

National Library of Luxembourg – Inauguration on 30 September 2019
Roly Keating (15 mins)

Building Libraries For The Future

Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies, dear Monique, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen – Bonjour, Guten Tag and Gudden Dag. It is a true honour to be here, and to play a small part in the celebrations of that rarest and most special event in our profession: the inauguration of a new, purpose-built national library building – open to all, sharing its knowledge, ready to welcome visitors from everywhere in the world.

In my time as Chair of CENL, the Conference of European National Librarians – an organisation of 48 of Europe's national libraries – I have with great interest followed the plans and progress made on 'the Kirchberg site', as Monique Kieffer has always referred to it. And in her updates to us over the years she has not exaggerated: this is a wonderful new building, and a spectacular new home for the national library's collections.

The development of new buildings to protect, preserve and provide access to our shared cultural heritage for the future is a regular theme for debate among national librarians across Europe and around the world. Many of us are in the middle of planning or realising our own changes and renovations, not the least because national library collections are restless, living things, constantly growing and developing, year upon year – expanding not just in scale but in variety of content type, and the purposes to which they are put. Archival-standard space to ensure they can be looked after for generations to come is an ever-present demand.

In comparison with the National Library of Luxembourg the British Library is in some ways a surprisingly young institution. We are preparing for our 50th anniversary in 2023, and our building in London has only recently celebrated its 20th birthday. But we, too, have been asking ourselves very similar questions to the ones you have so thoughtfully addressed in planning the building we stand in today:

What needs to happen in our national libraries in the 21st century? How is the world changing around us, and how do we keep pace with that change? How do our researchers want to access information today, and what do they want us to add to the memory of the nation, tomorrow and in 50 years from now?

What's not in doubt is that the very concept of a library space has changed in the era of digital transformation, but not in the ways that some were predicting even ten years ago. It is a striking fact – something we're very aware of at the British Library – that the more digital the lives of users become – the more time they spend peering at screens, touching and swiping – the longer the daily queues in front of our buildings become.

It seems that even as the digital revolution progresses and deepens, so perhaps counterintuitively does the power, and meaning, and allure of great civic spaces, where people of all backgrounds can come together, on equal terms, to study, to think, to read, to make new knowledge.

National libraries have a very particular role to play in this changing world. We are custodians of memory, of intellectual heritage. We preserve it, help it to grow in each generation, and hand it carefully on to the next one.

But we are also active and dynamic contributors to contemporary society. We support research of every kind, into any topic under the sun. We stimulate the innovation to sustain and develop a healthy economy in a knowledge-driven world. We deliver unforgettable cultural and learning experiences that enrich people's lives, and inspire the thinkers and researchers of tomorrow.

This knowledge-driven world presents opportunities but also risks and challenges. We have become all too familiar with the erosion of trust and civic values that can be caused by the sheer superabundance of information sources that we all deal with now in our daily lives, where the boundaries between truth and falsehood can sometimes seem dangerously blurred.

This is an environment in which national libraries have a unique and vital role, both symbolic and practical, as spaces where the timeless values of libraries – of free enquiry, independent thought, open creativity and the patient acquisition of knowledge – are expressed at the highest level of national commitment, and which our users know to be sanctuaries of unbiased access to the information they need, delivered by professionals they can absolutely trust.

Because however beautiful spaces we build, we all know that at their heart libraries of all kinds are about the talented people who bring them to life, day in day out – the critical work of our committed, professional and passionate library colleagues who, objectively and non-judgmentally, guide and navigate our users through oceans of content and point them in the direction they are seeking.

In the words of one celebrated student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: “When in doubt, go to the library”. There you will find that copy of that book, newspaper, map, journal, letter, photograph, music and even a particular website from a particular day; and a trusted person to deliver it to you.

I have often heard people comment that ‘physical books’ are a thing of the past, that they have been fully replaced by e-books. But this is not a reality, nor does it look set to become a reality in the foreseeable future.

Digitally produced content – in the library world referred to as ‘born digital’ – is increasing, but so is the rate of physical publishing. We live in a hybrid world, and our duty is to find ways of providing our readers and researchers the best possible access to this rich hybridity while continuing to advance our cause of opening our legacy collections to everyone through new spaces and new technologies.

This parallel existence of physical and digital is a major consideration in the way we look at our services today, and digitisation has been one of the key strands of activity that libraries around the world have undertaken, to enable researchers to access whatever they are looking for, wherever they are.

At the British Library we bring all of this activity into a major programme we call ‘Heritage Made Digital’, supporting not just our efforts to digitise key parts of our collections but ensuring they are freely available on-line to everyone in the UK and across the world – and published according to shared international standards that allow scholarly connections to be made between different national library collections at a scale simply impossible before.

For the incoming flow of new publications, libraries are working hard to enable access in both physical and digital format, increasingly allowing readers to use their own hand-held laptops and mobile phones to view the collections.

This new landscape of content and access requires new skills, including ever-more sophisticated techniques behind the scenes to manage description of data, so that readers can select the easiest access to a piece of information as well as use it for their research. New generations of tools to interrogate digital content – data analytics, Optical Character Recognition, geo-spatial referencing – are already making an entirely new range of research practices possible.

I am constantly inspired by the sheer creativity with which people engage with our digitised collections, and am excited to see what the next 10 years bring as digital scholarship develops and matures across research disciplines. National libraries – with the right support – have a unique capacity, and the obligation, to remain at the forefront of those developments, working together share knowledge and collaborate on new technology trends.

Information management and literacy is a joint endeavour across national boundaries, and it is only through open collaboration and partnership – especially in the emerging disciplines of machine-learning and artificial intelligence – can we continue to fulfil the unique role we are playing in our societies today.

The daily work of serving our readers now, and in years to come, obliges us to think about our spaces, and the journey our readers take – online and onsite – in finding information and creating knowledge. And there could not be a better illustration of this than the building you are standing in today.

The National Library of Luxemburg @ Kirchberg has successfully brought together its collections from 7 separate sites, created almost 500 seats for readers as well as public social spaces such as chill-out zones, family areas, a café and collaborative spaces. It has done this in a way that maximises flexibility, and with the future always firmly in sight.

As we know well at the British Library, good transport infrastructure is absolutely vital so it's great to see your enviable tram link as well as an underground car park, which will make it easy for everyone to come here not just to research but also to enjoy the Library's cultural and exhibitions programme. Most impressively of all, perhaps, this library has fully embraced the principles of operating in a green and sustainable manner, something many of us are keen to do but sometimes struggle with as we tackle the constraints of our legacy accommodation.

This is a library building fit and ready for the 21st century, to serve its local and national communities and to reach beyond its physical boundaries to collaborate with its international partners and friends. For every great national library is also an international library – part of a network of institutions around the world, all united by a common mission, to advance knowledge and mutual understanding.

Networks such as CENL have a vital role to play in this mission, ensuring that we support each other in facing the complexities and challenges that great institutions of knowledge and learning will always face. Both in my capacity as CENL Chair and as Chief Executive of the British Library, I am immensely grateful to have had the support and friendship of the National Library of Luxembourg over the course of many years. I am fascinated and eager to see how you will use your new home, and how we can all continue to learn from you, and from each other.

On behalf of all of members of the Conference of European National Librarians, as well as the British Library, and of the national library community around the world, my warmest congratulations to you, my dear Monique, and to you all. Thank you.