



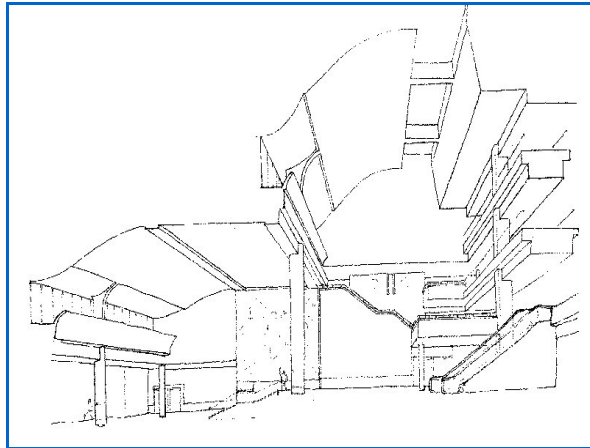
The Design and Construction of The British Library.

A presentation of the book by the architect Colin St. John Wilson on the new building for the national library at St. Pancras in London.

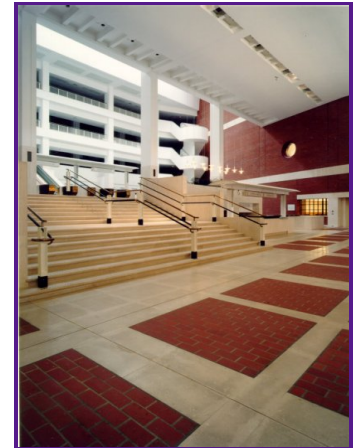
(click photo to enlarge)



The Humanities Reading Room
(Photo credit: Irene Rhodes)



Main Entrance Hall.
Drawing ('the big wave') by Wilson



Entrance Hall
(Photo credit: Irene Rhodes)

Symbolic form

"Libraries are made of the stuff of myth. Somewhere within the silent miles of stacks, gallery upon gallery, and the associated web of information retrieval there awaits the discovery of those secret connections whose alchemy will at last combine to form the Philosopher's Stone: and it is a most compelling part of this myth that the discovery of this secret will one day be the achievement of a lone scholar: Faust, Einstein or..."

And so to every scholar the library is a personal realm of secret topography and it is this perception that conditions the propriety of the public image of its architecture. It is no place for the rhetoric demanded by the grand celebrations of opera or theatre - for the library is not called upon to advertise the occasion that will draw a crowd of spectators to appointed times of performance. A comparison between the "billboard" facade of the Paris Opéra inviting a huge audience and the single door leading into the walled courtyard of Labrousse's Bibliothèque Nationale makes the point. Timeless, massive and withdrawn, a library awaits the random arrival of its lonely explorers. Propriety that seeks a sensitive representation of this ambivalent character urges upon us a certain quietism of the kind described by Adolf Loos in which 'a building should be silent on the outside and reveal its wealth only on the inside'.

Nevertheless there is a sense in which a library has to be celebrated over and above the observance of duty: there is an inherent symbolic content that has to be given its embodiment and duly celebrated - something like the classical idea of a 'showing forth' of the inner significance of a place or an institution. At a time when there is no universally accepted language in which to celebrate such abstract ideas this is a delicate matter. Rhetoric, if it is to be intelligible, requires a public realm of shared values and beliefs. In writing about the absence of any such public realm in our time the poet W. H. Auden wryly observed that 'whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds phoney': Paul Verlaine had said more bluntly 'we have wrung the neck of rhetoric'. That architecture - a public art - should suffer the same inhibition is almost a contradiction in terms but it is, sadly, a predicament of our time. The attempt by the Post-modernists to overcome this fact by adopting formal concepts of the 18th century is as unconvincing as the opposite mode of abstract expressionism is disturbingly shrill. A future generation may find an authentic rhetoric: but we, where there is no common language to be shared, should proceed with caution.

What is important for any such celebration if it is to be free from phoney rhetoric is that it should be grounded in the facts of the case. In The British Library the symbolic role is most truly embodied in the King's Library. It was a condition of the gift to the nation of this great collection of George III that its beautiful leather and vellum bindings should be on show to the general public and not just the scholars. The volumes have hitherto been distributed in the wall-cases of the British Museum where its identity, however handsome, has the passive character of decoration to the walls of the space dedicated to exhibitions. In the new building the collection is housed in a free-standing structure, an object in its own right, a six-storey-high bronze and glass tower. By this transformation it becomes simultaneously a celebration of beautifully bound books, a towering gesture that announces the invisible presence of treasures housed below and a hard-working source of materials studied in the Rare Book Reading Room opposite: the symbolic role is at one with the use.

This is an example of the way in which a library can be celebrated over and above the observance of duty. It recalls quite rightly the building Type used traditionally as a shrine and there is a certain analogy here to the famous Kaaba or 'Black Box' in Mecca.

There is also an issue of form raised by tendentious questions about planning for the future - devising a 'Library for the 21st century'. In dealing with this factor it has to be borne in mind that the occupancy of the greater part of the building is dedicated to purposes

and practices of an unchanging nature - the storage and consultation of millions of items specifically to be preserved in their original form. To consult the Lindisfarne Gospels or the manuscript of 'Beowulf' the same basic conditions are required as those that were enjoyed when the work was first made. On the other hand it is inherent in the character of what is called 'cutting edge' technology that it is usually housed in short-life, rapidly replaced buildings, so that we tend to associate lightweight technology and deliberately transient 'styling' with the forefront of technological development.

It is inherent in the stylistic claims of 'high-tech' architecture that it must never look old, and obsolescence must be fought by constant replacement of out-of-date parts. However for the new national library it was specified that the building should have a working life of 200-250 years. In the event the building had to be so designed that changes to be accommodated were almost entirely electronic and therefore capable of replacement invisibly many times over in the life of the building. This has been done by forming continuous accessible voids at both ceiling and floor level throughout that which, for the most part, is an unchanging fabric.

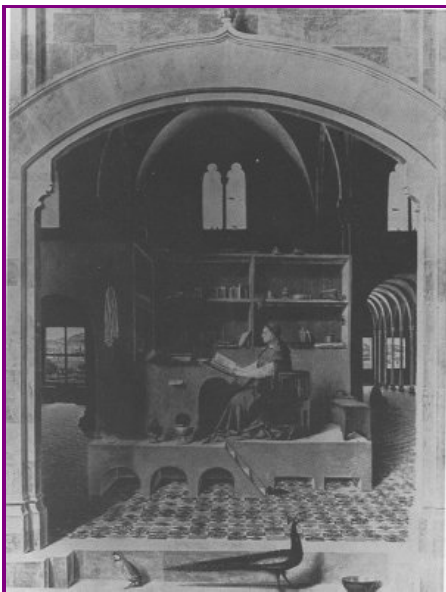
A more appropriate poetic for such a building derives from the intention that running through the design there should be a sub-plot of metaphor and of allusions - either explicitly to historical precedent (as we have discussed in the case of the King's Library Tower) or to more recent precedent drawn from what has become, during this century, the very rich and diverse language of Modernism. Indeed it is very much in the nature of the Modernism to which I feel an allegiance (Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky) that it is imbued with the historical sense of continuity and the practice of allusion rather than the clean slate of 'Modernismus' which denied all connection to the past." (p. 28 - 30)



The Rare Books Reading Room
(Photo credit: Irene Rhodes)

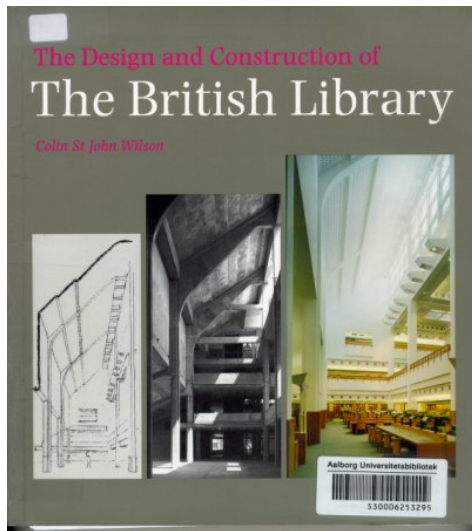
"Each reader has a range of generously dimensioned desks (of which the smallest is 1.140 m wide and 750 mm deep) made of oak with leather-top surface, and served with individual light source and power outlets for computer, microreader or other equipment: a warning light informs the reader of the arrival at the control desk of books requested. A specially designed chair and, if required, footstool complete the specification of 'workplace' for every reader. There are also a number of closed 'carrels' for single or shared occupation distributed within each reading room." (p. 63)

"At each desk, a switchable desk light allows the reader to select ideal conditions for screen reading (light off) or for book reading and establishes a local focus of attention, the printed page being, as it should, the brightest surface in the field of vision. Even in distribution to prevent glare, the light levels are varied enough to provide an endlessly interesting, dappled landscape, shifting and breathing as clouds pass overhead." (p. 68)



'St. Jerome' by Antonello da Messina
(National Gallery, London)
(Photo credit: Irene Rhodes)

"To an architect the most haunting image of the solitary scholar is the painting of St. Jerome (the patron saint of scholars) by Antonello da Messina which hangs in the National Gallery, London. Ensconced in a timber shell raised four steps above the cold tiled floor, the scholar is enveloped in a purpose-made aedicule of bookshelf, ledge and desk like an organist's console. The whole structure forms a frame of attention focused upon the act of reading: and in its turn this delicate barque is enveloped within a high-vaulted structure of stone. It is the very embodiment of intense silent concentration in a hierarchy of space and a palette of materials each of which responds to purpose by its scale, position, texture and orientation to light for this fortunate scholar." (p. 65)



Wilson, Colin St. John
The design and construction of the British Library
London, 1998. - 96 pages.

[The British Library](#) homepage

[\(return to top of page\)](#)

Rev. by Pierre Evald 30.11.1998