

## The Turbulent Totality and the Total Experience: Cultural Activities at The Black Diamond, The Royal Library in Copenhagen

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With this paper I should like to pass on some experiences from The Royal Library in Copenhagen as to how new activities can become part of a new library concept.

The Royal Library is basically a library associated with the classical European library tradition. Seven months ago we opened a new building, The Black Diamond. With the Diamond we want to create a completely new type of national library with a strong emphasis on cultural activities, such as exhibitions, concerts, events etc. The library should open up to the world outside. This greater openness was to happen in two ways:

- opening up towards the present users by creating better and easier access to the collections via large reading rooms with long opening hours and by increased use of IT;
- opening up for the public as a whole by making the new building a centre for exhibitions, meeting activities and other major events.

The building was therefore designed with two clearly separated functional parts. We have chosen to distinguish between the two aspects by calling them „the library part“ and „the cultural part“:

- The library part would accommodate circulation, reading rooms, reference collections etc. The library part would take precautions against theft from the collections.
- The cultural part would contain exhibition rooms, meeting facilities, lecture room, restaurant, bookshop. The cultural part should be allocated longer opening hours than the library's, so that cultural activities would not be restricted by the library's opening hours.

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The architects have designed a building for us which in every way lives up to the architectural qualities and the functional requirements, and in which the library part and the cultural part merge into a whole and do not appear as two physically separate units.

The building was meant to be more than a library in the traditional sense. Of course, it still had to be a library, but the entire population (the taxpayers) should be given the opportunity to experience a working environment and to enjoy the nation's cultural treasures. It therefore also contains:

- meeting rooms;
- a large assembly and concert hall for 600 people;
- large exhibitions areas;
- bookshop, run by professionals;
- restaurant, run by professionals;
- all for the purpose of supporting cultural activities and providing the framework for activities.

So where do we find ourselves now seven months after the opening? Here are some experiences gained up till now.

Anyone involved in larger public building processes will know that the road from the drawing board to the ultimate goal is not an easy one. Unforeseen expenses, increased building costs, unexpected delays, unprepared demands from the authorities – all of these are bound to occur along the way and affect the final result. It means that one might have to change one's planning conditions midstream which will certainly create new problems when the building process is already going on.

When planning a building project one very central question is how many persons are going to be in the various parts of the building at any given time. This we worked out in so-called flow figures. The flow figures were particularly important because all the new reading rooms face one large common area, the atrium where all the cultural activities are gathered together. Originally the cultural part was planned based on the following flow figures:

- During the daytime the large new assembly hall would be used by the academy of music for practising and for smaller meetings with no more than 10 - 100 people in the large open area.

- In the evening there would be meetings and concerts in the hall with up to 600 people. The first interval was supposed to be at nine o'clock, when the large reading room closed so that the noise in the open area from the 600 guests would not interfere with the library functions.

During the final planning of the restaurant, assembly hall and conference rooms our professional advisers opened our eyes to the amazing possibilities this fantastic building offered for staging big events, and they suggested a number of changes to the original concept, which amongst others meant that the big hall and restaurant could be used for conferences, receptions as well as real parties, when the library was closed. All of it with a view to creating income for the library.

At about this time we received a final message from the Ministry of Culture that the library would not qualify for any special additional grants for the activities in the cultural part. This meant no extra grants for exhibitions, concerts, conferences etc. The ministry informed us that as far as money for these activities was concerned it was up to us to provide the revenue through box office receipts and through letting out premises etc.

We therefore had no choice but to follow the advice from our consultants which was to maximise the possibilities for using the building for conferences and events, now that we found ourselves in a situation that forced us to recover all expenses ourselves. These activities were to be managed professionally with a view to creating a profit and in a way that would not mix these business activities with that of the running of the library. Consequently we also believed that extra investments should be regarded as an investment to be repaid as the revenue started to be generated.

The all-important setback for this strategy happened after all the investments in the big hall, restaurant and conference rooms had been paid long ago. As a state institution we were not allowed to invest according to business principles and all the expenses we had incurred for the hall, restaurant and conference rooms had to be paid out of the general grant. At this point we had only one way of recouping this expenditure, namely from the book acquisition grant, from which we had to take an amount corresponding to one year's budget for the National Library's bindings and acquisitions.

Despite all these problems we succeeded in realising the building project as planned. On the 15<sup>th</sup> September 1999 the building was opened to the public

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and from the very first it has received much praise. The change for us has been totally revolutionary, all-pervading and fantastic.

In the past tourist guides to Copenhagen usually described The Royal Library in terms like this:

„Secluded and sheltered from the noise of the city, in a quiet garden, unknown to the great public, you find the acropolis of learning, The Royal Library, in a stylish building where only scholars are allowed into the sacred halls.“

Today the situation has changed completely.

The positive interest in the building has been quite overwhelming. During the first three months we had a quarter of a million visitors who wanted to see the building. In the press and in the media „The Black Diamond“ has become a household name.

The interest in booking rooms for various activities has been staggering. There is a three-months waiting list for a guided tour of the building. The conference rooms are booked far into the future.

Since the opening many private firms, organisations and public authorities have had conferences in the hall, but the facilities are not really geared to big conferences. This means that lunches and coffee breaks for conference delegates have to be taken „standing“ and take place in the reception area where the library patrons arrive. It also means that noise inevitably reaches the reading rooms. As I mentioned earlier the acoustics in the reading rooms are adapted to there being 10 - 100 people in the open area during the daytime. Now there are as many as 600 which certainly cause some inconvenience in the reading rooms.

The biggest and most debated event so far took place towards the end of February when the Danish pop group Aqua introduced their new CD in the Diamond for 800 invited guests. On that day the library closed four hours before official closing time and the Diamond was transformed into a huge discothèque with eight bars. Let me quote a Norwegian newspaper's comments on the event:

„This could never have taken place in Norway. For one thing it is almost unthinkable that such enormous sums of money could be granted for erecting a monumental and magnificent building for the

purpose of housing a book collection, such as has been the case of The Royal Library in Copenhagen – also called The Black Diamond because of the stately appearance. To invite a pop group to use the building in Søren Kierkegaard's Square for one of the most incredible launchings of a record the world has ever witnessed is to the Norwegian mind quite absurd. ... That this happened while they were surrounded by 21 mill. books ... So impressive was the launching of the record to the international press that the performers ran the risk of being overshadowed not only by the building, but also by the generous buffets, brandy and cigar salons ... We have to admit that we remain dazzled by a successful marketing stunt. The publicity value for Denmark is probably inestimable.“

With the Aqua event the limits of the building were effectively tested and we agree that we can go no further than that. It also affected the core of the library function, as the library closed four hours earlier on the day. We have subsequently decided that closing the library because of events must be the absolute exception.

The review just quoted gives a vivid description of the event itself, but also points out something quite central which we have experienced ourselves, namely that the publicity value of The Black Diamond is invaluable for The Royal Library.

And what has the reaction been?

#### *The Tourists*

The number of tourists has been staggering. We had worried in advance that many new guests would be inclined to believe that they had arrived in a public library, and that our staff would have to spend a lot of time explaining angry and frustrated users that in that sense they had come to the wrong place. We tried to prevent this situation by preparing brochures and putting up signs which said that this is an academic library which supports research and further education.

Those initiatives have born fruit. The tourists accept that this is a working building and we have not been troubled by too many irrelevant inquiries. The sheer volume of visitors is, however, a problem. Compared with before the Diamond was opened, the number of visitors has trebled and the pressure increases considerably during school holidays and on Saturdays. The amount of people is in itself a disturbing factor – and the fact that the building has

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become a favourite sightseeing spot for families with children at the weekend adds to this problem.

To remedy this we have put up extra signposting outside the reading rooms asking people to respect that this is a place of work for researchers. We intend to maintain the principle that this is a working library, but also that the building is accessible to the entire population.

*The Users*

The users are divided into two groups. One group thrives in the modern environment with lots of activities and feels inspired by working in modern surroundings. Some of the older researchers who were used to the atmosphere of the old library feel lost in the new surroundings and are beginning to find other places in which to do their research. This letter from a student gives quite an apt description of what functions well and where there are problems:

"I am a student and come here from time to time to borrow books, search for literature and to use your excellent reading room. But there is nearly always too much noise for me to be able to concentrate. Today there was a gang of youngsters making a lot of noise in the department for literature searches. Last time it was a group of young people who were sending hotmails to each other – and they were quite loud. ... I then went into the reading room to get a bit of peace and quiet, but was met by piercing baby crying noises from the staff quarters(!). And librarians are standing behind their desks, chattering at normal level(!). While I am writing this e-mail a workman starts drilling. It really is not good enough. I think quietness is important in a library. And it is otherwise such a lovely place. I do hope it will be possible to induce the librarians to keep an eye on the noise level and do something about it, when it becomes too much. With best wishes and thank you for an otherwise very fine library."

The biggest problem we have had is in fact quite trite, but also very indicative of a person's basic needs. It concerns the canteen. In the old house the readers were used to sharing the canteen with the staff and could get a cheap cup of coffee or sandwich. One of the really major complaints has been that we did not carry on this tradition in the new house, where restaurant and café are run on a commercial basis with commercial prices. The lack of a cheap cup of coffee or sandwich has really made the blood boil in the Copenhagen university world. The solution was that we have arranged an area for eating, with machines for coffee and soft drinks. That has put a stop to any criticism.

*The Politicians*

Even before the opening the Ministry of Culture was worried that we would be swamped by tourists, but this fear has now been outweighed by the political system's pride in the building and its popularity. One has also been reassured that we have been able to counteract most of the criticism levelled by the library users about the high level of activity.

*The Staff*

Before opening the new library, a number of training programmes had been worked out for the staff, as many more members of staff had to join in the service of the public which has meant a completely new situation where old barriers have been broken down. Now the staff at the circulation desk are not only supposed to check out the books but also to be able to answer questions about which types of materials have been used in the construction and who has created the work of art which adorns the ceiling.

The most intense discussions have been on who should be allowed to use the public PCs. Is one allowed to write an e-mail? I know that these problems exist in all libraries, but we have more than 100 PCs available in a very open library which attracts thousands of tourists. Our policy is that anyone with a serious purpose is allowed to use the Internet and to write e-mails – free of charge.

Finally there have been some heated internal discussions on the controversial decision to close the library for four hours for the launching of a pop CD. Some called it a pollution of the library. Now that the event is in the past – and it proved to be a success – the criticism seems somehow to have abated.

*The Economics*

The many activities in the Diamond were supposed to make a profit for the benefit of the actual running of the library. The starting-up phase has been extremely hectic and a stable management organisation has not yet been established for the many new activities. For the time being we must realise that the money is floating the opposite way, namely from the management of the library to the cultural activities. But we are working very hard on this aspect with a view to making the cultural activities balance financially – and make the money float in the right direction.

In the areas where we are cooperating with professional leasings, such as the bookshop and restaurant, we are making a profit. In those areas that we are solely responsible for – we loose money.

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The Diamond and its multitude of activities have, however, given The Royal Library something that money cannot buy, namely an image and a popularity in the general public's mind which definitely defies imagination. It is obvious that the building and the non-library activities give the library a prestige and a positive position which it could not otherwise have aspired to. There is no doubt whatsoever that these activities are supporting the library – even despite the very real problems of an activity and noise level that are too high. The Royal Library has effectively dusted itself down and become a symbol of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*The Future*

The Black Diamond is by now mentioned in every single tourist brochure about Copenhagen and we fear the approaching summer. We want to maintain our open policy, but it will become necessary to work out some regulations for where tourists are allowed in the building so that they do not disturb the reading rooms. These are totally practical precautions.

Next it will be necessary to recruit members of staff with a business background to be in charge of the cultural events – or at least work together with professionals. On this particular point we have overestimated what a person with a purely library professional background is able to do.

We still need to merge the cultural activities and the library activities. In our proposal for a strategic plan up until 2005, which is being debated just now, we have expressed our aim thus:

The Royal Library must run its main functions: national library, university library, research institution and cultural institution in such a way that they support and develop each other and together produce results for the institution's target groups in every area, which surpass what each by itself would be able to contribute.

The vision behind this strategic goal is quite clear. The cultural activities are here to stay. Every department, every function, every member of staff must contribute to the institution's main activities succeeding in working together in a harmonious and constructive way. The cultural part must support the library parts – and vice versa.

Seven months after the inauguration we are beginning to find ourselves in a turbulent totality.

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