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- Andrew Benjamin
- Davina Jackson

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# on the library

## text

Andrew Benjamin

## images

Terroir

## INTRODUCTION

A competition entry by Terroir for the New National Library of the Czech Republic prompted an essay by Andrew Benjamin on the idea of the library and its relationship to nationalism and public space.

## READING AND WRITING IN PUBLIC

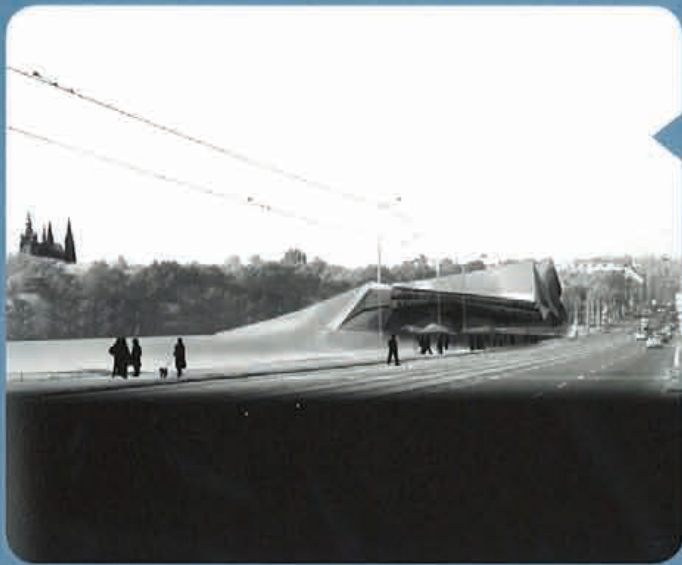
The library houses. To think, however, that the problematic of the house provides a way into the library – as though all that is really at stake is the provision of public lounge rooms – is to fail grasp the increasing complex relation between public and private space in which the library needs to be located. Equally, libraries are at the forefront of any concern with the archive and thus the process of archiving. The relationship between, for example, a national historical collection of documents and books and their subsequent digital storage and use necessitates that this aspect of the library be reconsidered. This reconsideration will be as much curatorial as architectural.

Approaching the library therefore demands that what predominates are questions of public space on the one hand and the nature of the archive on the other. These two domains should overlap productively within the process of design. Making this claim is not to assert that the design

process will take them into consideration. The argument is simply that noting their centrality constructs what might be described as a field in which judgement becomes possible.

The public used to be identified with the national. In that context public space became the domain in which the national was staged. Pelcnik's National University Library in Ljubljana (1941), for example, was an attempt to integrate a conception of Slovenian identity with a specific conception of modernity. After Pelcnik the relationship between national identity or even local identity and the architectural no longer has a determining role in the how the library is designed, let alone in how it appears. Indeed, it is possible to conjecture that while there is a recidivist conception of nationhood that continues to show itself in populist political discourses, any real engagement with the politics of public space knows from the start that neither the public nor





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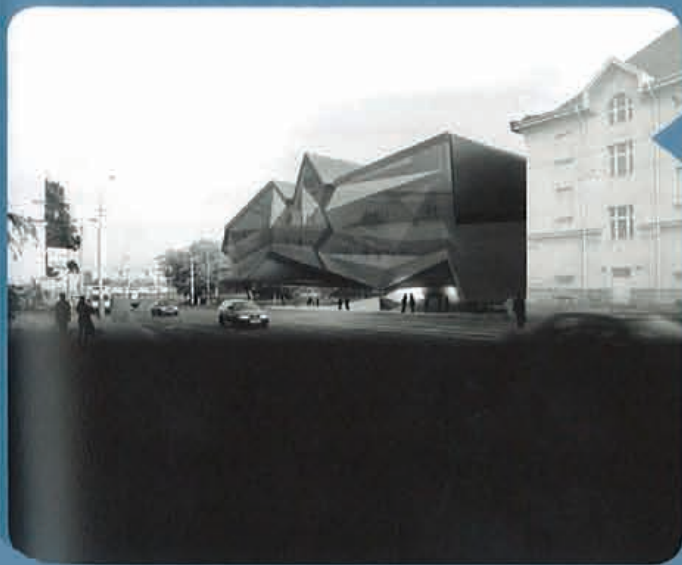
public architecture can be defined in ways that conflate or identify the public with an essentialist sense of national identity. In the context of Plečnik's project the public is conflated with the national. If this move is no longer possible, how is public space to be understood?

Any response to this question and thus any attempt to create public space have to take a diverse sense of the public into consideration. That diversity has an effect on how space is conceptualised. Equally, however, public space is a locus of control. Security guards and CCTV define public space in terms of monitoring. Public space cannot be conceived outside its assumed relation to the question of policing. That there may be a tension between policing and the diversity that defines the public, a diversity that reworks the public in terms of the cosmopolitan, has to be acknowledged as a given. Design cannot resolve the conditions that generate it; nonetheless, the practice of design has to register its presence. What then of public concerns?



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Another way in is needed. Indeed, the answer to this question resides in a reconsideration of the archive. The library's relation to storage is ubiquitous. Libraries are repositories. As such they are sites in which material is deployed and used, creating and recreating national and international narrative constructions, reconstructing lives, projecting possibilities and undoing already determined histories. Archives hold possibilities. Traditionally, access to the archive works through a hierarchy. Such a structure has its inevitable set of protocols. With the assumed centrality of material objects the hierarchy will have a structure that is determined by the materiality of the object and the role of the objects within already existing historical, national and regional narratives. A clear example is SOM's Beinecke Library at Yale University, which was built for the maintenance and celebration of rare books and manuscripts. With the material object access will always need to be policed in a number of different ways such that filters begin to limit approaches to the books and manuscripts. At each level there will be further forms of restriction. At work is a gradation of access. It is not too difficult to envisage that such a programmatic imperative will have a direct impact on design.



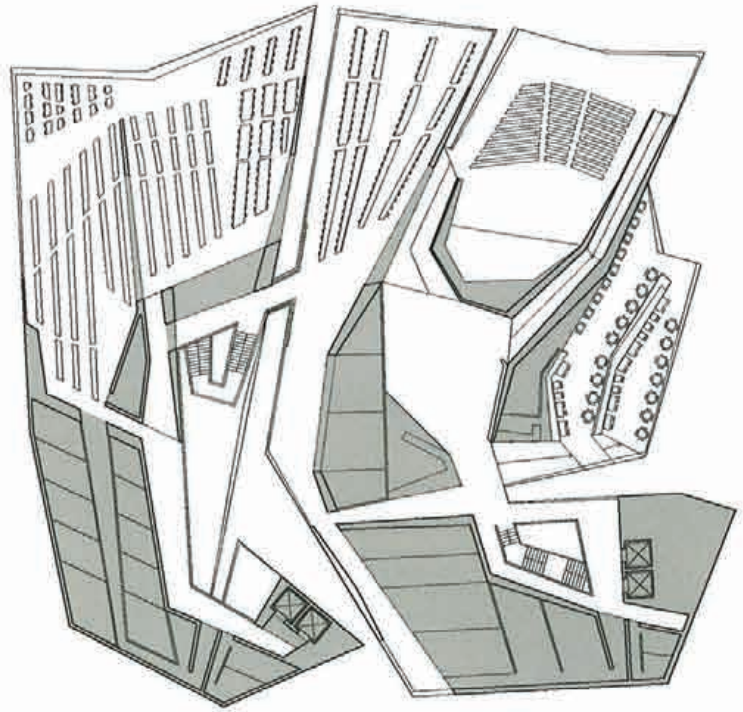
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Images of Terroir's  
submitted entry for  
the New National Library  
of the Czech Republic.





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While the digitalisation of the archive does not resolve the question of storage, nor does it eliminate a hierarchy of access; however, what it does achieve is a radical reconfiguration of that process. Digitalisation operates in a number of different ways. Collections of documents and manuscripts can be stored digitally. Books and journals can be accessed digitally. Databases allow for searches that extend beyond the material confines of the building. The corpus of entire literatures can be stored digitally. (This has already occurred with the body of work in Ancient Greek and Latin.) Images representing the majority holding of museums are increasingly at hand. The screen therefore becomes a site in which material can be employed that reaches within the building whilst reaching outside.

It should not be thought that the impact of the digital on the library involves the move from material presence to digital presence. Such a description is too simplistic. What is reconfigured in the process is the reading, the writing that stems from it and, more significantly, the status of the reader. This reconsideration is enacted within the library. It will no longer, however, be a relationship between the reader and the process of reading and writing that was structured by the same hieratical process that defined the

relation when centrality had to be attributed to the materiality of the book or the document. Or where the materials (the read) were defined exclusively by their location in the library.

Through the process of digitisation the assumed difference between the archive and the open collection is more nuanced. While the archive will necessitate storage and while there will always be the need for originals to be consulted, the nature of that need will be subject to change. Moreover, the readers accessing rare and precious documents and books will no longer occupy an already defined category. The question of the reader will have opened. If there is a parallel situation then this opening has its correlation in the potentiality that the archive – in the broadest sense of the term – will have always contained.

In this regard it is significant that Terroir's competition entry for the New National Library of the Czech Republic 2007 uses the presence of the actual archive as a structuring device within their design. Refusing to conflate the archive with mere storage they conceive a different relation. The archive is defined by its potentiality. The archive therefore is neither literal presence nor is it mere metaphor. The archive that would be located within the terrain's folds is envisaged to work up through the building, interrupting predetermined

spatial arrangements. Part of the work would be the construction of public spaces. In so doing, the archive as a reality as well as an architectural concept has a material and thus a tectonic effect.

Once the archive is defined by potentiality then it accords with a conception of the public in which the latter is no longer equated with a forced homogeneity in which hierarchies are naturalised. The public becomes a locus of diversity and the cosmopolitan. It is therefore a collectivity the actions of which cannot be regulated in advance. Hence, public space is its own archive. If there is a way of negotiating the presence of policing then it has to do with the recognition that the policing that hinders experimentation operates within structures which contain and limit the given. What cannot be policed is potentiality. The digitalisation of the archive and thus its emergence as an open structure defined by infinite use coupled to a conception of the public and public space defined in terms of a potentially unmasterable diversity should reposition the library. A repositioning that will demand a different response to the question of what it means to read and write in public.

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