

A European library for Milan: the BEIC Project

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THE BEIC PROJECT

Milan and the region Lombardy boast a very complex and contradictory reality. There are many public and private libraries. Some of them have a remarkable historical tradition and a considerable ancient and contemporary heritage. However, despite this and all the investments of the last years, the local library services seem to be inadequate compared to the increasing demand coming from the cultural, research and occupational world. Among the interventions carried out in the last years, it is worth mentioning the reopening of the "Biblioteca Ambrosiana", the creation of the "Mediateca" (multimedia library) of Santa Teresa (a branch of the "Biblioteca Braidense"), the reorganization of some peripheral libraries, the gradual computerization of the services, the improved coordination, the investment in new technological and multimedia equipment, the creation of new libraries and the highly dynamic library services of the province. Anyway, Milan is still very far from being able to compete with the other big European capitals in terms of library services. The library infrastructures are still largely undersized with respect to spaces, services provided, promotion and coordination.

The BEIC project results from this situation. The main aims of this library - Biblioteca Europea di Informazione e Cultura, European Library of Information and Culture - are meeting the increasing and diversified cultural demand of Milan and Lombardy, establishing new ways to coordinate the various existing libraries, promoting and managing the computerization process of services and the digitalisation of documents, and raising the city to the level of the other big European capitals. The name of this library itself clearly defines its *mission*: an international body that promotes the European vocation of Milan and Italy; not only a container where documents are stored, but primarily a workshop and a centre for the production and spreading of information, as well as a public infrastructure for knowledge and culture. The BEIC will be a large open-shelf library with a close interconnection between the books and the computer modules: it will contain both hard copies and digitalized books, with original texts and translations, with fundamental global works and collections, the most important monographs and many periodicals. The public will have direct access to the works in the open-shelf sections, while the remaining documents will be kept in a vast closed archive.

This will not mean establishing a new national library, but rather realizing a new concept of library, somehow similar to the New York Public Library. A library that can provide a higher service compared to the public reading libraries and yet different from the specialized libraries. Something between the big *public library* and the *reference library*, linked in a network with the other libraries of Milan and Lombardy, with the Italian and international bibliographic databases and the major libraries abroad. The BEIC will be organized according to the strongly user-oriented "three-level" library model. There will be a *Near Zone* (with the entrance, reception and information desk, exhibition areas, browsing area, children's library, media forum, educational centre, conference centre, news section, newspaper library, travel and leisure section, community information) with some shops and catering facilities; a *Middle Zone*, with open-shelves (reference, theme sections with open-shelf archive, reading and consulting areas); and a *Far Zone*, with department storerooms and a closed deposit in the basement.

The project numbers are the following:

- a documentary archive with approximately 900,000 volumes, 150,000 audiovisuals and 3,000 current periodicals in the open-shelf consulting areas
- a documentary archive with approximately 3,850,000 volumes or multimedia documents in the storerooms
- approximately 3,500 consultation areas

- approximately 1,000 seats in the auditorium, conference room and halls
- approximately 600 seats in the catering facilities
- approximately 2,700 m² for businesses related to the library activities

The area of the project is of approximately 65,000 m², of which 13,000 m² are destined to the closed archive. Outside, some public areas and parks have been planned, covering a surface of approximately 17,000 m², while the basement will host a 13,000 m² car park.

AREA, REQUIREMENTS AND PROJECT RESTRICTIONS

Very often creating a new big public library implies an urban recovery on a larger scale, which applies also to this project. In fact, the [BEIC](#) will be built at the site of the former railway station of Porta Vittoria, facing the Parco Marinai d'Italia: this abandoned area represents one of the many unsolved deficiencies that affect Milan and, despite its closeness to the centre, this area shows various signs of urban and social degradation. Right from its first expansion in the late 19th century, big infrastructures and urban facilities have risen in this area: from the old fruit and vegetable market to the Porta Vittoria station, until the establishment of the nearby "Città annonaria" (comprising the slaughterhouse and the meat, fish, fruit and vegetables market etc.), which is partially abandoned. All around are industries and large working-class housings with wide public parks that blend with the urban fabric.

Following the abandonment of the railway station and the further agreement between the Italian Railways, the Municipality and the Region, in 2000, this area was divided into two longitudinal strips: the north destined to a service, trading and residential complex, and the south with the new [BEIC](#). Underground there will be the "Passante Ferroviario" (the blue line) with the Vittoria station that will become one of the main stations of the regional metropolitan railway system. The longish configuration of this area deriving from the longitudinal division of the existing lot represents a particularly strong restriction to the project.

Other restrictions and characteristics of this area are the location of the underground station (east) and its exits; the east-west linear park connecting the Parco dei Marinai d'Italia to the sports and recreational facilities, which will rise beyond the ring road; the interruption of the pedestrian route constituted by the avenue between the library and the existing park; problems related to the risk of raising the water sheet (which makes it difficult to build 6-7 m underground); and maximum height restrictions due to the nearby airport.

PROJECT CHARACTERISTICS AND INFORMATION CRITERIA

The project provides the creation of a large building about 30 m high and lying on a 5-m base that slopes down to the east and west with two wide green ramps. This building is intended as a true cornerstone in the city, as an "ark" of culture and information linked to the urban and regional framework - as a grand but not pompous urban symbol. The extraordinary expressivity of its architecture aims at transmitting the exceptional public function it hosts. It will be an urban icon: the public space *par excellence* that invites to discover and explore.

When planning a new library, one of the main problems to face from the architectonic standpoint consists in helping the passer-by fight down his "fear to cross the threshold". That is why it is of primary importance to link and integrate as much as possible the inside of the building with the outer public spaces. Thus, what happens inside the building must be clearly visible from outside, so that the occasional passer-by is induced and encouraged to enter and explore, or - even better - unwittingly attracted. Therefore the *Near Zone* of the library (with the newspaper library, the news section etc.) is clearly visible from outside and is located very close to the park, the catering facilities and the coffee shop.

In order to achieve this integration between the inside and outside, the project provides a longitudinal passage crossing the building. It is entirely public and runs parallel to the east-west linear park along the two green sloping ramps. Both these ramps lead the visitor to an entrance of the building into the large full-height entrance hall (the *BEIC Forum*).



It is a real "urban environment", about 25 m high, with the library sections on overlapped levels that overlook a glazed square. From the entrance hall it is also possible to access the shops and catering facilities that have a second access to the outside facing the linear park. The entrance hall stands above the road level and is directly linked to the Parco Marinali d'Italia through a cycle-pedestrian bridge passing over Viale Umbria; from the linear park, it is possible to access directly the entrance hall through the ramps, escalators and lifts.

The two sloping ramps covered with lawns serve both as a park and as an urban area for the community. The reading arms extend from the main building and provide a visual connection between the *BEIC* outer public spaces and the urban fabric, and with its colonnades and the overlooking "bridges" of the reading rooms facing the surrounding architecture. In the library square (near the exits to the station), a colonnade filters the view of the linear park and of the multi-purpose complex.

The wide base hosts the most "external" functions of the library itself: the *Mediaforum*, the conference centre, the educational centre, the shops and catering facilities and the public car parks underground. The children's library is on the ground floor and can be accessed directly from the lower level of the entrance hall. It has an independent configuration and faces directly its own wide garden. The *BEIC Box* is a big square building, 30 m high and about 80 m wide. It hosts the main functions of the library: entrance, newspaper library and news section, lending service, reference desk and open shelves. From here, the reading arms extend towards the outside. The outer hollow "body" of the building hosts the technical services and rooms, the systems, and most of the vertical connections, while the upper hollow "body" hosts the offices that directly overlook the library entrance hall and the inner yards built on the top of the building. The closed storage is located underground, below the base, while the laboratories and the technical support services are grouped in a linear one-floor block at the front facing the side street. The "Villaggio delle Biblioteche" (libraries village) is located in the eastern area and has the same dimensions as the two buildings that will rise in Viale Molise. In the future, the *village* might host special funds and collections.

The *BEIC Box* contains books that are directly accessible on the open shelves. The shelves are arranged by theme in three overlapped departments that overlook the *BEIC Forum*: Human and Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Literature and Arts. The high concentration of books in the *BEIC Box* facilitates the users' search and underlines the close link, interrelation and circularity of the sections, and the different fields of knowledge. The wide entrance hall is lit by two large glazed walls, east and west (shaded against the summer sun), and by a big zenith skylight. Here the visitors are welcomed in the big "urban environment" of the *BEIC Forum* and can easily find their way to the overlooking departments. The main route leads the visitors through the entrance to the reference desk. The reading arms with glazed windows start from the *BEIC Box*. They extend on the sloping ramps and face the park on one side and the new library square to the east. The fact that the reading rooms extend on sloping ramps allows a direct link between the reference rooms and each one of the three theme departments, creating a common reading space although on overlapping levels.

The BEIC Box is the main place where people meet, exchange information and search on the shelves, enquiry, and consume the information. The reading "bridges", reaching outwards in the full light, are ideal to pause, meditate and enjoy the absolute quietness and silence.

The departments on overlapping levels create a highly communicative atmosphere, an "urban environment" and a "panorama of culture" similar to the one in the Staatsbibliothek of Berlin. The inner configuration will allow a wide range of possibilities and a varying use of the spaces. Inside the library, everybody will find the most suitable reading place depending on the moment, the purpose of his research, the time available, and even his own mood: from the seats at the common table in the large reading rooms to the single carrel for undisturbed hours of study, from the reading places in the hum of the BEIC Forum below, to the seats facing the inner garden, the outer park or at the top with a view of the city.

This box-shaped building will have a self-supporting structure with full-height reinforced concrete beams contained inside the body thickness to hide any pillars inside the BEIC Forum. The outside of the body will be covered with anodized steel panels, whereas the base will have a stony finish. The slabs will consist of large pre-fabricated plates. Since the atmosphere of a library is largely determined by its acoustic environment, the vertical walls will be panelled with sound absorbing perforated wood panels. In addition, the floors and false ceilings will be sound absorbing. Passive air conditioning and energy saving systems will be provided wherever possible: floor heating on the reading terraces, natural ventilation systems through openings in the facades and in the covering to prevent greenhouse effect, glazed surfaces on the fronts equipped with fixed or moving sun blinds.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

BEIC - Biblioteca Europea di Informazione e Cultura. <http://www.beic.it/>

BEIC project. http://www.deathbyarch.com/html/european_library_of_informatio.html