

Utopia

International co-operation between architecture libraries - a utopian project?

Francesco Di Giuseppe and Rossana Morriello,
*Biblioteca Centrale di Architettura,
Politecnico di Torino*

1) The Italian context



Since an exhaustive analysis of architecture libraries in Italy – both in terms of quantity and quality – is not available at the moment, it may be useful to consider the general features of Italian academic libraries, as they emerged from the Preliminary Report of the Osservatorio per la Voluzione del Sisema Universitario (Review Committee for the Evaluation of the University System) promoted by the Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research (MURST), in the research programme called 'Measurement and Evaluation of University Libraries'. (1)

In relation to the European programme LIBECON 2000, the Review Committee thoroughly investigated the academic libraries, collecting as much data as possible in order to understand the performance and quality of the entire system. The decision to adopt data survey procedures and methods similar to those employed in other EU countries allows comparison at the international level.

Taking into consideration the known statistical indicators, the Report underlines the organisational weakness caused by fragmentation into a great number of small libraries. Moreover, a lack of efficiency in services emerged, especially when considering the number of students (2) as related to the number of libraries, professionals (Full Time Equivalent), and expenditure. According to the Report, in Italy in 1997 there were 2221 libraries linked up with 1639 administrative units, while in 1995/96, in the UK, 104 universities administered a total of 556 libraries, and in France, in 1994, there were 301 libraries.

Thanks to statistical data collected by SCONUL and ARL, it is also possible to attempt a more precise comparison with English and North American academic institutions. Even in this case, although some relevant indicators are at the same level, it is clear that Italian libraries still have to do a great deal of work before they can offer – at the highest standard – the most requested services in a modern academic library, that is ILL, SDI, IT, networked electronic resources, reference services, and user training.

The Report also presents some solutions for the improvement of the general efficiency of the system,

and these solutions were confirmed in the workshop 'Academic Libraries of the Future : Ideas, Projects, Resources', organised by the Conference of Italian University Deans (CRUI), last May in Rome. (3)

Assuming international size and quality standards, MURST and CRUI outlined a set of guidelines to re-organise academic libraries. The main aims for the future will be: to merge libraries, to enhance services and co-operation, and to improve the professional qualifications of librarians. With respect to the autonomy of universities, both organisational and financial, it will be their duty to fulfil these guidelines. A main role in this difficult task will be played by Academic Library Systems (SBA) which were constituted during the 90's in all universities with the specific role of co-ordinating libraries and their activities.

In the complex and varied world of Italian academic libraries, architecture libraries present the same features and problems (space, equipment, resources, staff) as similar organisations in other fields. Among more than thirty Italian libraries specialising in various aspects of architecture and urban studies, it is possible to find well-established institutions (for example, most faculty libraries) but also very small libraries connected to departments and institutes, or libraries with a long historical tradition as well as newly created ones. (4)

Since the mid-80's, CNBA (Coordinamento Nazionale delle Biblioteche di Architettura) (5) has been active in introducing innovations to the tools available to architecture librarians, promoting the exchange of knowledge and professional experience, and collaboration and co-operation between libraries. In 1984, many libraries were involved in one of the first CNBA achievements, the "Catalogue of serials owned by Italian architecture libraries". Since then, many activities have been carried out, involving a growing number of libraries, especially in thematic working groups. During Bibliocom-Bibliotexpo 2000, held in Rome, 25-27 October 2000, CNBA presented its activities and projects in a session entitled "Themes of disciplinary cooperation".

Among these projects it is worth mentioning the realisation of MAIA, (6) a MetaOpac that will allow users to search the catalogues of most of Italian architecture libraries simultaneously. Moreover, twelve libraries are involved in another CNBA project – the cataloguing and indexing of articles published before 1990 in main Italian architecture reviews. This huge effort will produce a database that will fill a lack in Italian bibliographic tools. It should be clear, then, that the main focus for CNBA activities is co-operation, and this theme will be further investigated during the next meeting of the Association to be held in Rome in June 2001.

2) From national to international co-operation

The need to better investigate the subject of co-operation, intended not as a simple slogan but as a series of concrete actions undertaken in order to improve the quality of library services, seems to be essential in Italy where this tool is still weak since it is new and lacks the appropriate instruments both from the point of view of law and organisation. During the recent meeting of the Italian Library Association, (7) data available show that 70-80% of Italian libraries do not co-operate or they do so only in theory. The limited number of cases in which some sort of co-operation is realised, and where, however, some problems remain, are mainly co-operation in terms of cataloguing and management of the catalogue, while a greater attempt should be made in organising and providing library services.

In factual and functional terms, the discussion of co-operation implies the need to overcome many problems that the above-mentioned lack of uniformity in Italian libraries, and particularly in university libraries, causes. These problems concern insufficient staff and different levels of qualifications, little uniformity in management of services, difficulty in getting public institutions involved, cost management, and lack of adequate laws to facilitate co-operative projects. It is a challenge for Italian libraries and, notwithstanding the particular Italian situation which makes a comparison on many points difficult, some sort of collaboration with other European countries is extremely important, especially in universities where some common features can be identified. However, this is not always easy, since while the situation in England and the United States is well known, in other countries it is not.

Nevertheless, something is being done in academic libraries. Particularly in the area of architecture, there are many projects in progress, also at a European level. This suggests that co-operation in the field of architecture is not a utopia, but an effectively realisable project. The CD-Rom *Urbadisc* is an example; the CD-Rom includes the most important European architecture and urbanism databases. Italy participates in Archinet, (8) an association for the production and dissemination of information on architecture, design, urbanism, planning and related fields. Some other projects are particularly interesting as they specialise in the construction of multilingual thesauri, like *Muleta* (9) (realised within the European programme MLIS) and, even though not strictly on a university base, the *Thesaurus de l'architecture* (realised with the contribution of the French government). (10) The *Thesaurus de l'architecture* is based on the French database Mérimée and shaped on the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) and on the Thesaurus of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of

England and will soon be translated into Italian by the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, so creating the basis for international communication.

The very need for widespread dissemination of information between European architecture libraries makes the creation of a forum for discussion and comparison desirable, especially if it can be considered a useful step towards wider international disciplinary co-operation:

- First, through the creation of a federation of national associations of architecture librarians existing in different European areas, such as ARCLIB and CNBA, that can promote a network for the sharing of knowledge and experience, with the support of an international electronic mailing list, in the same way as IFLA already acts – an organisation that will be able to realise and co-ordinate a series of activities for architecture librarians; international exchanges perhaps within European programmes such as Socrates, a discussion forum and an annual meeting that promotes contact and comparison between different national circumstances; constant training and updating on projects and on specialised subjects in the field of architecture.

An activity that could be easily understood and visible through a website and bring in time the realisation of other important projects for architecture librarians:

- the creation of a directory of libraries and schools of architecture, a collection of selected and classified resources, as realised by RUDI and ADAM in the UK (and, in the American context, CYBURBIA) – a project that would be the basis for further collaboration in terms of sharing of digital resources and the creation of an international digital library of architecture.

Part 1 of this paper has been written by F. Di Giuseppe and Part 2 by R. Morriello.

Notes

(1) In its web site <<http://www.murst.it/>>, MURST presents projects, on-line databases containing statistical data concerning students, courses, etc., and official documents. The Report is found at <<http://www.murst.it/osservatorio/ricbibl.htm#Rapporto>>

(2) The Review Committee for the Evaluation of the University System cites, referring to 1995/96, 1,018,938 students (FTE) in the UK, and 694,116 (estimated FTE) in Italy. Referring to 1997/98, ISTAT (Istituto per la Statistica), <<http://www.istat.it/>>, gives the data shown below for university students.

(3) The final document and related documents are available at the address <<http://www.cru.it/forum-bibl/index.html>>

(4) In the last few years, according to European standards, the Italian university system has experienced a process of de-centralisation, while the so-called 'mega-universities' have reduced their size.

(5) CNBA has moved its web site to the new address <<http://www.cnba.it/>> ; contents and graphics are under construction.

(6) In collaboration with the Italian Library Association (AIB) and CILEA (Consorzio Interuniversitario Lombardo per l'Elaborazione Automatica), CNBA has produced a prototype of the Virtual Collective Catalogue of Architecture Libraries, which is available at the address <<http://azalai.cilea.it/maia/>>

(7) Some papers presented at the meeting are available on the Italian Library Association website: <<http://www.aib.it/aib/commiss/cnbp/centro2.htm>>

(8) The members of Archinet are: CNBA, IUAV (Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia), OIKOS and QUASCO. Further information is available on the website: <<http://iuavbc.iuav.it/archinet/archinet.html>>

(9) Muleta - Multilingual and Multimedia Tool for Environment, Town and Country Planning, Building and Architecture: <<http://iuavbc.iuav.it/urbandata/muleta.htm>>

(10) Thesaurus d'architecture: <<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/thesarch/pres.htm>>

Note (2):

	Iscritti			Immatricolati al 1° anno			Diplomati e laureati (a)		
	Totale	Maschi	Femmine	Totale	Maschi	Femmine	Totale	Maschi	Femmine
Agrario	41.577	23.778	17.799	8.783	5.139	3644	2.636	1.606	1.030
Architettura	77.656	40.341	37.315	8.864	4.335	4529	7.234	3.700	3.534
Chimico-farmaceutico	55.271	21.290	33.981	10.936	4.062	6874	4.411	1.704	2.707
Economico-statistico	253.904	135.770	118.134	46.094	25.216	20878	24.306	12.801	11.505
Geo-biologico	71.464	28.322	43.142	14.970	6.289	8681	5.275	1.982	3.293
Giuridico	293.833	123.502	170.331	50.689	22.185	28504	18.632	8.060	10.572
Ingegneria	211.230	179.302	31.928	37.864	31.673	6191	14.806	12.770	2.036
Insegnamento	68.575	6.918	61.657	18.324	2.047	16277	3.838	379	3.459
Letterario	168.774	47.295	121.479	32.951	10.326	22625	12.219	2.830	9.389
Linguistico	89.231	11.707	77.524	18.024	3.008	15016	8.106	679	7.427
Medico	87.128	35.919	51.209	15.865	5.453	10412	10.685	4.205	6.480
Politico-sociale	144.066	64.064	80.002	32.285	14.280	18005	10.094	4.212	5.882
Psicologico	47.035	9.395	37.640	10.723	2.217	8506	2.678	482	2.196
Scientifico	50.047	31.950	18.097	9.660	6.470	3190	4.836	2.620	2.216
Educazione fisica	17.205	9.087	8.118	4.028	2.261	1767	2.171	1.007	1.164
TOTALE	1.676.996	768.640	908.356	320.060	144.961	175099	131.927	59.037	72.890