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# Buildings Speaking About Reading

THREE LIBRARIES: LONDON, WARSAW, TALLINN

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A national library is a symbolic space. It is a place where an architect feels the pressure of "representing" the nation through that most sacred of national symbols: language. Accordingly, library projects often spin out of control as the enormous amount of money and resources needed are habitually withheld by central governments that, nonetheless, are unwilling to cancel projects so prestigious. The late critic Martin Pawley once proposed that the British Library model itself after a Cadbury storage shed, as that would be a far better and more convenient way of holding the priceless contents of the national collection than an elaborate, pretentious work of fine art. He was, of course, aware of how impossible that modest proposal actually was, considering the symbolism and self-declaration that any such project has as its mandate.

Given that national libraries, like nationalism itself, are a modern idea, they have often been tackled by modernist architects, who have had to find a subtle lexicon with which to represent the nation—one not indebted to the performance of nationality indulged by traditionalist architects in authoritarian states. These architects of national prominence with modern ambitions couldn't create library buildings like, say, the Lenin Library in Moscow or the Central Library in Manchester, England, the architects of which had rifled through the annals of Rome to find the appropriate form for a library in the 1930s. A straightforward, undeclarative modernism—of the sort used by local or university libraries, such as John Madin's at Birmingham, England, or later by the French government in Dominique Perrault's chillingly rectilinear and monumental Bibliothèque Nationale—was also to be avoided. As a result, these buildings can be a strange combination of modernism and architecture parlante. This piece is on three such libraries, designed by Stanislaw Fijakowski, Colin St. John Wilson, and Raine Karp, to declare the persistence of national cultures for three very different European countries—an ex-global imperial hegemon, a major regional power that was wiped off the map in the nineteenth century, and a country that did not exist as a "nation" until the twentieth century. All were projects of the 1970s completed in the 1990s, and all attempt an uneasy, complex negotiation between tradition and modernity.

Warsaw's Biblioteka Narodowa was constructed on a parkland site just south of the center of the city. Designed by Fijakowski in 1963, construction began in 1977 and was officially completed in 1998. As a project, it lasted as long as the protracted battle over Colin St. John Wilson's British Library, which was completed in 1997, more than thirty years after the architect's first, 1962 design. The contrasts between these two buildings, so close in temporality, craftsmanship, and symbolic import, are noteworthy. Wilson's building is a deliberately compromised modernism, with strong Brutalist volumes leavened by redbrick, travertine, and oak. It is ridiculously English in its air of mild-mannered compromise, trying to plow a path between the Scylla of the traditionalist Prince Charles tendency and the Charybdis of an extremist, history-is-bunk modernism. For all its crafted and sculpted masonry, it aspires to lightness—white walls, placidity, a sense of metaphorical and literal enlightenment.

Fijakowski's building, by contrast, is somber, murky, and deliberately maze-like; knowledge is presented as a puzzle to solve, not as an open book. You can't gather that entirely from the facade, which is a clipped and sprawling, stretched-out piece of late modernism. It borrows more than a bit from the Vesnin brothers' original design for the Lenin Library in Moscow, or their ZIL Palace of Culture in the same city; its volumes spread out across a park—a long curtain-walled glass and marble facade to the street, another to the back of the park, unassumingly grouped around a windowless bookstack. Canopies provide good places to smoke 'round the back and in the corners, and intersecting walkways enclose a quadrangle. The difference between this and the minimal volumes of the Vesnin brothers can be spotted in the panels by the entrance, where an abstract stone relief of indeterminate gaseous and fleshy forms, designed in 1982 by the artist Jan Kucz, is captioned with "Biblioteka Narodowa." Their cursive lettering, which has seemingly crept in from a Surrealist painting, indicates that there will be more than mere reason at work in this library.

Inside the Biblioteka, the dominant colors are not Wilson's red and white, but black and gold—a palette for the extravagant scholar. The floors are of black and yellow terrazzo, with black benches; the columns are in an exotic yellow stone that looks like marble veined with nicotine stains. That strange yellowish color is everywhere: in the wood of the card catalogs, the



The British Library by Colin St. John Wilson.  
Photograph by the author.



Canopies provide good places to smoke 'round back at the Biblioteka Narodowa. Photograph by the author.

reading room desks, and the bronze handles of the doors to the toilets—with *BN* carved onto them in clear capital letters. The yellowy columns of the reading rooms lead to a suspended ceiling that is divided into a faceted grid, where wood panels are speckled by clusters of egg-shaped bulbs and bisected by dark yellow strip lighting.

The Surrealism continues downstairs, where there is a small cinema, the walls alternate between black, white-veined marble, and corrugated concrete, with splay-legged settees underneath. In the restaurant the Surrealism becomes nearly horrifying. Diners are accompanied by a continuous panel of beaten metal, showing eerie organic forms like those at the entrance, except here they are emphasized by a dim and murky light. Fijakowski's is not an illegitimate vision of knowledge and its achievement, nor is it entirely an image of the various monsters created by the sleep of reason. It is education transmuted as a difficult, strange, and endlessly surprising quest—a continual search that can take you where you never knew you wanted to be. It's also a social condenser, at least of sorts. Films and exhibitions run here, and unlike in the British Library, much of the space is public. One exhibition shown recently included a series of unusually seditious slogans from Bernard Shaw, Toni Negri, and others, embossed on the wall in blue letters.

As a monument in space and a piece of city, however, the most



A palette for a serious scholar inside the Biblioteka Narodowa. Photograph by the author.



Raine Karp's fading Linnahall. Photograph by the author.

intriguing of Soviet-era libraries is yet another national library. It is a repository of knowledge that symbolizes the intellectual life of Estonia, and, like Warsaw's national library, it was finished just after the collapse of Communism. Because of that, there have been especially forceful attempts to claim it as a national architecture, even involving acts of subversion that conned Brezhnev and Gorbachev out of tens of millions of rubles and raw materials. Given the timing, any deliberate anti-Soviet intent does not seem likely; in fact, the building adheres closely to the old Soviet maxim "national in form, socialist in content." Unlike most buildings that followed that model, however, its national form is not appliqué but an elemental reworking of historical architecture from the ground up.

The architect of Tallinn's National Library, Raine Karp, might just be the most original of Soviet architects (he is still alive, and would probably not appreciate the description)—at least after Melnikov. Karp takes his intuitive sense of form and scrupulousness toward context and amplifies it into buildings that practically become landscape. They do not complement topography but rather are topography themselves. Karp's best-known building is Linnahall, on a promontory leading out to the Baltic Sea. It's hard to know exactly where the "building" starts at Linnahall; it's really a series of platforms, giving visitors a magnificent view of Tallinn's Hanseatic skyline and the sea, with ships heading off to Finland and Russia. Appropriately enough, given that Cold War theorists considered the USSR a modern reincarnation of "Oriental Despotism," it elicits comparisons like the pyramids, the Ziggurat of Ur, and the temples of the Aztecs.

The National Library is not quite as insane, which is one (of many) reasons why Linnahall is derelict and the library is well-kept; while the youth of Tallinn are drinking dubious plonk in the former, they (or at least a group of art students) are sketching and painting the monumental lines of the building in the latter. Like Linnahall, it is practically geological, an eruption of elemental form. A symmetrical stone entrance, with a circular stained-glass window, somewhere between Romanesque and Brutal, is the nearest thing to conventional architecture in the building—a "normal" facade, with a square facing the rest of the city and steps on either side. Walking up, visitors find themselves on more of Karp's platforms, which wind around stepped reading rooms, creating another monumental pyramid/temple/zig-



Stepped reading rooms at the Estonian National Library. Photograph by the author.

gurat, again in an utterly original language that fuses the most experimental mid-twentieth-century architecture with something entirely ancient. Looking down along those walkways, visitors will see a series of vaults like some kind of renaissance prison, catacombs of books. It is a labyrinth begging exploration—new corners and spaces encourage wandering, each presenting new views of the building and the city around it.

But despite this engagement with movement and views of the surrounding landscape, these buildings don't seem to point outward, in the cliché of Baltic modernism. There is no attempt to emulate, imitate, or have a dialogue with Sweden or Finland—no Aalto-like restraint. They come instead from an intense architectural intellect, drawing on forms that are personal, historical, and geological, but that most of all try to help the visitor make sense of other architectures and landscapes. These are buildings as monumental viewing platforms, containing within them, as if almost by side effect, repositories of culture, like theaters and libraries. Both buildings open out to the city, but they are not self-effacing either. They have a strong, if lurking and oblique, presence in the city.

Fancifully, one could argue that the geological effect of the building roots literature in the landscape. In its use of the local limestone there is a clear regionalist gesture, as, too, perhaps in the central window of the front facade, suggesting the rose windows of Gothic cathedrals. It appears not as a nationalist building but a regional one—a form of local modernism. In this it may reflect the culture of Tallinn itself, an international city from its very inception as a Hansa entrepôt, and one fairly evenly divided, at the time of the library's building and today, into both Estonians and Russians. It is "of" the city but does not declare a particular position about to whom the city belongs—unlike, say, the Russian Orthodox churches built in the late nineteenth century, or the Museums of Occupation and commemorative crosses built in more recent years.

At least two of these libraries reflect a certain sense of national crisis. The British Library's thirty-year plus gestation reflected a general sense of national malaise that often translated into a nostalgic, post-imperial anti-modernism. And though it bent over backward to please both modernists and traditionalists, the latter still hated it—Prince Charles referring to it as a "dim collection of brick sheds groping for some symbolic signifi-

cance,” a fact that rather recalls an absolute monarch rejecting huffily his courtiers’ attempts to please. [1] It is both compromised, in its attempt not to offend both camps, and deeply stubborn in its dogged fulfillment of an architect’s particular and total vision, from the bricks to the door handles. It was not, however, accepted as a national symbol, at least it hasn’t been yet. The National Library of Warsaw, built mostly during Poland’s period of martial law in the 1980s, has similarly not become a symbol, although it is less likely that the architect had ever intended it to be so, designing instead a building that reveals its secrets only upon close inspection. Neither could ever possibly be conceived as “icons.”

Of the three, only the Tallinn National Library was able to become symbolic, however, and not because of the building but because it could be yoked post-completion to an Estonian national and linguistic rebirth with which the building initially had little to do. By *not* immediately pegging itself to one particular competing narrative or identity, Karp managed to create a large and original modernist building that didn’t feel like an imposition and was, in that sense, a document of confidence. Formally this is reflected in the way that the building looks toward the city, its skyline, and the sea—its modernity deeply rooted, heavy with limestone and concrete, with its gaze oriented toward a future that might escape the shibboleths of nationalism.

[1] Quoted in Nicholas Barber, “Drawing the Battle Lines,” *The Independent*, April 26, 2014.