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Ragnar Audunson
Istvan Papp: A friend, a man
and a librarian for all seasons

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I am happy to take this opportunity to congratulate Istvan Papp on his 90th anniversary and to express my gratitude for professional support, comradeship and for close friendship over four decades. Cooperation with and support from Istvan has been very important for me in my career as a library researcher.

Istvan personalizes Hungarian and European history over almost the last 100 years. He was born during the Horthy regime, was a schoolboy during the second world war, finished gymnasium and became a student during the Stalinist period, finished his studies and started to work just after the 1956 revolution, in which he took an active part, had the greater part of his professional career during the more relaxed Kadar period and finished his professional life after the change of system.

During his professional career under shifting social and political circumstances, he had leading positions in Hungarian librarianship and contributed decisively to developing public librarianship in the country. He did so without ever compromising on his values and integrity.

Istvan is the most liberal, open-minded and unprejudiced man I know. Not only does he personify history from the 1930's till now – he personifies also the basic values of liberalism and openness on which democracy as well as librarianship are founded.

One should not rank friendships, but I am proud to count Istvan as one of my closest friends.

A friend and a librarian for all seasons.

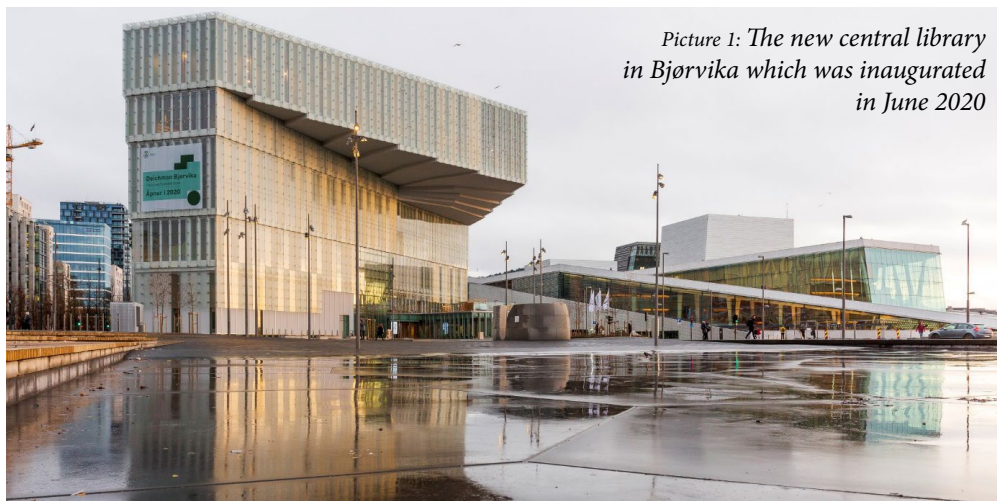
Ragnar Audunson
*The long and winding road:
The history of Oslo's new main library¹*

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1. Problem statement and research questions

It is difficult to assess on which fields of public librarianship Istvan Papp has made his greatest contributions: As a top-level library manager in the Ministry of culture? As a leader of R&D work at the Library Institute at OSZK? As an activist and elected trustee in the Library Association and in international librarianship via IFLA? As a deputy director for many years at FSZEK? His contributions are manifold. I think, however, that the work he did to transform the unpractical and inaccessible Wenckheim palace, the home of FSZEK since 1929, into one of the most beautiful, welcoming and accessible metropolitan libraries in Europe ranks high. Therefore, it seems pertinent to devote this chapter in the Festschrift to a case study on library buildings.

In June 2020, in the middle of the corona pandemic, Oslo's new main library was inaugurated. That marked the end of an almost 30-year long process – a long and winding road including intermediary stops at a failed shopping centre from the early 80s, a planned shopping centre closely connected to the Central Railway station, a Rem Kolhaas inspired project designed by the Dutch OMA architectural group at the closed down Western railway station till the



*Picture 1: The new central library
in Bjørvika which was inaugurated
in June 2020*

project reached its final stop in the posh Opera quarter. In this chapter I will analyze the project with a few to elicit the following research questions:

- This 30-year planning period 1990–2020 saw important developments in ideas and thinking regarding the role of public libraries and their role in urban development, e.g. ideas regarding libraries and culturally led urban regeneration and branding (Skot-Hansen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Jochumsen), the social turn which can be dated till the millennial turn (Söderström and Nolin, 2015). Important technological developments affecting libraries fundamentally, e.g., streaming of content, the explosion of social media platforms and 3D-printing took place during the period. How are these developments reflected in the planning of the library throughout this long period?
- Parallel with the planning of a new main library, other major cultural projects took place. The new Opera house was inaugurated in 2007. In 2003 it was decided to merge four national museums – the National Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art, The National Architectural Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts – into one National Museum, and the Ministry of Culture was looking for a suitable site for building this new National Museum. Did, and in case how, these other major projects affect the process towards a new main library in Oslo?
- Which considerations and interests dominated in the decision making process? Building a new main library is a major project occupying substantial resources. When decisions regarding such projects are made, not only interests and considerations vital to the field to which the project belongs, in this case librarianship, are relevant. The project will have spin-off effects related to other fields and interests. In many major investment projects, e.g., when deciding where to place a hospital, an airport, a university campus to mention a few, such spin-off effects might be just as important as professional considerations. How has the balance between considerations based on librarianship and considerations based on interests external to librarianship been in this case?

Building a new main library represents a major cultural investment involving priorities within the cultural field as a whole and affecting urban development. Such huge investment projects usually create conflicts and discussion. In the Oslo-case, the library project was explicitly linked to other major cultural developments, for example the new Munch museum and the new National Museum. As such, the projects offer an opportunity to study dynamics in the cultural policy field, conflict dimensions, alliances etc.

2. Background: The need for a new main library

The building which was the home of the Oslo Public Library till 2019 was a neoclassical building inaugurated in 1933. It was designed as a public library by the architect Nils Reiersen. The 1930s were characterized by economic crisis, and due to financial problems, Reiersen's plans were not finalized. A second construction stage was never built.

Although located in not more than 5-10 minutes' walk from most central places in Oslo city and with some major secondary schools, the colleges of architecture and applied art and Oslo Metropolitan University in the neighborhood, it was situated somewhat detached from the bustling city life. Its nearest neighbour since the 1960s has been the governmental quarter. The majority of the ministries are situated in a modernistic building complex which dominates the area. We also find two of Oslo's main cathedrals in the immediate surroundings, among them the main cathedral of Norway's catholic church. Librarians described the building as a cumbersome and impractical workplace with magazines several stores below the ground and with a shortage of space opening up for activities one expects to find in a modern library. It was not easily accessible for the public with all its stairs. In popular talk the library was often described as "the stair house".

It has been evident, then, for a long time that something needs to be done to give Oslo a main library living up to modern standards.

In 1985, when Oslo Public Library celebrated its 200-year anniversary the gift from the city council was to engage an architectural company to design plans for a fulfilment of the second construction stage and a model of a complete library was handed over to the library director. Simultaneously the city parliament made the necessary decisions regarding zoning plans to open up for

Picture 2: The old central library at Hammersborg which was the home of Oslo public library 1933-2019



an extension of the library. Neither the new leadership of the library – Liv Sætren became library director in 1986 – nor the politicians who had given the gift invested any energy in realizing the plans. In a reportage in Norway's largest newspaper Aftenposten, the deputy director of the library admitted that the plans were unrealistic and described them as a castle in the air.

3. The 1990s: The department store period

3.1 Gallery Oslo and the City gate

In 1993, the Copenhagen main library moved into a former department store for furniture. In many ways that was in line with the way of thinking that came to dominate Oslo in the 1990s. We call that the department store model.

In 1988, Gallery Oslo, an indoor shopping street, 400 meter long, built above the central bus station opened. It was launched as Europe's longest indoor shopping street, where boutiques and restaurants should give Oslo a flair of Rome, Paris and Tokyo. The concept, however, soon turned out to be a failure. It had difficulties in attracting shops and restaurants, and the few which established themselves there, soon fled. When the newspaper *Aftenposten* in 2008 arranged a popular vote to select Oslo's ugliest building, Gallery Oslo won the competition.



Picture 3: Gallery Oslo – proposed as a new home for the library in 1991

Oslo Public Library's new director, however, saw possibilities there. In 1991 she conceived the idea of transforming the gallery from a shopping centre into a library street. She presented her idea and vision to the politicians in the city parliament and city government, and her proposal gained considerable support in the political milieu – the parties of the city government as well as the parties of the opposition.

One problem with the project was, however, that she did not anchor it neither with her own staff nor with the bureaucrats in the city hall. In an interview we made with her in connection with the research project this chapter is a part of, she said that her establishing direct contact with the politicians, not going via the bureaucrats, was seen as unheard in the city's bureaucratic apparatus. Among the library staff, the enthusiasm for the project was restricted. One department head, I interviewed in connection with a research project I did in the first half of the 1990s, commented: "She is talking about a Morgan Kane² room, a moose in the sunset room... Is she joking with us?"

The proposal also generated public debate. Authors such as Jan Erik Vold (maybe Norway's leading poet since the 1960s), Tove Nilsen, Jan Kjærstad and Thorvald Steen – president in the Norwegian Writers' Association at the time

(Nilsen, Kjærstad and Steen are translated into Hungarian) argued vehemently against moving the library. The library is a place for silence and reflection – “it has no place on top of a bus station”, Tove Nilsen argued. “If Gallery Oslo is such a phantastic place – why are the shops fleeing it?”, Thorvald Steen asked rhetorically.

Against these arguments focusing upon traditional images of what a library is, the leadership of the library focused upon accessibility and the restrictions related to develop a modern library created by the old building. They also contrasted the low number of visitors per capita in Oslo compared to other Norwegian cities with new and modern libraries. The arguments of the library director received support from the president of the Library Association, Trond Minken.

In spite of the support from politicians in the city hall, also the city councilor for cultural affairs, concrete plans and proposals were not presented before the city parliament. The city councilor used legal disputes with Norway’s largest bank following the bankruptcy of the company owning the gallery as an excuse for not coming up with a proposal. The parties of the opposition rattled the sabres and threatened with a voice of no confidence if the councilor did not come up with concrete proposals.

As stated by the newspaper *Verdens Gang* in March 1993, time was about running out for the Gallery Oslo project.

As the Gallery Oslo project seemed to slip out of the library’s fingers, a new alternative came up: the so-called City Gate-project. That was also well within the department store model. In the meantime, adjacent to the Central Railway Station a large shopping centre called the City Gate was under planning. Could that also be the home of the city’s main library? At a meeting in the city parliament on the 17th of February 1993, the city councilor for culture was heavily criticized for not having delivered what the parliament had asked him to deliver



Picture 4: Model of the OMA project at the Western Railway station which won the architectural competition in 2002. Abandoned in 2008

regarding the gallery, simultaneously as he was instructed to prepare a report eliciting other alternatives, among them the City Gate. The Gallery alternative was, however, not completely dead. In a memo from the planning and building agency of the city administration dated 1995 evaluating several alternatives for a new library including restoring the existing one, Gallery Oslo is still regarded as the most interesting alternative when it came to using existing buildings whereas the City Gate was regarded the most interesting when it came to new buildings.

It seems, however, as if the responsible city counselor was too late in preparing the necessary decision-making documents also regarding the City Gate, which also slipped out of the library's hands.

3.2 The government enters the playing field – the new main library as part of a larger cultural package

In 1997 the social democratic-led city government was supplanted by a city government led by the Conservative Party, which should bring the issue of placing the city library to its final conclusion.

Till now, the issue had been discussed within the framework of city politics and the needs of the library. In 1997, however, Turid Birkeland – minister of culture in Torbjørn Jagland's social democratic government, put forward a proposal where location of new main library was part of a larger cultural package including other considerations than those of the library. The government has started preparing the planning of a new opera house and wanted to place that at the closed-down Western railway station – a location that also had been considered by the city's planning authorities as a possible site for the library. With the backing of the prime minister and the minister of planning Bendik Rugaas, a main figure on the Norwegian library scene since the 1970s and then on leave from his position as national librarian. The proposal was that the opera should move from the building which had been its home from 1959, the so called "Folketeaterbygningen" (Building of the Popular Theatre) – a building which also housed the offices of the governing Social Democratic Party and its daily newspaper – and move to new premises at the Western Railway station. "Folketeaterbygningen" is a huge, 11-store building from the early 1930s, built in what can be termed Soviet style functionalism. The proposal was that this should be developed into a cultural centre housing the new main library together with cinemas and a theatre. One of Norway's leading building consultancy firms was engaged to estimate costs and do a pilot project.

In June 1999, however, the Norwegian parliament made a decision which changed the game completely. The opposition in the parliament managed to overrun the government and it was decided to build the Opera in Bjørvika, in the Eastern part of the city, not on the site of the Western railway station. This decision was not at all related to the issue of a new main library, but it was of decisive importance for the library project.

4. The library as an iconic identity marker

4.1 The Western railway station and the OMA-project

The Parliament's decision to place the opera in a closed down harbor and shipyard area, Bjørvika, close to the Central Railway station, paved the way for the Western railway station as the site for a new main library. On the 9th of March the city parliament decided to acquire the area from the state and place the library there. The library director and several librarians were present on the gallery of the city parliament's meeting room and celebrated with layer cake. Finally the issue seemed to have found a solution.

An architectural competition was organized and won by the office of the famous Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas OMA in collaboration with the Norwegian Space group. Koolhaas was the architect behind the iconic Seattle Public Library which opened in 2004 – two years after as OMA/Space group won the competition in Oslo.

The new site of the library is centrally located in the bustling harbor area which now hosts popular shops, cafes and restaurants. Its nearest neighbour is the city hall and it is only a stone's throw from some of the major cinemas, the parade street Karl Johan, the National Theatre and the old university buildings. OMA's winning proposal meant a radical break with the projects which had been considered so far. Oslo Gallery, the City Gate, Folketeaterbygningen and several other projects which had been considered, were all buildings not deviating from the normal urban environment to which they belonged. OMA's proposal was an iconic building – a library with the role of branding the city to the external world as open, modern, cosmopolitan and creative. The library was designed as a low, glacier-like building behind the old building of the railway station, under protection as a cultural heritage building and the home of Nobel Peace Centre. Below ground it was planned to have a cinema centre and conference facilities. On the northern wing, the architects had planned a 18-floor high hotel.

The proposal created debate and resistance, in particular the high-rise hotel building. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage was very much against the

project. In 2006 an adapted project without the 18-floor high building was adopted, and the road towards a new main library seemed clear and free.

In 2005, however, a short interlude with possible far-ranging consequences took place. One of the city government's foremost priorities in the field of culture had for a long time been to move the Munch museum from its present 1963-building at Oslo's east end. When the city government that autumn presented its budget proposal for 2006, it simultaneously presented a proposal to move the museum to the Western railway station, and build a new museum adjacent to the library. The city parliament, however, decided in November 2005 that the Munch museum should remain at Tøyen in Oslo's East End. Did this defeat reduce the city government's enthusiasm for the OMA-project, and did it open up for a comprehensive Bjørvika-solution for both the Munch museum and the library a couple for years later? That is an interesting question.

A new development completely unrelated to the library should, however, soon change the direction of the process towards a new main library.

In 2003, the government had implemented a comprehensive museum reform. The National Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Applied Art and the Museum of Architecture merged into one institution, The National Museum. To begin with, one considered erecting a new building for the merged museum at the site of the National Gallery. That plan was, however, rejected, and the minister of culture cast his eyes on the Western railway station. The Ministry established contact with the city government with the goal of buying back the site of the Western railway station. Simultaneously, some problems related to the library project had become evident. It turned out to be difficult to fill the huge area the OMA-project consisted of. Oslo cinema was not very interested in the planned cinema centre. The Ministry's initiative was, therefore, welcomed by the city council as a way out of the problems – maybe also as an initiative paving the way for a comprehensive solution in Bjørvika including the Munch museum as well as the library. Negotiations started in April 2008. The library did not take part in these negotiations. In May, on a joint press conference by the head of Oslo's city government, Erling Lae and the Minister of culture, Trond Giske, the new solution was presented: The National Museum to the Western railway station – the new main library to the Opera quarter in Bjørvika.

Although the library did not take part in the negotiations, the library director stated in an interview with the author of this chapter that she was happy with this new development. The problems the OMA-project had run into and the problems related to filling the huge space, made such a change necessary.

Shortly after this press conference, the city government gave another press conference where it announced, without prior discussion and vote in the city parliament, the moving of the Munch museum from Tøyen to Bjørvika.

5. Bjørvika: New architectural competition, new delays and budget overrun

The OMA-project could, naturally, not be transferred from the Western railway station. A new architectural competition was organized, this time in tandem with the Munch museum. The winners were announced in 2009: As for the library, Lund & Hagem Architectural office won with the project diagonal, whereas the Spanish architect Herrera won with the project Lamda.

The winning library project received in general a positive reception. The Lamda project, however, generated conflicts and resistance simultaneously as those against moving the museum from Tøyen had not given in. The coupling between the library project and the Munch museum was probably one of the reasons why almost four years passed between the architectural competition and the final decision in the city parliament to start the building. In 2013 the city parliament decided to start the building of a new main library and a new Munch museum based on the two winning projects from the architectural competition.

Although the site turned out to be extremely challenging, and budget overruns and delays in the project more or less were the order of the day, the project was more or less on track between 2013 and 2015. Costs escalated, deadlines and planned opening years had to be adjusted, but the project as such was not seriously questioned. In 2015 the building site was nothing more than a gigantic hole into which water leaked – a leakage which the engineers did not quite know how to make tight, and which also led to money leaking ever so quickly out of the city budget.

6. 2015: New city government – new crisis for the library

After the local elections in 2015 the city government led by the Conservative Party (Høyre) and with participation from the liberals, the right-wing Progressive Party and the Christian Democratic Party was supplanted by a left-green coalition led by the Social Democratic Party with Socialist Left Party and the Green Party as participants. Shortly after taking office, the new city government stated that due to escalating costs, the library project had to be thoroughly evaluated. Every stone had to be turned, they declared. Stopping the project was clearly an option. As the head of the city government, Raymond Johansen put it: We haven't exactly taken over a turnkey building. It is our responsibility as

a city government to see to that the city's resources are used as efficient and effective as possible.

The project of giving the city a new main library, then, was again in play. For a couple of weeks in the period October – December 2015 a heated and intense debate took place. The organization Friends of the library, profiled authors and personalities from the cultural public sphere, the Library Association and the trade union of the librarians engaged themselves. Words such as “scandal” were frequently used. The chairman in the Friends of the library, the writer and urbanist, Erling Fossen declared that if the project were put on halt, Oslo would collapse as a city of culture. He formulated the role of a metropolitan main library like this: “A good library is both a generator for urban growth and place development, a temple for formation (Bildung) and contemplation and an unassertive manifestation of how sophisticated the public sector can be.” (Erling Fossen, 2015).

The debate ended with the city government deciding to complete the building project, but it introduced some modifications to control it financially, for example earmarking much larger parts of the building for rental business than originally planned, in order to reduce budgetary deficits. 40 per cent of the area should be rented and 60 per cent used by the library for library purposes.

The project was back on track. Now only the pandemic disturbed and resulted in a postponement of the grand opening from March 2020 till June the same year. The Goal line had been reached almost exactly 30 years after the process started with Liv Sætren's visions regarding Gallery Oslo.

Conclusions

We can draw three main conclusions from our analysis.

First: Trends in ideas and thinking regarding the role of an urban main library are heavily reflected in the project throughout its 30-years long history. The department store period of the 1990s took example from other projects internationally, e.g. the main library on Copenhagen, and was in line with the market oriented and information-as-a-commodity way of thinking which was strong in that period – a way of thinking that generated criticism and resistance in the staff and also among actors in the cultural public sphere. With the OMA project the library's role and potential as a place maker and its role in branding the city becomes visible. The library as a place maker and its role as a meeting place – an urban living room – becomes even more accentuated in the Bjørvika project. But we also see that when legitimizing the library became challenging, as in the crisis in 2015 when the whole project was in danger, those

defending the library return to the traditional values of knowledge, reading and culture. These values are the constant.

Our second main conclusion is related to the role of the accidental. By accident, the city counsellor responsible for the public library when Gallery Oslo and the City Gate were discussed, was slow in providing the city parliament with the necessary decision-making documents. Had he come up with such documents, there would probably have been a political majority for one of these alternatives.

Our third main conclusion that the dynamics which created movements in the library project was heavily affected by and dependent upon conflict-ridden issues external to the library. In the 1990s several ideas were presented. All political parties declared their support to giving Oslo a new main library. There were few conflicts apart from the internal resistance and resistance among cultural personalities regarding Gallery Oslo. But very little happened. There was very little movement, and towards the end of the decade, the project seemed to have reached a standstill. Then the conflict regarding the placing of the new opera created dynamic and movement. What would the fate of the library have been without this library-external conflict and the success of the opposition in winning the struggle of where to locate the new opera building. Then came the needs of the merged National Museum – also a library-external issue of decisive importance for the development of the library project. And then the links between the library project and another library-external and heavily conflict-ridden issue: the location of the Munch Museum. The process illustrated the importance of conflicts in creating dynamics. In the 1990s, with a low conflict level regarding the library issue, little happened. The library-external conflicts regarding the location of the opera and the conflicts regarding the two museum issues were vital in creating momentum and movement. Maybe the library would gain from more conflicts around itself?

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Notes

1 The research on which this paper is based is part of the Polycul-project financed by The Research Council Norway.

2 Morgan Kane was a Western hero in a series of books written by the Norwegian author Kjell Hallbing under the pen name Louis Masterson. The series was a tremendous success and the 83 volumes sold together 11 million copies in Norway alone – 22 million altogether.