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Public libraries and development planning in Portugal

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Abstract

The development of library services especially for the general public has become visible in the enormous growth in purpose built or re-designed library buildings in Portugal. A major role is played by the Public Library Programme, which is carried out by the Instituto Português do Livro e das Bibliotecas (IPLB). This nationwide library scheme connects with local authorities to create favourable circumstances for investment in library buildings and services. The paper describes how the programme has influenced the planning of services for the development of urban and rural communities. The indications and requirements set by the funding programme form incentives for local authorities to include library services and buildings in their local planning. Increasingly, they add extra functions to it, in order to strengthen the cultural and educational services. In this way literacy and lifelong learning of new user groups are supported.

1 Establishing public libraries

Establishing modern public libraries in Portugal started about 15 years ago. The national government acknowledged its role in guaranteeing effective conditions for information services, by creating a Portuguese Institute for the Book and Libraries (IPLB), and stating that 'the re-dynamisation of channels of diffusion (e.g. libraries and bookshops) should also address those audiences which lived remote from books and reading.

The Portuguese Institute has the task, as it is formulated in the (updated) Law (90/97, 19 April 1997) 'in view of the network of public libraries which still demonstrates gaps,

to develop well-coordinated programmes, projects and actions in order to contribute to a cultural reorganisation of the country, while diminishing the regional differences, illiteracy and cultural exclusion.'

2 Funding programme

'All citizens have a right to culture and information. The State has to ensure the execution of these rights', reads the introduction of the law of 1987 (Law 111/87, 11 March 1987) which introduces a funding programme for establishing public libraries at the municipal level.

The programme serves as a guideline for the creation of public library services spread over 278 *Municipalities* of the Portuguese continental territory. Nowadays this means: 85% are already integrated in the Portuguese Public Libraries Network. The public libraries which have been being built in the last 15 years particularly in the interior of the country, have contributed to the quality of the environment in the small and medium-sized Portuguese towns. Promoted, funded and supported technically by the Ministry of Culture through the IPLB, the programme provides the following information on the urban context:

"In respect of the relationship with the urban surroundings, it is important to consider that the municipal libraries, as public buildings, should be considered as symbolic elements structuring the city network, with a well identified image from the architectural point of view, regardless whether it is a purpose built or an adaptation of an existing building.

The establishment of the library in an existing building is only feasible when the building is considered architectural heritage and, at the same time, meets the area and functionality requirements contained in this document, considering its location and potential impact on the environment and neighbourhood.

In effect, the building – preferably with its own parking area or one nearby, with space reserved for disabled people – should be located in a place frequently visited by the population or in a nucleus of urban expansion and should be a strong attraction to the public. The architectural image it projects of itself is important, as a public building with a specific function, undoubtedly relevant to the community. The design of the entrance deserves a special focus as a determining element of the main façade's composition and of the building itself. The entrance should enable an easy perception of the interior of the building. The outdoor and indoor accesses should respect the legislation regarding people with disabilities.

It is through the hall that the internal/external relationship of the building is established and access is given to all areas of the public service. It is therefore the great distributing space of the building, a kind of indoor "square", where the three-dimensional aspect should be prominent, so as to enable a clear reading of the library's operating mode."

3 The role of local authorities

The programme includes important benefits and obligations. The local authorities have to apply for the national Institute's support by submitting a library-proposal. If this is accepted a contract-programme is signed, which provides for 50% of the

funding. The local authorities will have the ownership of the equipment and its management; any future expenses, including staff, are their responsibility.

The initial financial support implies compliance with some minimum requirements based on the population the library serves. These requirements entail 1) the size of the areas (square meters); 2) the collections (volumes); 3) the number of staff and 4) the rendering of proper services.

One of the main concerns of the national institute has been to see to an equitable distribution of library services, all over the country. This requires a delicate balancing of interests and priorities. It could mean that smaller towns, in remote or less populated areas sometimes had to be given priority over a larger city. As a true public service, libraries should be accessed everywhere and cultural participation, educational development cannot be left to only larger, urban areas, as the funding programme aims to demonstrate.

Nowadays, more and more Local Authorities take the opportunity of this funding incentive from the Government to add other, mostly cultural functions to the library building, for example an auditorium, an art gallery, a municipal archive, etc.

In practice, the choice of the site for the library is a delicate matter: libraries as modern buildings have to be visible and form important spots in the city. They can also be established in existing buildings of high cultural patrimonial value.

4 Educational services

For several years, the municipal libraries, in principle designed for the public in general, have been mainly occupied as study rooms by students of different education levels having no alternative.

Recently, the Ministry of Education has created a School Libraries Network, the need of which was greatly felt to keep pace with the educational system's modernisation. Municipal libraries, in turn, have begun providing it support, through staff training sessions and many other services requiring similar skills. Public libraries sometimes even designate space (*SABE*) for these support services to School Libraries.

Today, with the expansion of the networks of school and university libraries, that resource situation is progressively being changed. Also the adult population is increasingly using the public libraries.

5 Literacy and new user groups

The need to improve reading habits, to which we must nowadays add new demands like computer literacy, is linked to the high level of functional illiteracy of the Portuguese population. This illiteracy is mostly due to the early drop-out from school, which is being combated across the entire country (today, compulsory education is still 9 years). The high adult illiteracy among the Portuguese, should also be understood in view of 50 years of dictatorship, during which education and culture were obviously never a priority.

In recent decades there has been a flight of the rural population to the urban centres, abandoning agriculture and changing to the professions of the secondary and tertiary sectors. This migration has created an extra demand for information services to meet the challenges of the emerging information and knowledge society. The necessary

infra-structures and technical facilities are, however, not yet widely accessible at home for the Portuguese population, specially with a lower income.

To these changes in the population one can add the increasing number of immigrants from mainly Eastern European countries.

The above mentioned factors, can explain, in part, the popularity of the modern public libraries which have been built and equipped according to the requirements – a major national and local investment. The libraries present themselves as attractive spaces for various and increasingly new user groups. All are welcome.

Special attention is paid to the younger ones. We know that we need to invest in the younger generations, when establishing priorities and preparing for a better future.

We should point out the extraordinary care and attention that is given to the children. The children's departments present an enormous variety of activities. They are organised by highly qualified professionals – a service, considered exceptional by the foreign librarians who visit us.

6 Alternative for leisure time

The public library has still another role to play in the city environment. Our consumer society is fascinated by shopping centres where the Portuguese population likes to stroll during its free time. Here, the public library has to play a role we consider irreplaceable: namely offering alternatives for the enjoyment of leisure time in an imaginative way.

It's important for the development of everyone, to live and spend time in a space without any commercial pressure, in a safe and neutral environment, which offers the possibility of expanding knowledge, offering free, democratic access to information, without any charge.

Public Libraries are possibly the last cultural public space available to all without distinction. It is a public meeting and community space, where identity roots are sought and the future is accessed: nowadays the public library is actually an open window to the world.

But in order to remain that window, the public library has changed and will continue to change, just as the society it reflects. We do not know for sure what it will be in 20 years from now, but we believe the current trends will be emphasised.

7 New services

The creation of new services requires more flexibility in the buildings and the ability to adapt to other realities. One of them is the designated "hybrid library", in which other cultural values will converge in compliance with the library's core tasks.

Fundamental contributions to the life-long learning and social inclusion aspects, which are recognised as inevitable objectives in our days, are now added to the public library's basic missions of information and recreation.

The development of multiple functionalities is forcibly reflected in a new design of the interior spaces, which small and big European public libraries now are undertaking. A special conference in the Netherlands was dedicated to the creation of libraries as

'public paradises'. Recommendations made to the Council of Europe and authorities include:

- facilitating investment and maintenance of indispensable infrastructure and innovations for public information and library services from adequate buildings.
- supporting the inclusion of public libraries as important public spaces in new city planning and development;
- supporting the inclusion of citizens' consultation (also by children and young people) in the building process of public libraries;
- promoting that library services are included in basic services in rural areas;

(see: www.debibliotheken.nl/english; conference proceedings forthcoming)

The biggest of public libraries in Europe may serve as an example for restyling: the Public Library of Rotterdam. After 10 years of operation, this library dedicated 10 million euros to the restyling process.

There is no doubt that, in general, the image of the public library and its integration in the city planning has decisively enhanced the live of cities and villages. Sometimes they are themselves the driving force of a profound change: I am thinking of the recently opened and beautiful library in Vienna, Austria, on the edge of a depressed and problematic neighbourhood. Something similar has been announced for Lisbon.

During 15 years, we have created library services by rehabilitation of buildings or purpose built libraries in many parts of the country. Good architects have been in charge, advised by librarians, which is one of the requirements of the ongoing programme we mentioned before.

8 New settings

The new Portuguese libraries are therefore important public spaces, affecting the towns' design. They have even developed into new focal points by combining functions with other cultural and civil buildings.

Special areas are dedicated to reading. Different types of media are often presented in integrated collections. Other spaces have been dedicated to exhibitions and meetings of varying themes – corresponding to the interests of the different user groups. They assume significant dimensions and become the meeting point or the "town square" of that community.

These new services and settings offer possibilities to experiences of exchange and social life, in an environment favourable to personal and collective development, non-existent until recently.

It has changed the population's way of living and interacting, as can easily be observed in many parts of the country, as the result of national and local development planning.

So, one can understand that the Public Library is situated at the core of the local cultural policy. And equally so, stimulating the establishment of libraries is considered to be, right from its starting point, the most successful programme of the Governmental cultural policy.