The Verticality of Library Buildings - from the Sacred and a Treasury to an Icon of Marketing

Summary:
This speech examines one of the basic elements of library architecture – the tower. The author analyzes the symbolic and social context of vertical forms. Both of them are changing in time and giving new meanings. On the one hand there was a small library in the tower in Périgord which had belonged to Michel de Montaigne and which was used for his seclusion. On the other hand the tower was a repository to keep the books safe. This form we know from *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco but the repositories closed to the readers were still popular in 20'th century. Now we can observe a change because new towers which were built in the late 20'th century up to this day. Those libraries should be open to everyone. Such solutions we can find in Luckenwalde and soon in Copenhagen and Doha. Contemporary library architecture is important from a marketing point of view. Thus there are several projects with high building which have to draw the reader's attention.

Keywords:
Library architecture; High-rise building; semiotics

Introduction. Cultural background

In the postmodern times, man strives to be his own measure. Taking the world as it is found, he freely rearranges its elements constantly searching for a world of his own individual creation. He becomes a designer and an engineer of new individual forms of expression. He is convinced of his complete power of self-determination and creation of long-lasting values, even if for his own use. He has free will and is culturally almost unrestrained in his rights to live the way he wants. However, he lives in a "world for sale" in which profit is a global value. By taking this perspective, it is possible to see that currently the changes of the world are more dynamic than ever before. The dynamics of the changes also affect various artefacts which until recently were considered as qualitatively stable and today they start to designate new values mutating and merging with new qualities which so far seemed completely incongruous for reasons such as cultural differences.

For this reason the author attempted a fundamental analysis of the changes of the essential primary and secondary functions of the vertical constructions of libraries trying to limit the interpretations with two qualitative variables of towers, namely prestige and safety and their derivative features.

Symbolism of the tower – tradition and the present day

It is worth starting the discussion by referring to the connotative meaning of tower. The *Dictionary of Symbols* by Kopaliński says that tower symbolizes, among other things, time, ladder to haven, salvation, beauty, majesty, grandeur, treasure (treasury), loftiness, perspective, guard, defence, shelter, safety, stability, hidden truth or evolution[1]. While the semiotic codes of towers are among the easiest to read, the traditional practical functions of these buildings carry at the same time axiological duality of the meanings embedded in the symbol of tower. On the one hand, there is the feeling of safety resulting from the movement upwards[2]. Whatever is at the top is in a way a model for whatever is

below. Books kept high up on shelves secure our spirituality. We get the impression that our culture, closely watched in inaccessible repositories of towers, will be preserved for posterity. Thus, we also believe that the memory of ourselves will persist.The tower is a connection between the heavenly transcendence and the earthly everyday life. However, the sacred at the top at the same time shows what is below, namely the decline. In this way the second semantic component is revealed. The symbolism of the space is dual. There is heaven, but there is also hell[3]. The strive for perfection, man's dream to gain knowledge and ascend to the top, involves the risk of falling and suffering.This is the image of the man-library relation we get from reading the last pages of *The Name of the Rose*, when the main protagonist values the social good (culture) over his own well-being saving old and rare prints and books from getting burnt down in a flaming tower. Although the material the tower is made of is more fragile than expected, its transcendent power, namely the spirit and the sacred are more durable and stronger than the ordinary adversities. It is a model of indomitable nature. In the *Divine Comedy* by Dante there is a passage saying: *stand like a sturdy tower that does not shake its summit though the winds may blast* (Purgatory, Canto 5.13). On the other hand, the story of the tower of Babel reminds of the fragility of such buildings. Although the Tower of Babel is a symbol of man's struggle to unify humanity, it is nevertheless an attempt doomed to failure which, its temporary success notwithstanding, eventually ends in confusion[4]. A 25-meter tall artistic creation of a Tower of Babel made of thousands of books by Marta Minujín in Buenos Aires in 2011 is a contemporary exemplification of this symbolic split of the idea of verticality[5].

What message does tower communicate contemporarily? The archetypical nature of verticality made it possible to retain a number of features, but their intensity changed. In terms of architecture, the primary symbolic function is the pursuit of prestige. Today, the metropolises of Asia bear witness to the claim in the same way as the great cities of America did several dozen years ago. The number of towers, their height, form and texture inform us about the wealth and power of their disposers. The promotion of oneself stepped in to replace the transcendental content – marketing took over from the sacred. A separate issue is the sphere of aesthetics, which as a meter of fact was never of the highest order. As a result of their postmodern and neomodern composition, skyscrapers look nearly identical and it is hardly possible to distinguish more than just a few conceptual programmes[6]. The Costa Iberica project by a group of Dutch architects is the best example of how the symbolic content of codes gets changed (Fig. 1-6).

Fig. 1-6. Symbolic-functional transformation of the cross: MVRDV *Costa Iberica*. Project, 2000-2005. Courtesy of MVRDV

Library tower – from symbolism to consumption

In the search for symbolism of towers, significance is attributed to the notion of the sacred, which, seen from the diachronic perspective, in case of library takes on various meanings. What is useful here is the ontological analysis of a work of art requiring its structure as well as the origin to be examined[7]. Making an a priori assumption that the architecture of libraries has the distinguishing features of a work of art (irrespective of the opinions and tastes common at any given moment in time), both the structure and the origin of the object provide ground for analysis. It can be noted, for example, that the agreed organizational structure of libraries limits the number of people authorized to access the storage towers sometimes to a very small group of staff members. What's more, the construction of barriers and locks is another physical indicator of security meant to protect what can be referred to as the sacred sphere of the world of knowledge and spirit embodied in the collections of books. So, the origin of verticality in architecture is connected with the process of contact between the sacred, how ever understood, and the profane. The storage tower as a treasury, isolated as it is from the rest of the world, is in contact with it. Without this contact and connection, the idea of the sacred for its own sake, deprived of followers and supporters, without readers or bibliophiles, would be futile.

The physical contact of the two spheres occurs in the monumental Bibliothèque de la Part-Dieu (designed by Jacques Perrin-Fayolle, Charles Delfante, 1972) dating to the early 70s of the 20th century. It is the headquarters of Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon with a storage tower of 17 storeys situated in line with the entrance to the institution looming over it and the visitors going in.

Fig. 7. Bibliothèque de la Part-Dieu, Lyon: JACQUES PERRIN-FAYOLLE, CHARLES DELFANTE (Lyon). 1972. Photo: Tomasz Kruszewski

A peculiar interface between the sacred and the profane is revealed to users of the libraries located in converted former or partially still functional churches in Stadtpfarrkirche Müncheberg and Stadtbibliothek Mühlhausen in Germany and in Lévis in Québec (Bibliothèque Pierre-Georges-Roy) Canada. Even though the libraries do not use the towers on a daily basis for any particular purpose, the towers are nevertheless the very architectural element which connotes a link between the two worlds with the library as a gate between them. Once constructed along with all the buildings around them to serve other purposes, today they are also used as a marketing indicator for two variables. First and foremost, they indicate prestige suggesting that library is not housed in "any old place", but they also provide a landmark, a lodestar safely guiding the users towards it. It seems that the original function of the church towers has not been completely eradicated by the new host[8]. A library as such is among the few public institutions that fit in well with the "spirit" of the building of a temple. As noted by Mario Botta, once inside a church, one feels it is the centre of the world[9].

The sacredness of a place maintained through a vertical structure results in its separation from the profane. The world of knowledge and cultural heritage is safeguarded by glass walls of the towers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (design Gordon Bunshaft, 1963) at Yale University in New Haven and the King's Library Tower in the British Library in London (design Colin St John Wilson, 1998). In the former modernist construction, we actually deal with two towers, if we follow Charles Jencks' imagery that the object looks like "a pile of television sets with no picture"[10]. The tower proper of the Beinecke Library is a 6-storey cuboid form, which unlike in London, is not just

one of the elements of the gigantic hall of the library, but fills almost the entire interior of the building. It gives the impression that it is just a sheltering cover for the tower made of piles of monumental collections. The access to this "treasury" is guarded by the personnel deployed as sentry at the tower gate. Seemingly within arm's reach, the sacred sphere is in fact accessible to a very limited group of the library staff handing out single tomes outside the treasury to the reading room.
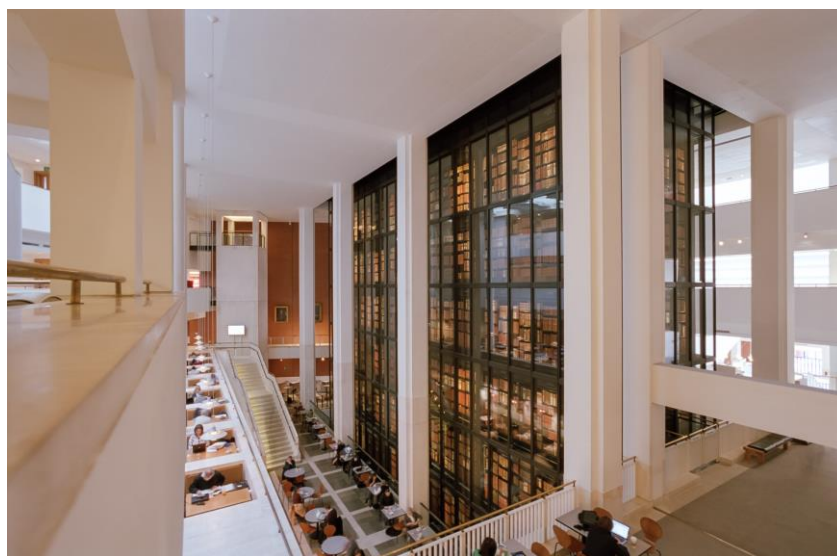

Fig. 8. Glass cover-tower: G. BUNSHAFT *Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library* (New Haven). 1963. Photo: Michael Marsland. Courtesy of Yale University

Fig.9. C. St. J. WILSON *King's Library Tower. British Library* (London). 1998. Photo: Xavier de Jauréguiberry

The concept of New Haven was in organizational and symbolic terms transposed to the capital city of Great Britain. Also here the collections are visible from behind glazed surfaces to all the library users and tourists visiting the place to witness a material artefact testifying to the greatness of the former world power. The tower, housing the historical collections of books of King George III, has additional symbolic connotations, which are lacking in the Beinecke Library. The sacred is strengthened through the historic cohesion of the collection, its homogeneity. The collection turns into a sign of patriotic nature.

The space of both the libraries is more like a library treasury than a depository. It is, however, a unique treasury, because in most cases such places are invisible and their location unknown to the customers of libraries. Since access to them is limited to the anointed bearers of administrative permits, the treasuries and locked depositories are considered as a specific type of sacred areas. Those authorized to access them participate in the sacred sphere, which is the last protection preventing the cultural heritage from being lost. Within his or her dominion, the library owner personally or through an appointed authorized librarian defines the organizational standards regulating the use of the sacred sphere within designated and structurally connected reading rooms located outside the sacred territory. In this way the reader's mind is offered a short-term opportunity to enjoy the substitute of the aura of

the sacred sphere. All the other users of the space of the library open to the public are given a product to admire, namely an exhibition used as a publicity gimmick of the institution.

Unlike in the last two examples, the postmodern world witnesses a process of constant reduction of the barriers separating the sacred from the profane and as a result the power of transcendence diminishes. Apart from cultural factors, there are also some very clear-cut factors such as the organizational formula chosen by a given institution (e.g. the modernly understood public libraries), or the material used to construct the most essential building elements. The Book Mountain in Spijkenisse in the Netherlands, designed by MVRDV, is fitted with spiral pedestrian walkways which "bring" the reader inside it, which is a complete rejection of the idea of library followed in New Haven and London. This "tower-mountain" of books, almost completely filling a pyramid-shaped glass construction housing it, is fully open to the public[11]. As far as the building material is concerned, over the past few decades see-through glass in panoramic windows has been very popular, or as an additional structural façade element as is the case with the seat of the national library of Belarus (72 metres, 22 storeys, designed by Michaił Vinogradov, Viktor Kramarenko, 2006). The construction reduces the sense of unknown and unexplored experienced by the visitors and users. Additionally, a hierophany occurs. The features of the spirit and the matter are nearly within arm's reach with the boundary between the two blurred[12]. Modern library buildings are also among the indicators of the blurring boundaries between the sacred and the profane, art and commerce, objective beauty and manipulative marketing. The propaganda overtones in the building in Minsk are striking. The glass symbolizes, as it were, transparency (although the glass cover hides a concrete construction), and the building itself is a perfect part of the communist propaganda shown on a regular basis as a symbol of civilizational "advancement" of Belarus.

An illustration of the tendency to blend the two traditionally separate worlds is the Municipal Library in Luckenwalde (designed by Marina Wronna, Ralf Fleckenstein, Katharina Feldhusen, 2008). Its building is a converted old train station with a small tower clad with golden facing built at one end[13]. The play with the viewer still relies on light, but this time colour is used instead of glass. The golden colour evokes the archetypal vertical symbolism with such its attributes as wealth, prestige, and mysteriousness, but at the same time due to the fact that the whole construction is tilted to one side it suggests "homeliness". This trick is like giving a "wink" to the people using the building signalling that even though they may be dealing with a library with an enormous cultural potential backed with a tradition of many generations, it is at the same time a library which they can take possession of. The users are to make themselves "at home" and the interior design intensifies and facilitates the feeling. The very construction of the tower stands out in relation to the façade of the main building of the

former train station. Shown in this way, the tower of Luckenwalde is perceived both inside and outside as a place open to the public.

Fig. 10. False-accessible tower: M. VINOGRADOV, V. KRAMARENKO

Nacionalnaja Biblioteka Bielarusi. 2006. Photo: Victor Shaposhnikov

Fig.11. Accessible tower: WRONNA/FLECKENSTEIN/FELDHUSEN

Stadtbibliothek Luckenwalde. 2008. Photo: Hans Parnitzke (Creative Commons)

The building of Stadtbibliothek Luckenwalde is a reminder of the duality of values behind the concept of library as a location where the unusual meets the casual, and the sacred mixes with the public and common.

While analysing the symbolic character of a vertical construction, one important symbolic feature is not to be overlooked, namely representativeness, which results among others from searches in the past. At the University Library Heidelberg (Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg) a castle motif (corner turrets) has been used intentionally as a reference to the atmosphere of the city, which for hundreds of years has been overshadowed by the ruins of one of the most magnificent Renaissance castles. The historicizing building from the architectural vision of Josef Durm, owing to its bay windows, pilasters, and ornamented avant-corps of the front façade, referred to the rich history of the urban and university centre and the famous Bibliotheca Palatina. It was meant as an architectural continuation of the cultural potential of Heidelberg.

Fig.12. ... searches in the past: JOSEF DURM *Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg*, Photo: Tomasz Kruszewski

The contemporary high towers indicate the expansion and cross-cultural migration of codes. In this context, Isozaki's attempt to restore the traditional symbolism of towers in his project of the Qatar National Library in Doha takes on an additional, precisely commercial (but not necessarily grandiose) dimension. The building will supplement the symbolism of tower with modern challenges, accomplishing as it were the concept of tower as an ideal protection combined with simultaneous mystical communion high above ground with the "spirit" embodied in books. As far as the elements of articulation are concerned, the library in Doha resembles the somewhat brutalist, flower bud shaped Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina (designed by Clorindo Testa, Francisco Bullrich, Alicia Cazzaniga, 1992) in Buenos Aires and the Geisel Library (designed by William Pereira, 1970, renovation 1993) at the University of California in San Diego, but has none of their ruggedness and roughness, with its form going far beyond the 20th century approach to the architecture of libraries. If not a leap, it is at least a step towards redefining the symbolic meaning of not only the tower, but also of the buildings of the institutions of culture. Just like culture, it is airy and lives among the clouds over people's heads. On the other hand, it is for people and meets their aesthetic tastes.

Tower – an "open" symbol?

Summing up the search for the functions of the changing symbolism of the tower, we can refer to a spectacular crowning achievement of the idea of library in the age of information society, namely the idea of cultural and social centre. There are three such libraries where the motif of the tower has been used. The already built public library in Shanghai and the currently constructed national library in Astana.

The Shanghai Library from 1996 is housed in a monumental building with two towers of respectively 24 and 11 storeys, which allude to the modern skyscrapers of America (Fig. 17). The taller is 106 meters high. They are a landmark, but also an integral part of the scientific and educational centre of this world's largest metropolis, as symptomatically indicated bynumerous institutions and two squares named respectively the Knowledge and the Wisdom. As far as the building in Astana is concerned, its idea originated when the capital city of Kazakhstan was moved to a new location and the process of reconstruction of the national identity started consisting in regaining independence from the Soviets and developing a modern state at the meeting point of two continents. A combination of a futuristic cylindrical form and the traditional Kazakh motifs, the building is to embody the whole idea. The tower within the building is rather implicit due to the flattening of the construction. However, the spiral base of the building, which suggests climbing up, will give a magic ascending impression. The library is to become a new cultural and intellectual centre, constructed as a part of a new economic, social and political centre of the state. The two examples are indicative of a tendency in which new economic powers manifest their aspirations also by means of spectacular

architecture, which includes towers and skyscrapers. The same marketing operation was visible in the USA before the Second World War started. Now, it can be seen in the dynamically developing states of the East.

Fig. 13. Library in clouds: ZHANG JIE ZHENG *Shanghai Library.* 1995. Photo: Anna G C (Creative Commons)

Traditions, different as they may be, use similar models of communication with consumers of architecture. Modernist ideas are not the only ones that go beyond a single ethno-social area, which proves that towers are the very construction that connote no affiliation with any specific cultural area. It is enough to look at numerous library depository towers across Europe and for example at the tower of the Biblioteca Mário de Andrade (designed by Jacques Pilon, 1942) in São Paulo. They all stem from different historical background, but the construction of the towers was determined by the utilitarian function. The examples discussed here also show that the primary value carried by towers is also to communicate information of symbolic dimension, expressed for instance on a scale of prestige. The tower construction combines the practical and symbolic aspects: such a library, and the material symbol of knowledge with it, is visible from a distance. It is a landmark and a marketing object, but still a symbolic one.

This monographic article makes no mention of a number of other symbolic elements discernible in the libraries with a predominance of forms in which the motif of the tower is emphasized in a more or less discrete manner, such as is the case with the Ruskin Library in Lancaster or the central library of the Brandenburgische Technische Universität in Cottbus. Some other important issues were also not covered in the semiotic analyses of vertical constructions. This includes the male/female opposition. The potential sexuality of the body of the building in the time of modernism was excluded from the architectural discourse[14]. However, this metaphoric opposition is still present, exactly when interpretation is applied to vertical constructions, especially those with depository function. The tower, a phallic form, a symbol of power and expansion, in case of libraries in terms of functionalit is also a cradle, shelter, and consequently the female element. After all, the tower protects

man's cultural achievements. It also gives its users a temporary sense of security when they are inside it and this claim is valid regardless of how much the archetypical character of towers was upset and weakened after the September 11 attacks. Those issues should be further elaborated on in the future research.

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[1]Władysław KOPALIŃSKI *Słownik symboli*. Warszawa 1990, p. 461.
[2]See Andrzej WARMIŃSKI Filozoficzno-symboliczna wieża architektury, [in:] *Przestrzeń, filozofia i architektura: osiem rozmów o poznawaniu, produkowaniu i konsumowaniu przestrzeni*, ed. Ewa Rewers, Poznań 1999, p. 64.
[3]Jan F. JACKO, *Struktura symboli wertykalnych a ich rola w komunikacji międzykulturowej i w zarządzaniu*, [in:] *Religion in the time of changes*. ed.Ewa Klima, Łódź 2005, p. 179.
[4]*Torres y rascacielos. De Babel a Dubái*. ed. Robert Dulau [et al]. Barcelona 2012, p. 20-25.
[5]See*Marta Minujin – Official WebSite* [online], Marta Minujin 2010 [access: 30.03.2013]. Accessible in Wolds Wide Web: http://www.marta-minujin.com/exhibitions19.html.
[6]See e.g.exhibition*Torres y rascacielos. De Babel a Dubái* which was organized inObra Social "la Caixa", Barcelona and Madrid (2012-2013).
[7]Władysław STRÓŻEWSKI, *Wokół piękna: szkice z estetyki*, Kraków 2002,p. 211.
[8]See Tomasz KRUSZEWSKI, *Adaptacja bibliotek w budynkach sakralnych – wybrane kwestie*, „Bibliotekarz" 2009, no. 4, pp. 5-7.
[9]Philip JODIDIO, *Architecture now!*, Köln 2002, p. 30.
[10]Charles A. JENCKS, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Warszawa 1987, p. 19.
[11]See *Book Mountain by MVRDV* [online], "Dezeen – Architecture and Design Magazine" from 4.10.2012 [access: 29.03.2013]. Accessible in World Wide Web: http://www.dezeen.com/2012/10/04/book-mountain-library-pyramid-by-mvrdv.
[12]Por. Mircea ELIADE, *Traktat o historii religii*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 21-22.
[13]See Manuela ROTH, op. cit., p. 293.
[14] Krzysztof KALITKO, op. cit., p. 34.