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Berlin's public libraries – diversity guaranteed?

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Abstract:

Berlin's public libraries have undergone any number of structural changes – and may be facing just as many more.

Can they still guarantee a diverse service? In the last ten years, the number of public libraries in Berlin has been almost halved. Closures of branch libraries, unification of West and East, merger of boroughs and local government reform are only the major changes which had to be dealt with. At the same time, the differences between public libraries have grown, as they have received differing levels of finance from the boroughs. One kind of diversity that may not be so desirable.

The Central and State Library of Berlin (ZLB) has successfully coped with the organisational merger of both the large public libraries in Berlin, the Berlin City Library in the East and the America Memorial Library in the West. While it has no direct responsibility for the other public libraries, the ZLB does however provide important services for the borough libraries and the federal centre of the shared online union catalogue, which binds all the public libraries closely with each other. This has led to developments which now pose the question of further structural change between the ZLB and the borough libraries. A diversity of new visions and concepts for this are being formulated.

1. The beginning: Libraries for diverse social groups

Over 150 years ago, the first four People's Libraries opened their doors in Berlin in August 1850. A half century later there were 27 city libraries with issue counters and 6 public reading rooms provided for the consultation of journals, newspapers and reference works¹. Finally in 1901 the Berlin City Library was established and opened in 1907. "The City Library should address the development needs of the widest circles of the population and be equipped as a central resource for the individual public libraries"². This relationship between the Centre and the libraries in the boroughs has been the subject of repeated discussion in Berlin for over a hundred years and with the passage of time has resulted in different forms of

centralisation and decentralisation, always however keeping in mind the different types of user, all of whom were to be served.

Today the public library system in Berlin is still distinguished by the two levels of government interaction, that of the State and city of Berlin, and that of the boroughs. This discussion has again become very topical in the last few months, as the financial situation of the city of Berlin has demanded new structural measures. In order to gain a perspective on the future of public libraries in this city, the structural developments in Berlin since the fall of the Wall, present service levels, developments in locations and the vision of future concepts in their diversity will be introduced.

2. Berlin statistics 2003 – diversity guaranteed³

Berlin has a geographical extent of over 800 square kilometres, and includes much wooded, lake and meadow land as well as town. Since the reunification the travel network has been extended in East and West and the two have been linked to each other again, giving very quick transport connections in the city using different modes of travel.

It is difficult to categorise Berlin's population. In 2003, 3.4 million people live in Berlin, of whom 13% are foreign nationals, predominantly from Turkey, the Balkan states, Poland and the regions of the former Soviet union, but also from many other countries.

The largest age group consists of 30 to 40 year olds. 50% of Berlin households consist of one person.

There are 128,000 partnerships outside marriage. Almost two-thirds of mothers with children below the age of 18 are in employment.

15.6% of people in Berlin live below the poverty line, the more children you have the more likely you are to be poor.

A large number of different religious groups are represented in Berlin, but the majority of Berliners do not belong to any religion.

Since 1990 there has been considerable restructuring of the economy in both parts of the city. The large industrial concerns in East and West have closed and let many people go. The move of the parliament and the federal administration from Bonn to Berlin has not yet been able to develop the service sector sufficiently to support a healthy economic state. Unemployment among the population stands at 18.7%.

Berlin's public libraries – diversity of structures in the boroughs

At borough level after the "Wende" (change), as the time of the fall of the Wall and the reunification in Berlin was called, there were 23 borough library systems, with more than 200 libraries and 9 mobile libraries. Local government reform of the Berlin boroughs in 2000 led to a reduction in number to 12 (see figure 1)⁴, so that each of the new boroughs has between 250,000 and 350,000 inhabitants.

Figure 1: Old and new boroughs in Berlin

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There were only two new boroughs in which old boroughs from East and West were combined. But even the unification of boroughs from the former West Berlin or East Berlin was not always straightforward because of their differences and identities, and this hindered organisational decision making and action for some time. There was naturally some delay before all the leadership positions had been selected again. Although the East-West problem

in Berlin is no longer quite so central in the new millennium as it was in the middle of the Nineties, a look at the relative positions is still interesting:

Year	Number of boroughs	Leadership (East)	Leadership (West)
1992	23	11	12
2003	12	4	8

And diversity has grown rather than fallen since the borough reform, as now public libraries are administered sometimes along with education, sometimes with cultural activities and sometimes independently, so that co-ordination and agreement on a political level covering all Berlin is even more difficult than before.

The has all had a considerable effect on the situation today. Moreover it can be established that the number of public libraries has halved in the last five years, compared to numbers at the time of the “Wende”. In 2003 there are now only 106 libraries and 8 mobile libraries in the boroughs. Further branch closures are to be expected.

Year	1992	1997	2003
Number of locations (all Berlin)	>200	176	105
Number of mobile libraries (all Berlin)	9	10	8

Number of borough library branches⁵

These branch closures should not generally be seen in a negative light, as they were in part small, old-fashioned outposts with limited opening hours. But it was also necessary to close some larger locations, as policy demanded a strict decrease in staff numbers and at the same time some boroughs were no longer willing or able to pay the rent for some of the accommodation in which the libraries were housed. The library development plan which appeared in 1995, but which however was not accepted as a political commitment, had as one of its aims the expansion of larger branches while closing smaller ones. Without an agreed plan at State level, planning which goes beyond the individual borough’s bounds and hence equality of provision by public libraries for the population cannot be guaranteed because of the borough’s sovereignty. Even when the different sizes and economic make-up of the boroughs is taken into consideration, the variation in number of library branches between 4 and 19 is not designed to meet the requirements of the population, but rather the result of uncoordinated economy measures and plans within each borough.

How did these differences come about?

As part of the local government reform in Berlin, boroughs no longer receive an earmarked sum of money for libraries from the State government. They now receive a gross budget which they can decide to allocate as they please, to libraries, museums and sports facilities. This particularly affects the variation in provision for acquisition budgets in the borough libraries, which vary from 50,000 to 300,000 Euros – despite have similar sizes of population. In 2001 this range lay between 100,000 and 380,000 Euros⁶ in round figures and substantially more ten years before, since at that time there were supplementary development funds available for the eastern part of the city. As a result the stock renewal rates for the public libraries in Berlin’s boroughs were much reduced and very variable, between 0.82 and 6.9. This less attractive and less up-to-date stock lead to a fall in loan numbers in 2002 of 33% in comparison with 1992. Part of this was attributable to the closures of smaller branches and

reductions in staffing, by which the total of opening hours alone has shrunk by 23% in the last two years⁷.

Diversity as an integral principle.

In its two buildings, the Central and State Library of Berlin (ZLB; www.zlb.de) has introduced a very much sharper structural development in the last ten years, which has eventually left it in a much better situation at the moment compared to most of the boroughs. The Berlin city library, founded in 1901, was united after the fall of the Wall in 1989 with its “sister” library, the America Memorial Library, built in 1954. This library was so named because it was a gift at the beginning of the Fifties of the Americans to the population of Berlin, a reward for holding out during the blockade from 1948 to 1949 by the then Soviet Union of access routes to the Federal Republic of Germany. The AGB, as it rapidly became known, was the first large open-access library in Germany and was distinguished from the very beginning by very high visitor numbers. On the day the Wall fell, 10 November 1989, East Berliners streamed in to the America Memorial Library and queues stretched along the streets in front of the building. Some readers returned books that they had borrowed 28 years before in August 1961, before the building of the Berlin Wall. On the same day there were gaping voids in the Berlin City Library, the BStB. The provision of newer stock here was able to attract more readers gradually, but it took the merger of the two libraries into the Stiftung Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (Central and State Library of Berlin Foundation) in 1995 and the new structure introduced thereafter to enliven these locations again, when the large traditional reading room was converted into an open-access area. At the same time the responsibilities of a State library had to be embedded in the Foundation, with regional copyright deposit, acquisition of the estates of Berlin personalities and the indexing of the old inherited collections as well as the creation of a Berlin bibliography. Thus a place was established within a library landscape in Germany which prefers to separate public from academic librarianship, which can offer citizens the best in stock provision for academic as well as popular purposes. The new structure of the BStB and AGB represented a sharing of the current collections in humanities subjects and in the sciences between the two buildings in a true mix of media.

	America Memorial Library	Berlin City Library
Subject areas	1. Children	8 Information Services
	2. Young people	9. Mathematics. Information Sciences
	3. Music	10. Natural Sciences. Technology
	4. Art. Theatre. Media	11. Medicine
	5. Information Services	12. Economics
	6. History and Social Sciences	Press Centre
	7. Literature	Berlin Studies Centre
		Historical collections

Division of subject areas between the ZLB buildings

The main consequence of this was the combination of collections within each subject, so that more than 300,000 volumes had to be moved and to some extent provided with a new unified classification. Almost 50 employees changed their workplace and moved from East to West or West to East. A detailed report on this process of change as the unification of disparate cultures within a common organisation was given at an earlier IFLA conference in Bangkok in 1999⁸.

This structural development of the Central and State Library (ZLB) left it better able to cope with a reduction in budget, since for example it was no longer necessary to duplicate materials for two subjects in two buildings. The Foundation's independent status also made it possible to exchange pay and non-pay allocations, giving more flexibility to meet the demand for subject acquisition and also for justified increases in staffing. As the expenditure on staffing could be decreased from 59% of the total budget to 53.5% within a few years, it was possible to maintain the acquisition budget for the time being at around 1.9 million Euros. Only the substantial cuts of the last year have affected the acquisition budget so greatly, that, without the contributions from other sources (charities, federal funds), it would have been nearly halved, similar to the situation in the boroughs. We must be prepared for a negative trend in the future, as the State of Berlin is greatly indebted, due to speculation losses by the State Bank, and cannot expect to receive supplementary tax income. Nevertheless the cuts in all areas of public expenditure which have been announced seem likely to depress the economy and thus to decrease income from taxes. This became especially clear when one of the oldest and largest bookshops of Berlin, which was still family-run, had to announce its insolvency last year and was closed. For the ZLB, its suppliers and also its clients, this difficult financial situation is certain to bring hard times in the future.

Together with the Central and State Library, the public libraries in Berlin today consist of 107 library branches spread over 12 boroughs, with an acquisition budget of almost 3.8 million Euros and stock of over 9 million items, and issues in 2002 amounting to around 18.7 million. Up to the present moment, measures taken by the ZLB have been successful in increasing issues over previous years and thus the central libraries have, with 3.3 million annual issues in two locations, represented more than a fifth of the 15.4 million issues delivered by 105 libraries in the boroughs. At the same time, the high visitor levels of the AGB have for years made it the most visited library in Germany. The ZLB was also able to maintain opening hours, even if it has not yet been possible to make the opening times of the two buildings in East and West the same. One piece of diversity that it would be better for the client to do without.

The ZLB and the boroughs train between 16 and 20 young people each year for the career of paraprofessionals in media and information services, which in the dual education system of Germany is a mixture of classroom instruction and practical work in the libraries. The libraries are in discussion with the Continuing Education section of the Freie Universität on the topic of further education for its employees. Investment in training and development is particularly important in times of staff reduction, if appropriate and diverse service is to be maintained.

The diverse service strengths of Berlin's libraries

Thanks to considerable investment by the State of Berlin it was possible in past years to conclude the project suggested in 1994 of an Association of Berlin Public Libraries (Verbund der Öffentlichen Bibliotheken Berlins, VÖBB; www.voebb.de). Even two years after the ZLB was the last to join the 105 borough libraries, the system does however still have considerable performance problems, and can often offer only limited functionality. After there have been some more improvements to both the software and the database structure by the responsible partners, some mistakes discovered long ago have finally been out right and the integration of the journal database promised two years ago have been achieved. Despite these problems the VÖBB has provided many of Berlin's public libraries with their first automated library management system and thereby has made fundamental changes to working practices and the

professional development of library staff. The central office of the VÖBB is located in the ZLB to provide services for members of the union. Now that the Association has been set up, the continuation costs have to be met by the ZLB and the boroughs themselves. As can be imagined, this settlement has been very difficult, particularly with regard to new investment in the technology for the union catalogue, so that the financial future for this system will not in fact be so easy to secure.

There have been many real improvements for clients since the establishment of the VÖBB and they are now offered a multiplicity of direct services online.. They can search in all the catalogues of the twelve boroughs or the ZLB individually or combined in the union catalogue, which together offer them 2.7 million titles in 8.3 million items, such as books, CDs, CD-ROMs, DVDs, videos, microcassettes, scores, speaking books, journals and games. They can order and renew these items in any of the 107 libraries themselves. The “pay in the association” function allows the client to pay fees in any VÖBB library. The Central and State Library sorts out the takings between the libraries. The membership card that the client takes out in one library (at a cost of 10 Euros per year for adults, half-price for students and free for minors and those in receipt of benefits) is valid in all 12 boroughs and in the ZLB. Of course these transactions can also take place via the internet and in return for a fee, requested books and other items can be delivered to one’s home address and returned by parcel post.

Post-service picture

Some libraries offer special introductory courses in using the catalogues and the internet. Internet connections with multimedia capability were provided for many Berlin libraries by the Deutscher Bibliothekverband’s (German Library Association’s) great campaign, with the Federal Ministry for Education and Science and Deutsche Telekom (German Telecom) as sponsors. Thus the internet is offered in each borough, sometimes with several, sometimes with only a few machines. Multimedia work is pursued intensively above all with children and young people. The tradition of the multimedia week for young people introduced a few years ago finds its proper continuation here and goes on into general internet use and internet instruction. Introductory courses for senior citizens in the Central and State Library are particularly popular, offering a peaceful and uninterrupted introduction to the world of networks on Friday mornings before the library opens.

As soon as the running of the VÖBB has more or less stabilised, planning will resumed on integrating it into the Cooperative Library Association of Berlin-Brandenburg, in which all the university libraries of both states, as well as other specialist research libraries and the public libraries of Brandenburg are integrated. This is important in order to become searchable by means of Germany’s largest catalogue search engine, the Karlsruher Virtuelle Katalog (Karlsruhe Virtual Catalogue)⁹.

Naturally there have also been many internal changes for the libraries. There have to be completely new ways of reaching decisions, the user regulations and also their application and above all the rules of the Association have to be discussed and decided. For this so-called “centres of competence” have been established, on borough looks after the communal access to the internet, another regulates interlending and transport. The ZLB has taken on the centre for competence for subject description and trains colleagues from the borough libraries to ensure that rules are applied consistently. As is still common in Germany, the libraries use variations of classification schemes, and even the varying Berlin implementations of subject description are different from those more commonly used in Germany. One borough library

concerns itself with music libraries, which make particular demands on software and on cataloguing.

And the VÖBB has also brought about new technical advances. A pilot project is attempting to link mobile libraries to the union catalogue and the user databases by means of a laptop and mobile telephone. The newest vehicle with all the latest technology such as reversing camera, disabled lift and WC went into service in the borough of Treptow-Köpenick in 2001.

Because of the variations in structure, some boroughs offer their clients information lines: the ZLB has established a special call centre for preliminary enquiries, information on opening times, etc. The young trainees are very successfully involved in this and provide part of this service working quite independently.

Berlin's public libraries frequently discuss what joint activities they can be involved in to improve the libraries or serve their clients. The managers of the public libraries in Berlin get together each month with representatives of the Senator for Science, Research and Culture to discuss common developments. This committee sets up working groups to which members of staff are to be assigned. These working groups are intended to initiate common activities, such as for example publicity for the VÖBB or common user regulations. At the moment there are 10 working groups on individual topics such as cost-benefit analysis or children's library work. The biggest challenge for this co-operation is resourcing. Some borough libraries are not prepared to assign staff resources to these joint working groups, but would like to benefit from the results. Basically, almost everything that requires increased expenditure is bound to fail, as there is only a small sum available for these joint activities within the ZLB's budget and all additional requests are almost always refused in the current budget position. This prevents many new ideas and joint activities for Berliners.

One fortunate exception is the Berlin Reading Summer which is taking place right now. A small working group had a few ideas on how reading could be made attractive for school children during the summer and with them succeeded in winning a prize from the Berlin Family Charity to put them into practice. Almost all Berlin public libraries are now taking part. But this also demonstrates that the separation into different boroughs and their libraries can add colour and diversity to activities and projects, but at the same time can be cause disadvantages for larger scale regional activities. Similar reading campaigns on a smaller scale are regularly organised by the libraries with schools. Associated with this, there are large numbers of class visits to nearly all the public libraries.

Some libraries serve diversity by collection literature in foreign languages for the foreign inhabitants of Berlin; two libraries, one in Kreuzberg focussing on Turkish literature and one in Hohenschönhausen on Vietnamese literature, have specialised in offering a broader foreign language and multicultural collection.

Developing branches – new architecture – divers finances

Not much now remains among the 106 branches of the many little book rooms that were so common especially in the East. This species can now only be admired in any great number in Pankow/Prenzlauer Berg. But the furnishings and equipment of many West Berlin libraries, where sometimes there has been little change since the Seventies, no longer match the aesthetic expectations of the younger generation for a pleasant modern ambience in which all kinds of media from the book to the internet are available.

It has however been possible in some boroughs to build attractive new main libraries. The chronologically first, and also first in architectural importance, is the Humboldt Library in Reinickendorf (West). Opened back in 1989, Charles Moore's building is still the most attractive public library in Berlin, the only one with a real fireplace and with a wonderful view over the waters of Lake Tegel. As the library of a borough located on the north-western edge of Berlin it has been able from the very beginning to count readers from the adjacent Brandenburg communities among its readers.

The first library in one of the new shopping centres which were built in every borough after the Wende, and since then in each part of the city, was the Anna Seghers Library in Lichtenberg (East). Another is the main library in the borough of Neukölln (West), which has found a new generously proportioned space reached out of the hurly-burly of the shopping centre by means of a glass lift and has wonderful views over the rooftops of Berlin. The new Philipp Schäfer Library in Brunnen Street in Berlin Mitte (East) with its attractive reading café is one of the projects where private investors showed interest in a long term lease for a new public building, as was the case of the new main library in Friedrichshain (East). And in Spandau, the last opening of a new large library managed to achieve the transition of the library from a rather remote location to one on the main road, right next to the main department stores. It is noticeable that a fairly even distribution of new public library buildings in Berlin between West and East is to be seen. Instead of "strength through control", as the Senate Department's library development plan of 1995 put it, and as has been seen successfully put into practice in Neukölln, in many cases however branches have been closed without being replaced or having an alternative institution offering good services to take their place. Taken as a whole the facilities at present available, including their equipment, do not meet the standards of modern service-oriented libraries.

A new building for the ZLB – diverse variations without end

The last concrete plans for new buildings for the two section of the Central and State Library were the victim of the costs of reunification. Even though a decision had been reached in December 1989 in favour of the proposed magnificent extension to the America Memorial Library and the requisite funding agreed by the Senate Building Department, it was finally deleted from the budget in summer 1992. At the same time the plans were dropped to roof over an inner courtyard of the Marstall, the former imperial stables in which the Berlin City Library had been housed since 1920. In parallel to this however, a grand vision was made public, in which the Palace of the Republic (closed because of asbestos) in the middle of Berlin near Berlin Cathedral might have provided good accommodation for both institutions. The Palace has been cleared of asbestos in the meantime, the German Parliament has decided on its demolition and that the Berlin City Palace, which stood in its place until 1953, should be rebuilt. The Central and State Library has been arguing since 1997 that it should be allowed to occupy the City Palace. Because other cultural sectors are involved, it is to retain the Marstall and receive additional space of around 7000 m² in the palace, which if at all possible are to be linked by the existing large underground passage between the palace square and the Marstall buildings. The space in the palace is very important for the ZLB, as it urgently needs a large new and aesthetically pleasing open access area. This will be clear to anyone who has ever visited the AGB on one of the lively late afternoons just before examination time for Berlin's educational institutions and has nearly been crushed in the press. It is not yet certain if it will really be possible to extend the space in the palace so that a million items can be housed there on open access, as the plans so far for the palace building

are still to be approved by the federal authorities¹⁰. There may be further decisions about this this summer.

Vision of future concepts – together in diversity?

There have been repeated discussions in recent years as to whether one single large organisation should be created in Berlin from the Central and State Library and the borough library systems. With 107 locations and around one thousand employees it would seem that a common foundation would be possible. This discussion, which has been going on for over a century, has become topical again. The committee of the responsible politicians from the boroughs, together with representatives of the Senate Department for Science, Research and Culture, as well as the relevant state ministry, the standing conference of leaders of Berlin public libraries has directed:

- that the problems of Berlin's public libraries arising from developments in recent years be demonstrated
- that a business plan be presented
- that a forecast of costs and benefits be prepared.

This should make clear what the potential implications and consequences of the above data for Berlin's public libraries could be, taking into consideration

- decentralised and regional aspects
- client needs/qualitative considerations (in particular service to the whole city, creation of institutions capable of delivering services)
- building a profile within Berlin's library landscape
- potential synergies in association with examination of opportunities to repair deficits
- the maintenance and extension of the range of services offered by VÖBB.

Since then concepts for decentralised and centralised visions have been revised. These have been passed on the relevant authorities. And perhaps the case will once again be that no great change is made to the structure, although this time the VÖBB offers the best opportunity to reduce duplication of effort (13 acquisition departments in Berlin's public libraries, 13 cataloguing departments) by means of a unified structure and to become more appealing to large sponsors as a strong competent partner. Even those visions which include large central libraries in the boroughs and subject specialist libraries within the city, make clear that service to the population of Berlin in its local neighbourhoods has to be tailored to the local situation. And that this restructuring has to take place under conditions of strict economising makes it all particularly difficult. Whether it will come to that is debatable, since people would rather optimise what is happening in the boroughs and are less keen to take an interest in what is happening in the borough next door. How long Berlin will continue to operate in this way is one question, how long it can continue to operate this way is an even bigger one.

¹ Wahlich, Ulrike. Rückblick mit Zukunft: 100 Jahre Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin. München: Saur, 2001, p.13

² Wahlich (2001), p.19

³ All figures from the Statistisches Landesamt Berlin 2003 (www.statistik-berlin.de)

⁴ Statistisches Landesamt. Overview of the new and old boroughs.

⁵ On the situation of Berlin's public Libraries. Internal report of the Standing Conference of Managers of the Berlin public libraries. April 2003

⁶ Public Libraries in Berlin. Annual Report 2001: city libraries in the boroughs of Berlin, Central and State Library of Berlin Foundation. Issued by the Senate Department for Science, Research and Culture. Berlin, 2001

⁷ "On the situation ...", p 3

⁸ Lux, Claudia. Managing library staff from a different cultural background – the east-west conflict in Berlin. *Ifla Journal* ...

⁹ The Karlsruher Virtuelle Katalog is the largest search engine for library catalogues. <http://www.ukba.uni-karlsruhe.de/kvk.html>

¹⁰ Feasibility study by the architect Jordi on behalf of the Federal Building Ministry and the Senate Building Department, April/May 2003