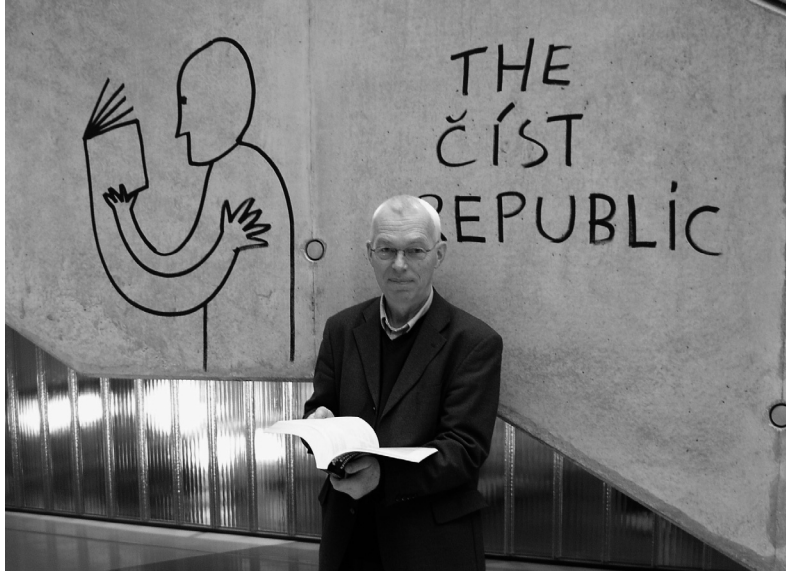


People in the news

Martin Svoboda



Martin Svoboda, director of the National Technical Library (NTK) in Prague, Czech Republic, was interviewed for *Serials* by Zuzana Helinsky as the innovative design for the new library, in which he played a pivotal role, became a reality.

Building a new library means having to think many decades into the future. What were the important considerations as you began the assignment and launched the competition for the design of the new NTK building?

Designing a library at the turn of the millennium was a very interesting, not to say nearly impossible, task. Preparations for the construction programme began in 1998, at a time when the information technologies that are at the heart of the modern library had started to develop with dramatic speed. It was evident that we could not predict precisely how the building would be required to function in 20 or in 50 years' time, and so it was important that the design should be simple, flexible and easily reconfigurable. Even then, it was clear that the most important thing in the library would not be the individual books, because these would become available almost entirely via the internet. Today, the library building is viewed primarily as a social space for studies, where it is possible to work in groups or to study privately, directly at the information source. From the outset, a requirement of the programme was that the

library should serve as a place for meetings, and that sufficient space be included for this. We wanted to include a café, an exhibition and conference hall and other public spaces. The winning project addressed all of this, in part, by designing the entire ground floor as a freely accessible public area, a kind of covered square that serves as a meeting point for students as well as other visitors. Inside the library are further services for the general public: a branch of the City Library, a café, bookshop, copy centre, computer accessories shop, gallery and 240-seat lecture hall, including conference facilities.

The library as an open organism: this is the trend of the present moment. During the design, did you make use of the practical experiences of your colleagues abroad?

Of course we took a great deal of inspiration from libraries that had already been built, and interesting projects elsewhere. The capacity of the study spaces was taken from the British and American standards, while keeping in mind that Dejvice is not truly a 'campus' in the Anglo-Saxon

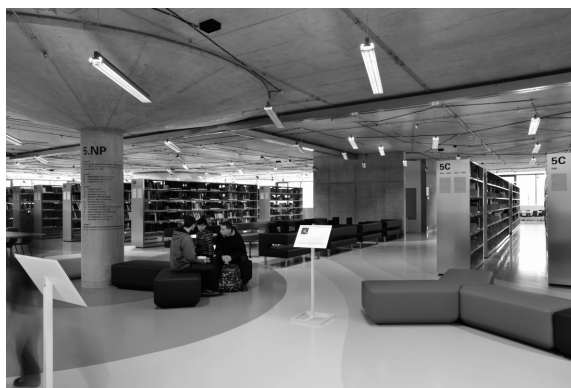
sense of the word. Also, as the National Library's automation expert, during the 1990s I visited around 25 libraries on the east coast of the USA, besides regularly attending the seminar for automation experts in European libraries, which meets each year in a different library. Back then, I had no idea that we would be constructing a new library so soon, but I absorbed the ideas somehow indirectly, just like many of my colleagues who also travelled, and each of them contributed something. In 1997, I was nominated by Jiří Gruša, the Minister of Education, as the director of the State Technical Library, and Prof Emanuel Ondráček, then the deputy education minister, assigned me the task of creating a new building. From that moment, understandably, we all started studying other libraries and their operations quite thoroughly, taking up information from conferences at home and abroad, as well as using materials from the non-governmental professional body LIBER, which supports the exchange of information between libraries across Europe.

In terms of operating procedure, what is most unusual is the extent to which books are available freely: half a million volumes will be freely accessible on shelves directly inside the study rooms, and readers will no longer have to order them from the depositories. What are the advantages, and possible disadvantages, of this method of organization?

First of all, I should correct the numbers here: the total capacity of the building is 1.7 million volumes and the open-shelf capacity is indeed 600,000, but with the proviso that initially, we are putting into free circulation 'only' around 200,000 volumes and are gradually adding to this number. The open-

shelf holdings will be organized according to the American Library of Congress classification system, which is used in many academic libraries around the world. For navigation and searching, it is also possible to use a computer terminal with the catalogue, which provides not only information about the book's code, but also its physical position on the shelf. It might seem that the open-shelf method would mean that fewer qualified librarians are needed, but the opposite is true: we need more people to keep the holdings in order and ensure that the books are put where they belong. Readers may not return the books to the shelf themselves, unless they are standing directly at the bookshelf and immediately put the book back after looking through it. As soon as the books are taken into the study rooms, they have to leave them on a special table, where the library staff will take them and reshelve them. Of course, there is always the danger that somehow a few books may end up where they shouldn't. To keep this from happening, we've given the individual volumes RFID chips, which also allows readers to check them out and return them by themselves. When the books are returned, a machine will use the chip to place the books in the correct area, and from here the librarians can easily put them back where they belong. And for checking on the shelves, we also have another device we call the 'librarians' assistant', which is a hand-held scanner that the librarian can run along the bookshelf to see if a book doesn't belong there. All of this is very important, because checking by eye and replacing volumes by hand would be a gigantic amount of work. What I've mentioned so far are the advantages. The main disadvantage of such a system is that it demands a much greater amount of space – but this is of course why the new library has been built in the first place.

The open shelving has the capacity for up to 600,000 volumes



What were the criteria for putting the books into open circulation?

Originally, we planned to have each academic field treated somewhat differently, so that the 'chronological depth' for different subjects would be different. Architects or mathematicians often look at books and journals from 10 or 20 years ago, while, for example, a book from just 10 years ago is ancient history for a student of computer science.

We started work on this, and made a detailed analysis of borrowings from the past several years, but unfortunately realized that there was not time to complete the preparations for this in time for the opening of the new building in September 2009, and so we decided against the plan of differing time perspectives. In the end, we made a more or less straight line, based on the year of publication regardless of whether the subject be, for example, electronics or chemistry. So far, we've prepared for open circulation, as I said, around 200,000 of the most frequently borrowed volumes. The rest will be added piecemeal: as soon as a book from the depository is borrowed at a reader's request and is returned, the volume will be given a chip, marked with a Library of Congress code and put into open circulation. For now, we have left one shelf in each stack empty, so that we have one-sixth of our capacity in reserve. As the shelves fill up, the books that have not been borrowed for some time will themselves be sent to the depository. I believe that the holdings in open circulation and in the depository will naturally balance each other out, and that what we will have out in the library will only be what is truly most needed.

Planning on the new NTK building started at the time when digital technologies were developing at a rapid pace, and it was hard to predict how things would look even a year ahead. Did anything surprise you to the extent that you had to change the project, to add to the capacity of the network or even to the physical space in the building?

Things that now seem completely ordinary to us were only seen rarely three years ago; just think of how digital cameras or cell phones have evolved in that time. As far as the NTK as a building, I don't have the slightest doubt; the building is designed, in my view, well enough to deal with any changes. As for information technology, for example with the radio-frequency identification of books, we were convinced from the beginning that this was essential for open circulation. Generally speaking, the requirements in this area have grown, and moreover things have been complicated by the fact that design work took place at an extremely rapid pace. At a very late stage, when construction was already under way, our colleagues from the universities took a critical look at the project, and



The NTK Library opened on 09.09.09

we became aware that there were a great many issues still to be resolved. The Education Ministry came to our aid and added around 60 million crowns so that we could improve the computer system, which also required greater intervention in the infrastructure, e.g. improvements to the cooling system, increasing the output of the transformer stations, etc. But I would say that an increase of investment costs by 60 million with respect to a total cost of nearly two and a quarter billion is relatively small.

The building also has an interesting environmental design; low energy consumption was one of the criteria for judging the competition entries. Possibly the question is premature before full operation has started, but I would still like to ask if you have been satisfied in this respect?

In 2000, there was still relatively little discussion about energy-efficient buildings, but one of our competition requirements was in fact the energy consumption of the building, or rather economy of operations. It was clear that finding enough financing for construction was a major problem, but asking for money every year for operating costs would be hardly less of a problem. As the director, I made it my goal to achieve a good balance between the costs for the institution's functioning and those of acquiring new holdings. We would like to see the pie of total expenditure sliced up evenly, so that operating costs do not take up more of the expenditure budget than we have for buying new books. So in other words, economical functioning was unequivocally necessary. To what extent we can achieve this, only time will tell.

Artwork has been used in the library building to an unusual extent. In addition to the central artwork and the design of the floors as technical blueprints, the group PAS designed another four projects working with the architects. Are you planning to realize all of them to the full extent?

What we call the 'central artwork', the sketches by Dan Perjovschi in the atrium, offers a definite release from the strain on the grey matter that happens during intensive studying. This is why we thought that it would be good to realize further ideas. We definitely hope to put 'Newsroom' into operation; whether 'Saga' is going to exist in the way that its creators planned is not yet certain, but in any event we will somewhere screen the documentary film by Vít Janeček of the library being built. For Newsroom, we are setting aside a specific area where there will be screens with news broadcasts and earphones, so that listening in full sound won't disturb the other visitors. Another project includes the large screens downstairs in the hall, which are expected primarily to broadcast navigation information and communiqués about what's new in the library, but as projection surfaces these can occasionally be used for something else. All of these wonderful ideas will be realized only once we've moved in, depending on how we settle into the building and what our capacities allow.

The NTK is the most important public building constructed in Prague in the past 20 years. As the builder of this exceptional architectural work, do you have any personal relation to the architectural discipline?

Architecture has always interested me; my relationship to it was significantly deepened in the summer of 1968, when a friend and I decided to take a holiday between our first two jobs. We travelled across Italy, seeing everything from the Greek temples in Sicily through Pompeii and the Vatican up to the modern buildings of Rome, Florence and Milan. For me, architecture also represents an important contribution to the city. For this reason, I've never had any doubts that if a new library is to be built, it is absolutely essential to hold an architectural competition for it, and I think the same should be required for all large public buildings. We started by collecting information about how to hold a competition, how to find



Graffiti-like sketches decorate the walls of the atrium

the money for it, and how to go about including it in our entire investment proposal. There were a lot of open questions; at the time the law did not make it possible to hold a competition so that the winning architects had the direct right to the realization of the design. It is not only about making sure that the building has good physical conditions, enough heat, light, etc., but that everything be in some way inspirational, that it addresses the viewer, brings him or her in to what's going on inside. In my view, this is the goal of architecture. And one other important thing: the library is a service. Many professional librarians regard what they do as a science, but operating a library is not like the discovery of the laws of nature; it is offering support to those who make these discoveries, but doing so on an exceptional level, and this in its own way is a science. It seems to me that architecture is very similar: an intelligent service that has to create a building for the client that is pleasant inside, that serves the right function, but above all acts as a comprehensible whole. Not to be a beautiful monument, but a functioning building. I hope that we've succeeded in this with the NTK.

