding sound. At first they failed to respond, so rainwater came in through the roof and splashed all the way down to the basement. The original sliding entrance doors proved so draughty that they had to be changed on health grounds to a revolving door, even though this destroys the symmetry. Cleaning the glass panels and 'skin' may also prove problematic.

What do readers think of this exotic building? Acting Librarian Monika Diecks told me that on the whole they like it very much, and many students from other faculties come there to work, bringing their own books. They complain about noise and the lack of windows, but they love the facilities and the atmosphere. Even the professors, who grudgingly gave up their departmental collections, appreciate the opportunity for interdisciplinary work in a stimulating environment.

## **Universitätsbibliothek der Technischen Universität Berlin und der Universität der Künste im Volkswagen-Haus**

Architect: Prof. Walter Noebel  
Date of opening: December 2004

The Technical University (TU) had to wait a long time for its promised library. The earliest plans were made in the mid-seventies but it had still not been built when the Wall came down in 1989, and by that time they were out of date. Prof. Walter Noebel, a specialist in large factory buildings, was appointed to revise them, but another 13 years passed before the money was forthcoming to start building. This was achieved by cooperation between the TU and the Universität der Künste, which has the top floor of five and shares services, and by an injection of 5 million Euros from the Volkswagen Foundation. Fourteen branch libraries have been amalgamated in this project at a total cost of 55 million Euros.

First impressions of the exterior are of a simple rectangular building in the red brick 'Klinker', typical of many of Berlin's industrial areas. It seemed quite appropriate to find a Trabant parked outside. The very spacious entrance hall is in unrelieved grey concrete with all the service pipes for electricity, water and heating exposed. The five floors of the library are visible round the atrium, but they hardly look inviting. Glass doors lead past the issue desk and five self-service RFID checkouts to the centrally placed stairs, from which one can begin to appreciate the size of the building. Nearly 900 reader places and 800,000 volumes on open access are accommodated, with another 1.6 million items in a closed stack in the basement. The library will have a capacity of 3 million items when the basement is fully fitted out with mobile shelving.

Many people find it remarkable that such a large library has no reading room, but a conscious decision was made in favour of 'zoning': placing seating close to all the resources for a given subject – books, periodicals and access to computers. The Acting Director, Andreas Richter, defends this concept as making less work for the librarians and saving the time of readers, who have not far to go for the material they need. There are information counters on each floor, staffed at certain hours by subject specialists. However, for the most part staff are behind closed doors, as in most older German libraries.

One can see that the design is very functional, if almost uncomfortably bare and plain. The only colour comes from the pale green flooring and desktops. The generous floor area (37,500 sq.m.) allows a spacious layout and there is good natural light from large windows. Flexibility has been a priority, so that in future shelving and seating can easily be interchanged. 300 computers are provided, with another 300 points for laptops. Signing is effective, each floor having a colour code which even applies to the labels on the books, for quick sorting. A book transportation system runs from the basement stack throughout the building, controlled by a computer program pioneered in the Library.

The description 'Learning Factory' is very apt. Concrete and steel are the backdrop, with coils of wiring hanging from the ceiling. Highest priority is given to efficiency and streamlining – and yet the library does have its own stark aesthetic, which is perhaps appropriate both to a technical and a modern arts university. Thanks to the scheme 'Kunst am Bau', 1% of the cost of new buildings must be spent on artworks, consequently two of the lightwells are decorated with inscriptions and paintings have also been introduced.

Although it appears conventional, the building is ecofriendly and has energy-saving systems (tapping heat from underground through a 16 kilometre long pipe) and other complex methods for heating, cooling and controlling the flow of air through the library. The 15 square glass and steel boxes along the façade are actually light wells and air extractors for the basement. At night they light up in different shades with variable brightness.

Opinions are sharply divided about this library. Frau Anke Quast, who took me round, felt that one quickly adapts to the style of the building and its open-plan design, although the acoustics remain a problem.

## **Grimm Zentrum der Humboldt- Universität Berlin**

Architect: Max Dudler

Projected date of opening: 2009

I was most fortunate to spend some time with Herr Dr Milan Bulaty, Director of the Humboldt University Library, looking at plans and computer simulations for the new Central Library, which is currently under construction. This promises to be a monumental building, with an emphasis on functionality but (in contrast to the TU) not on flexibility. Both architect and Director believe that there is still a place for a central reading room, so long as books are readily accessible and a variety of other

types of workplace is offered. They have therefore provided carrels, rooms for groups, areas for consulting digital media and special collections and seating along the edge of the building with views across the city: 1250 reader places in total. The total area of the library will be 20,300 square metres. The reading room itself is a very large rectangle with a glass ceiling, sheltering behind the higher front part of the building so that it does not get direct sunshine. The seats inside are arranged on two sets of terraces, comprising five floors on each side. Readers will face each other across the void – far apart at the top and close at the bottom. The bookshelves are set at rightangles to each floor so that readers can select their material and take it into the reading room, or alternatively, to the seats by the windows. Like the underground reading room in Dresden SLUB, which has influenced the design, the Grimm Zentrum will display a great deal of natural wood, but probably in a darker colour. In Dresden this is offset by the colourful books around the walls, but in Berlin it could look rather sombre unless the floor or the desktops provide a contrast.

The Humboldt University already has a major science library on a new campus at Berlin Adlershof. The Grimm Zentrum will integrate eleven branch libraries in the Humanities and Social Sciences to produce what they claim will be the biggest open access library collection in Germany; some two million volumes. The shelves will be full when it opens, so they will be retaining and expanding a store off site into which little used books will be moved as new stock is acquired.

Alongside its function as a serious research library, the Centre will also cater for the general public, who will find an exhibition area just inside the foyer, a café and a lecture hall. They will be able to see people working in the reading room through the glass wall, and this should hopefully encourage exploration of the library's other facilities.

Herr Bulaty took me to see the library site in Geschwister-Scholl-Strasse, which is conveniently close to the University's historic building on Unter den Linden. However the railway line runs alongside at about first floor level, posing a challenge for soundproofing the front façade. The progress on the building site is very fast, as it needs to be if the Centre is to open on time in 2009. We also looked at two branch libraries, one a renovated old building and one newly built. Later Frau Berghaus-Sprengel escorted me to the Theologisches Fakultät, where an attractive departmental library has been slotted in behind an old façade, bringing together scattered collections.

## **Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin : Neubau Unter den Linden 8**

Architect: H.G. Merz (Stuttgart)

Projected date of opening: 2011 (completed project)

The Staatsbibliothek has a long history, reaching back to a publicly accessible royal library of the 1660s. It achieved something of the status of a national library before the war, but its reading room was bombed in 1944 and it suffered a decline during the DDR period, when four ugly concrete stacks were erected on the site. Meanwhile a second library was built in West Berlin to house collections that had been taken for safety to Marburg and Tübingen. Since German reunification the two buildings have been under one management, and the decision has been taken to develop the library in

Unter den Linden, designed by architect Ernst von Ihne and opened in 1914, into a historic research library combining open access stacks, a strongroom and reading room for special collections and a general reading room in the shape of a glass cube. Rebuilding the iconic circular reading room would have been an option, but the new plan will allow better use of space.

In 2003 I saw the demolition men taking down the concrete towers in the middle of the site while the work of the Library continued around the periphery. Meanwhile, 50,000 metres of books had been put into storage for the duration of the project. On this visit I was actually allowed on to the building site, accompanied by Herr Hartmut List, who describes his job as liaison between librarians and builders. He told me that before any work could begin, the foundations had to be strengthened by replacing the rotting wooden posts, which had supported the building for a century, with 2,300 concrete pillars. This was quite a challenge for the engineers and cost 85 million Euros. The foundations for the new parts of the library were laid in 2005-6, consisting of several layers of concrete from a depth of 13 metres with safeguards against the high water table causing flooding. In August work was beginning on the glass cube, which will consist of two layers, the inner one being specially made with a heating process which slightly obscures the view through the panes. The tolerance for positioning the huge sheets of glass is 3mm.! At the base of the cube lies what they are already calling the 'wooden basin'. This will have 250 workplaces of which 20 are carrels, and 125,000 books round the walls on three levels, reached by stairs to galleries. The total cost will be 79 million Euros.

Underneath the Reading Room is the strongroom for the library's most valuable holdings. The doors are about 20cm. thick in solid steel, and similar panels would block the air vents in case of a disaster. I was told that the whole building could fall on this basement without crushing it. There will be a rare books reading room nearby with 50 seats. The plant to ensure control of temperature and humidity takes up a great deal of room in this basement and its walls are lined with acoustic material to contain the noise.

Alongside the new building there will be reorganisation of the original 'Haus'. The monumental staircase, which is a feature of the entrance, will be retained and the vestibule at the top will have a counter for ordering books from the stack. Further stairs will lead up to the reading room. As in the Grimm Zentrum the Staatsbibliothek will hope to bring in the public by having easily accessible facilities on the ground floor: a café and bookshop, a museum of the Library and a space for exhibiting some of its treasures, a room for temporary exhibitions and three seminar rooms. The old stacks, which take up half of the building and house 3 million books, are of a type which hold floors and ceilings together and therefore cannot be removed. They will be thoroughly repaired. All doors and windows in the old building will be replaced and some of the original specialist reading rooms - Music, Maps, Newspapers, Children's books etc.- will be improved. The cost of renovation is estimated to be 247 million Euros and it will continue until 2011. This gives some indication of the value placed on this outstanding library.

## **IKMZ Cottbus**

Architect: Herzog & de Meuron

Date opened: 2004

Much has been written about the new University library at Cottbus, which has caused a stir with its highly unusual shape and building materials. It is a landmark building in all senses. A mound was specially created so that it towers above its surroundings; it is placed between university and town, with a view to uniting both parties; it is a landmark in library design, unlike anything produced before; and it is unusual in being a library within a media centre: Das Informations-, Kommunikations- und Medienzentrum Cottbus.

The ground plan of the building has been described as amoebic, since it is totally curved with four unequal bulges. Entrances on two sides are designed as access from both campus and city. The walls are made of concrete and glass panels. Where windows are required there are two layers of glass, the outer one etched in an abstract pattern based on letters, with blinds in between. The whole effect is uniform except at night, when the lights show up which areas are transparent. Inside, a striking spiral staircase painted fuchsia pink and green leads to eight of the ten floors. These bright colours plus blue, red and yellow are repeated in the lino and also on some walls. The internal staircase walls and toilets are a startling lime green. Only the reading rooms are colourless, with white chairs and lamps and grey desks and carpeting set against the fluctuating grey/white shades of the windows. The reading rooms are each two floors in height, dominated by enormous specially designed chandeliers fitted with energy efficient lightbulbs. All ceilings are made of a kind of woven metal panelling, and the same material has been used for carrels and for dividing off some 'cabins' for subject specialist librarians.

There are exciting views from the open stairway and the various terraces which look down on the reading rooms. Essentially there are three Fachbibliotheken (subject libraries) spread across seven floors, with bookshelves and seating in various different configurations. Altogether there are 600 workplaces with both cable and wireless networks available. There are over half a million books, and 35,000 maps and media items. As one would expect, the library subscribes to about 1,000 electronic journals and databanks. On the top floor the Director and other managers sit in glass offices indicating their accessibility, but one wonders if readers ever interrupt them.

The Library has won the European title 'Library of the Year 2006' for its "innovative, integrated concept of information and media supply". It has developed computer-based learning support services and is a centre for e-learning. However the late decision to include the multimedia centre on the first floor of the building has caused problems, because it has to have a controlled entrance and in an open-plan situation suffers noise from groups working on the floor below.

Noise in general is the chief complaint about this building, as with other open-plan libraries. The Acting Director, Frau Frewer-Savigny, explained that it is not helped by being a show place where groups of librarians and visitors to the University and City come to marvel, though of course she appreciates that publicity is important for Cottbus. The quiet reading room in the basement is, on occasion, used for discussions

and the ground floor for events and exhibitions. The planned meeting room became a library workroom instead. The librarians would have preferred a building which was wider and not so tall, with multimedia in a separate room, so that there were quiet areas along the perimeter. The whole edifice was surrounded with red and white tape when I visited because several glass panels had crashed to the ground. I also noticed a number of automatic blinds being repaired because they get twisted by the wind. The architects have stipulated that none of the colours may be changed for 30 years, by which time it may look a bit dated. Despite these quibbles, one must admit that the innovative building has been highly successful in turning the media spotlight on Cottbus as a progressive university and also in engendering civic pride. At a total cost of 30 million Euros it has proved a good investment.

In 1999 Herzog and de Meuron designed a small library for the Fachhochschule Eberswalde which I also visited. Here they tried out the idea of a panelled exterior with repeated images, in this case etched on concrete as well as glass. It is however rectangular with a fairly conventional (and inflexible) layout inside.



I would like to thank BII for funding one week of my study tour to Berlin. Together with my college, New Hall Cambridge, who granted me two weeks' leave, they made the visit feasible. Herr Heinz Fuchs of Goettingen SUB was kind enough to put me in touch with the Bibliotheksverband, an invaluable source of contacts and advice.

While in Berlin I was able to meet Barbara Schleihagen (Geschäftsführerin), Hella Klauser (Internationale Kooperation) and Ulla Wimmer (Koordination) in person. I would like to thank them all for their kind hospitality, and introduction to the Bau Archiv of the Senatenbibliothek.

Many German colleagues gave up their time to show me plans, building sites and new buildings. I have mentioned them as appropriate in the text, but I would also like to thank the librarians whose libraries I have not yet covered: Frau Roessler in Eberswalde, Herr Dr Knoche in the Anna Amalia Bibliothek Weimar, and Herr Dr Simon-Ritz at the Bauhaus Bibliothek. I propose to write more about my conclusions in an illustrated article for *CILIP Update*.