
James Campbell is Director of Studies and Fellow in both architecture and the history of art in Queens College, Cambridge. Campbell notes in his preface that the idea for The library: A world history first occurred to him when he wrote a dissertation about the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford, a library in which this reviewer once worked.

Campbell wonders about the timing of his book, when we are repeatedly told that books and libraries are under threat. He notes, however, that the history of libraries has always been a ‘story of constant change and adaptation’. His focus is on library architecture and design, both internally and externally, rather than the history of their contents per se, although his text deftly analyses the scholarly literature on the history of libraries.

The numerous, sumptuous colour photographs are a constant delight. Campbell and award-winning photographer, Will Pryce, travelled to 82 libraries in 21 countries. One regret is that not one Southern Hemisphere library seems to be included. Maybe the State Library of Victoria or the National Library of Argentina could have crept in? Campbell largely follows the history of libraries chronologically, concluding that each age and culture has reinvented the library, moulding it to reflect contemporary priorities and influences.

Campbell’s first chapter, Libraries in the Ancient World, traces libraries from the beginning of writing to the fall of the Roman Empire through the libraries of Celsus at Ephesus and Alexandria, the latter reminding us that the destruction of libraries began early in history. Libraries were even a feature of Roman bath-houses, so reading in the bath also has a long history. Campbell does not restrict himself to Western civilisation, covering, for example, the Tripitaka Koreana, Haeinsa Temple in South Korea (1231), which contains 80,000 wooden printing blocks.

The architecture of a library was often a reminder of the builders’ wealth, culture and learning. During the Renaissance many libraries were built to demonstrate their patron’s erudition and culture. Michelangelo’s Biblioteca Laurenziana, commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de Medici, is the best Renaissance example. The Oxford Library, re-founded in 1602 by Sir Thomas Bodley, was, however, as much about book collections as architectural style. Campbell tells us that Portugal’s João V astonished the Rector of the University of Coimbra by telling him that the request to extend the library building was too modest. A library of exquisite baroque design was the result. Financial excess of that dimension rarely occurs now, although the Beinecke Library at Yale in the 1960s, with its huge marble walls, is an example
of relatively recent American library philanthropy.

Campbell’s final chapter, The Future of Libraries in the Electronic Age, reveals new library architecture and storage facilities of stunning design, including the Bodleian Library’s huge storage facility at Swindon, capable of holding eight million volumes. Such storage facilities are essential. Research libraries in particular should be wary of digital alternatives. As Gabriel Naudé famously wrote in 1627, ‘there is no book whatsoever, be it never so bad or decried, but may in time be sought for by some person or other’.

Featured modern libraries include the National Library of China, the Utrecht University Library with its black interior, red furniture and white floors, the Liyuan Library at Jiaojiehe outside Beijing, which has an exterior of flexed twigs wedged between rusty steel rails, and the Grimm Centre Library in Berlin, the largest open-shelving library in Germany.

Standout photographs abound, but note especially the Altenburg Library in Austria, the remarkable Long Room of Trinity College Library in Dublin, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art Library. As Campbell’s dust jacket notes, ‘the finest libraries are repositories not just of books, but also of learning, creativity and contemplations: they embody some of the highest achievements of humankind’. In the end libraries, in whatever form, undoubtedly mirror the history of civilisation itself.

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