

Trees and Labyrinths, Libraries and Archives: the Architectural Drawing between Real Space and Re-Imagined Space

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“An ark to save learning from the deluge,” as Francis Bacon described it in 1605 [1], such was the imaginative power of the cathedral of knowledge that here, since the 15th century and above all thanks to the expansion carried out by Thomas Bodley between 1598 and 1602 (Rogers 1991, tables 38, 43, 46), it finally found the right space in the first reading room in Oxford to be deliberately built for this function.

The image represents the oldest of Oxford's libraries and the historical core of the Bodleian Library, one of the oldest European public libraries and today an imposing cultural institution that houses millions of documents and 40 collections in 28 structures, which flourished after the decisive initiative of Thomas Bodley which, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, allowed its modern foundation and gave impetus to its constant growth by founding on

the first small collection of manuscripts originally housed in Duke Humfrey's Library, the important library complex of one of the most prestigious universities in the world.

Duke Humfrey's Library, in the image visible as the central hall in dim light, was opened in 1489 to house the collection of some 300 manuscripts, maps and rarities left to the University of Oxford at his death in 1447 by Humphrey of Lancaster, the first Duke of Gloucester and third son of King Henry IV of England.

To house this heritage, it was decided to build a room above the Divinity School, then under construction in the purest Perpendicular style [Sherwood, Pevsner 1996, p. 162], thus certainly constraining the unusual proportions of the library, wider than high, not very typical of late English Gothic architecture and yet the perfect setting for the Hogwarts wizard's library [2].

This article was written upon invitation to comment on the image of the Bodleian Library, not submitted to anonymous review, published under editorial director's responsibility.

The environment was marked by a dense series of windows still today interspersed with bookcases positioned perpendicular to the walls; in another engraving dated 1675 the chains that then still tied the books to a bar placed in front of the underlying shelf are visible, so originally there must also have been high lecterns in front of which scholars read while standing, according to the arrangement inherited from medieval manuscript libraries.

On this side of the large arch diaphragming the rooms of the gallery and of the hall in the foreground, the arrangement is reversed, showing furnishings placed against the walls and, at the head of the bookcases, wooden cabinets containing manuscripts too rare and precious to be left on open shelves. Books go from the floor to the ceiling; above all, what characterizes the environment are the galleries surrounding the two large rooms at both ends of Duke Humfrey's Library: Arts End added in 1610-1612 (identifiable by the multi-light window that can be glimpsed at the back of the room), and Selden End, the last addition of 1634-37 which gave the building its final, and current, H-shaped configuration [Tyacke 1998, pp. 86, 87], and hosts the observer from whose point of view the scene is framed. The light, an almost inevitable metaphor for knowledge that illuminates the mind, comes mainly from the focal point represented by the center window of Arts End; it is suggested by the sequence of narrow openings interspersed with the shelves of the hall, and above all by the windows of Selden End, placed laterally and to the back of the observer to frontally illuminate the gallery supported by slender columns, which, together with the two triangular pediments arranged parallel to the walls of Duke Humfrey's Library to frame the hall, reaffirm a grammar of the spatial envelope fully regulated by the language of architectural order.

The full light then alternates with the half-light necessary to reconcile study and concentration in the silence broken only by the sound of footsteps on the creaky wooden floor: the few people present are two scholars sitting on a bench and intent on discussing a volume lying open on a shelf and two other figures at the desk at the back of the room.

Their clothing places the image in times close to the foundation of the Bodleian while the engraving, by an unknown artist and measuring 33.3 × 25.5 cm, can be more likely dated to the first half of the nineteenth century, when it appeared in 1842 in the tenth annual of *Magasin Pittoresque*, a magazine published since 1833 in Paris; twenty years later the same engraving appeared again (with the dimensions 37.6 × 29.8 cm) in the second volume of *Old England*, a

repertoire of artistic and architectural antiquities published by Charles Knight in 1860 [Knight 1860, p. 69] [3].

Returning to the graphic work of 1842, the decoration of the library is described in great detail, such as the reflections on the wooden floor or the architectural moldings that determine a classical architectural syntax defining the environment, even in symbolic terms, as a temple of knowledge.

The image is a one-point perspective view with the vanishing point placed at the height of the center horizontal line of the large window at the back of the room, while the vantage point in Selden End is advanced with respect to the room's geometric center and slightly offset on the right side.

Symmetry returns several times: the environment, made up of three rooms arranged in an H-shaped plan, is symmetrical, just as the framing chosen for the perspective is symmetrical (or almost), with an insistence that somehow seems to underline the rigidity and an obsequious "detachment" of the architecture of the library archive, the library as container; with respect to its content, the books that are the protagonists of the scene (if not the scene itself).

A distance that breaks down and, despite the same need for preservation and perpetuation of memory, dynamically compares the relationship between container and content that structures the consultation of an archive (and in the Italian lexicon the term *archivio* means both the container and the content).

This relationship also distinguishes the different classificatory architectures and representations of knowledge exemplified by the models of the tree and the labyrinth [Eco 2007] and is inverted in the digital archive, where the rigidity of branch classification has been gradually replaced by the evolutionary structures of semantics and ontological relationships (from the relational model to the object model to the mixed model ORDBMS - *Object Relational DBMS*) to create exponentially "linkable" open data.

Consultation of a digital archive is by its very nature dynamic and (often, profitably) Borgesian labyrinthine in architectural archives where, through the power of graphic reconstruction, the objectivity of the text –bearer of informative elements regarding the artifact, the intentions of the designer, the constructive vicissitudes and so on– opens up to further critical variants of the interpretative hypothesis [Palestini 2017].

If, in fact, the materiality of the drawing on a sheet of paper (and the smell of the folder being opened and the rustle of the paper under one's fingers) triggers an immediate, even nostalgic link with the Past, only the subsequent maieutic

of reconstruction of the idea, more than that of the building, allows the construction of a broad memory that can transcend the purely descriptive dimension of the artifact, undermining the risk of a "presentist" approach (adopting the responsibility of the *Regime of historicity*, meaning the way of experiencing temporality and how a society treats its own past, invoked by Hartog).

Especially in a society characterized, as is ours, by rapid obsolescence, the gap between information and the deep meanings of memory, needs to activate memory by establishing the evocative power of the narrative layer on the materiality of informative contents [Marchis 2014].

It is precisely in the particular nature of architectural drawing to go beyond the material dimension of a support with documentary value to become a gateway to memories, a repository of stories and worlds of stories to be traversed bijectively from text to co-text / context, in turn an archive of other intra- and extra-textual information, and again from the paratext to the text [4].

For architects, graphic analysis is a vocational instrument of understanding and therefore of interpretation, and is not autonomous and free from constraints, but burdened by the responsibility of scientific, and even interdisciplinary reliability. If on the one hand an architectural archive opens windows onto the real past (the event substantiated in the manufactured artifact), on the other hand, it draws on the document to open others, also on the possible past of projects realized only on paper, in which that drawing relives and redeems the oblivion of the unrealized in a different outcome, recovering the nature of the open ending characteristic of architectural projects [Albisinni, De Carlo 2016].

There is no doubt that digitization has been a fundamental trigger for the vitality of architectural archives in at least two directions:

- in digital archives, accessibility to sources is virtually total and is limited only by the robustness and sustainability of archival processes consisting of the solidity of the formation of the documentary structures; by the guarantee that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the resources are respected over time; by the continuity of the

maintenance over time of the conditions of readability and intelligibility of the contents;

- the digital reconstructions of drawings and paper documents make it easy to activate the narrative device of the timeline where time and place relate in "variably structured" knowledge spaces [UID 2021].

Furthermore, the space-time relationship calls into question a series of themes that problematize the relationship between architectural archives and archival architecture: the polycentrism of conservation, which links the types of architectural archives to the multiplicity of functions that can be activated, for example, in teaching or in museology, and transforms the archival bond into a wealth of cultural bond with the territories [Guccione 2009]; the perennial oscillation between the need for memory and the inevitability of volatility due to the technological obsolescence that afflicts digital documents; the problem of the digital environment consisting of the treatment of documentary memories and the keeping of originals, which become only authentic copies or, for interactive and dynamic documents such as databases and web pages, must be reduced to the keeping of components in authentic copies; the ambivalence of the congenial nature of the drawings preserved as a lasting testimony but then dynamically renewed at each reading, questioning the limit of authenticity, identity and integrity of the documents in the graphic reconstruction [Ghizzoni, Musiani 2021].

Perhaps in contemporary literary criticism we finally find a valid parallel between the literature of memory, which, especially between the two world wars, narrates the search for "lost time" [5], and the implicit iconographic literature that animates and "embodies" an archive of architecture.

Suspended between the illusion of taxonomic systematization of knowledge and confident technological projection is an archive of drawings, an almost two-way metaphor of orienting oneself as a value of research and of getting lost as a value of discovery, and always suspended between the ancient, memory and history, and the contemporary, digital society and visual culture, retrieving the "ark of learning" described by Bacon and the ark of memory, and therefore of the future, for the explorers of virtuality.

Notes

[1] As reported in the *Novum organum* (New Instrument) of the section *Masterpieces from the Collections of the Bodleian Libraries*, the metaphor between the new Bodleian library and Noah's Ark is in the dedication with which Bacon sends Thomas Bodley a copy of *Of proficience and advancement of learning* (1603-1605), the master work of De

dignitate et augmentis scientiarum (1623), in turn the precursor text of the *Novum organum* in which Bacon proposed to King James I the idea of the empirical method as a new way of knowledge aimed at scientific progress. The dedication accompanies the volume with the words: "in regard of your great and rare desert of learning. For books are the

shrines where the Saint is, or is believed to be: and you having built an Ark to save learning from deluge."

[2] Duke Humfrey's Library is the filming set of the library of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where Harry Potter tries to find out who Nicholas Flamel is.

[3] Our image is part of a chronological story that sees the representation of this iconic place published at different times: the first one documented dates back to 1675, when Duke Humfrey's Library is described by an engraving, published in table VII of the nearly 40 plates making up the *Oxonia* illustrated collection edited by David Loggan, consisting of two compared views illustrated on side-by-side pages measuring 61 x 44 cm, where the room is framed by the End rooms, the Arts End at the top and the Selden End below, both depicted with a perspective very similar to ours; at least one other illustration – a print listed in various editions with dimensions from 14.3 x 11.1 cm to 28.2 x 21.4 cm, with the title, *The Bodleian Library*, author of the work, Frederick MacKenzie, engraver of the plate, John Le Keux, and printer "Published 1st Jan. 1836, by JH Parker, Oxford, C. Tilt, Fleet St., London, Le Keux, Harmondsworth" – is probably referable to the Oxford Almanacs for which between 1821 and 1853 Mackenzie had made 24 tables commissioned by the University of

Oxford. Although Duke Humfrey's Library is the thematic fulcrum of all these representations, in all the engravings where it is present, the title identifies as the subject the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford, never including the explicit mention of the historical room, true core of the Bodleian.

[4] All the archival information contained in the metadata file, in turn writes the history of the documentary element itself and, since everything that is "peripheral" to a text ends up becoming a hypertext, the paratext of a graphic text assumes a connotation that can best be investigated starting from the most stringent disciplinary tools to proceed subsequently with an inclusive approach, as suggested by the implications experienced by the Digital Humanities in regard to the unwanted uncritical impacts of purely quantitative investigation [Castellucci 2018].

[5] Even in the year dedicated to the celebration of Proust it cannot be overlooked, even if only by mentioning it, that this positivist memory will be flanked during the twentieth century by another dissonant universe of memory, gradually nourished by other subsequent modern utopian and dystopian visions, where memory does not refer only to the private and subjective, but is a social transformative capacity, which architectural culture has also repeatedly represented.

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