

Professional Library Exchange Visits in Germany: Bremen and Hamburg

by Pablo Bruno D'Amico (Argentina)

1. Acknowledgments

This report is made possible thanks to the generous support of BI-International, as well as the invaluable collaboration of the library networks in Bremen and Hamburg, Germany. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this professional exchange from October 24 to 26, 2024, in these cities, which provided a unique insight into their library infrastructure, innovations, and cultural significance.



This is me with the library mascot, we are best pals now.

2. Introduction

This report presents insights from my professional library exchange visit in Germany, generously supported by BI-International. The trip, which took place from October 24 to 26, 2024, focused on strengthening professional ties and exploring innovative approaches in German libraries, particularly those within Bremen and Hamburg's networked library systems. As a member of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Metropolitan Libraries Section, I was especially interested in learning from the experiences of metropolitan libraries and in exploring current trends in technology—specifically the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in library services.

Although the planned itinerary for the visit was adjusted, it covered a comprehensive range of activities and included visits to several libraries. On October 24, we began with a guided tour of Bremen's Central Library and had valuable discussions on topics such as diversity, training, and recruitment. Later that day, I had the opportunity to exchange ideas on AI and IT with German colleagues, which provided useful perspectives relevant to my own work in Argentina.

On October 25, I conducted a virtual presentation for Bremen Public Library staff and colleagues interested in learning about public libraries in Argentina. This event underscored the cultural exchange component of the visit, providing a platform to share insights on our library practices with a wider audience. Later that day, we visited the Hamburg City Library, further enriching this cross-cultural exchange.



Hamburg's impressive "Hall of Books"

On October 26, my visit concluded with a tour of branch libraries in Bremen, which provided a practical view of library services and highlighted some unique approaches in the region.

This professional exchange has provided a range of insights that I look forward to integrating into my work and sharing with the IFLA Metropolitan Libraries Section and other library professionals in Argentina through our National Librarians Association (ABGRA).

3. General Overview of Library Systems: Bremen and Hamburg vs. Buenos Aires

The library systems in Bremen and Hamburg are exemplary models of public libraries working collaboratively within their respective networks. Both cities have established interconnected library services that efficiently meet the needs of their populations. Bremen's Central Library and the Hamburg City Library exemplify this networked approach, offering a broad range of services that cater to the diverse needs of their communities. Their systems focus on accessibility, technological integration, and community engagement, ensuring that library resources are effectively utilized by residents.

In contrast, the library system in Buenos Aires, while comprising a network of 50 public libraries, faces significant challenges in addressing the needs of a population of approximately 3 million residents. Additionally, the daily influx of around 3 million commuters further strains library resources. Despite the efforts made by public libraries in Buenos Aires, the existing network does not sufficiently cover the comprehensive needs of such a large and diverse population.

A unique aspect of the Argentine library landscape is the role of bibliotecas populares (popular libraries). These autonomous civil associations are initiated by community members and serve as essential cultural and educational hubs. Popular libraries provide services and spaces for consultation, cultural expression, reading activities, and extensive library outreach, promoting a broad, inclusive, and pluralistic environment.

Typically managed and sustained by their members, bibliotecas populares offer valuable resources for information, education, recreation, and socio-cultural engagement through a diverse collection of bibliographic and multimedia materials. Their origins trace back to the Reader's Clubs established by Benjamin Franklin in 1727 in Philadelphia, along with similar experiences in the United States focused on community libraries in small towns and cities.

In Argentina, there are currently more than 1000 bibliotecas populares organized under the National Commission of Popular Libraries (Comisión Nacional de Bibliotecas Populares - CONABIP). These libraries play a crucial role in providing essential services to

underserved communities, filling gaps left by public libraries and ensuring access to information and culture for all.

The collaborative network of libraries in Bremen and Hamburg highlights the importance of resource sharing and community-focused services, aspects that could further enhance the library system in Buenos Aires. The integration of bibliotecas populares into the larger framework of public libraries in Argentina could provide valuable lessons in addressing the diverse needs of urban populations.

4. Description of the Visited Institutions: Objectives and Relevance

During my visit, I had the opportunity to explore various libraries in Bremen and Hamburg, each showcasing unique services and community-focused initiatives.

The Bremen Central Library impressed me with its strong orientation towards services and its role as a community meeting space. The library offers various environments tailored to user preferences, such as carpets and a pirate ship for children, and cozy areas with wooden floors and comfortable seating for adults. Notably, I discovered their innovative art lending program, which allows patrons to borrow works of art, primarily paintings—a service I had not encountered in other libraries. Additionally, they offer a "library of things," where users can borrow tools and even access to a food bank.



The library of things suffering "the failure of success"

The library also employs advanced technologies like RFID and automation, which, while familiar to me, were fascinating to see in action. We engaged in discussions about the material formats of collections, such as movies and music, versus streaming options, and the importance of ownership versus licensing of materials in libraries.

On the third day, I visited a sustainability-focused library that features a garden with beehives. This was a first for me and highlighted the library's commitment to environmental stewardship. An accessibility feature that stood out was the charging station for wheelchairs. We also discussed the background music played during opening hours and the library's "wish box," where patrons can submit suggestions for future developments, and had some fair trade coffee.



The library designed like an open book

In Gropelingen, a neighborhood with a demographic profile rich in immigrants and low-income residents, the library aims to provide services that support the community. They collaborate with other organizations to offer health access services and administrative support. This library is designed to be a workspace, facilitating various community needs. Remarkably, it also has beehives, and its architecture is thoughtfully designed to enhance the library experience.

In Hamburg, I visited the Central Library located in a central building across from the train station, making it highly accessible via public transport. I learned that users are referred to as "guests," a practice I found to be a welcoming approach. The library features makerspaces and numerous plants, creating a vibrant atmosphere. During our discussions, we touched on the challenges libraries face, particularly in doing more with fewer resources. Lastly, I witnessed presentations from young volunteers who conducted workshops on self-publishing scrapbooking and upcycling clothing, showcasing the library's engagement with youth and community creativity.

The libraries I visited are embracing current trends and innovative projects that enhance their relevance and impact in their communities. The art lending program at Bremen Central Library exemplifies a creative approach to fostering a cultural connection with the community. The "library of things" model addresses practical needs while promoting sustainability. A special mention goes to the interactive Tagtool+AI interactive installation that provides a creative and leisure experience while at the same time working as an important instance of digital literacy. Using free software like stable diffusion is a great way libraries can access to this advanced tools without the R&D costs of custom proprietary solutions.



The library interactive and fun AI digital literacy tool

In the sustainability-oriented library, initiatives like the bee garden reflect a growing awareness of environmental issues and the role libraries can play in promoting sustainability. Accessibility features such as the charging station for wheelchairs demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that all community members can benefit from library services. This library was also open for the nearby mental health facility, promoting also sustainable health for the community.



The garden with bees. It was cold but some came out to say hi.

Hamburg Central Library's makerspaces not only provide hands-on learning opportunities but also empower individuals to engage with technology and creativity. The involvement of young volunteers in workshops illustrates the importance of youth engagement and skill development within the library context.

These experiences highlight the potential for libraries to adapt and innovate in response to community needs, offering valuable lessons for similar institutions, such as those in Buenos Aires, where enhancing services and community engagement remains essential.

5. Reflections and Final Conclusions

My experience visiting the libraries in Bremen and Hamburg was profoundly positive, enriching, and inspiring. I gained valuable insights that I believe will significantly influence my work as a librarian.

One practical aspect I found particularly easy to implement is the use of color-coded labels on the spines of books to mark new arrivals. This simple yet effective method can enhance user engagement and streamline the browsing experience. However, some other strategies are more complex and may be challenging to apply due to economic constraints.

The emphasis on providing services, forming partnerships with other institutions, and reformulating communication with users are accessible and replicable tools that add significant value to library operations. For example, the model of providing an accessible library service outside staff working hours might be difficult to implement in large cities like Buenos Aires.

Personally, I consider the impact of this experience on my professional development to be valuable and lasting. I can draw comparisons with other libraries I visited this year, such as those in Barcelona, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Riga. The contrasts and differences between these institutions have highlighted the importance of considering diverse professional practices while also recognizing commonalities.

Emerging topics, such as creating different types of spaces for users (e.g., game rooms for youth or music and recording studios), have become increasingly relevant. Yet, some themes remain universal, such as the libraries' commitment to providing access to culture and knowledge and serving as spaces for community engagement and social justice.

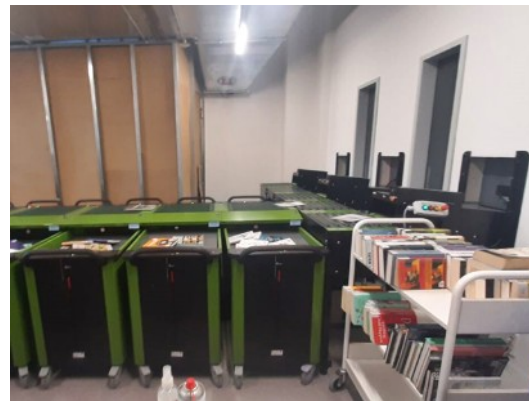
My visits to Bremen and Hamburg have not only expanded my understanding of library practices but have also inspired me to explore new ideas and approaches that can enhance the library's role within my own community. I look forward to applying these insights in my work and with the members of our Argentinean Librarians Association (ABGRA) and continuing to foster a vibrant, inclusive, and supportive environment for all library users.

6. Gallery of Selected Library Photos

All photos are my own, shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International license (CC BY-SA 4.0), reflecting my perspective on these inspiring libraries.



Left: A bike-mobile library. It also has a roof for rainy days. Right: The “wish box” for users to imagine the future. Children like ice cream in any part of the world it seems.



Left: The indoor tree, makes the library a more livable space, you cannot tell it's fake. Right: A sorting machine. Technology making easier the repetitive daily tasks for the workers.



Left: A corner for the youth, with games old and new alike, the human size figures can be a little scary at first. Right: the walk-in chess board, they tell me is very popular with all ages.