

IFLA Milan 2009: ten years later

'Libraries create futures: building on cultural heritage' was the motto of the 75th IFLA Congress which took place in Milan in August 2009 from the 23rd to the 27th, with the financial involvement of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, of the Municipality of Milan (with the convinced supporters Mayor Letizia Moratti and the Culture Manager Massimo Accarisi), of the Lombardy Region and of Milan Province, with a positive final balance sheet. An appointment that returned to Italy after the 1st World Congress of librarians in 1929, the 1951 meeting (with the I'International Federation for Information and Documentation, FID) and the 1964 Congress. Milan 2009 was a particularly important congress in which the IFLA formulated the list of future library tasks: the proceedings are a relevant basis from which to start again and on which to find other civil society partners. The message of that forum was the invitation to examine globally and in cooperative terms, of shared advanced answers, the theme of libraries contribution to the construction of multicultural communities. Social initiatives have enhanced aspects that characterize our history: a series of stamps issued by the Vatican Post Office (as in 1929); the cultural evening at La Scala; the exhibition of the Leonardo da Vinci's *Codice Atlantico* in the Gallery; the concert in the Duomo with a Stradivarius violin; the congress advertising on the electronic scoreboards (6x3 meters) in Piazza Duomo; the orange bag that some IFLA congress participants continue to wear; the soccer tournament, unique in the IFLA history, christened by the president Claudia Lux. Moments immortalized in the photographic reportage by Vittoria Bonani *IFLA: in 70 scatti: culture, tradizioni e biblioteche a confronto*¹, and punctually narrated in *IFLA 2009 a Milano* by Cristina Selva published in the *Rapporto sulle biblioteche italiane 2009-2010*².

The politicians absences (except the president of the Lombardy Region Roberto Formigoni) were embarrassing. An ideal high-profile speech was the one given by the cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, in the sign of the Second Vatican Council, at the meeting *Babel, Bible and Kor'an: from texts to contexts: from cultures to sacred books: modern functions of libraries in the religious traditions of Mediterranean civilizations* held at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana on August 24th, promoted with ABEI (proceedings edited by the CEI in 2010).

Unfortunately, the IFLA Congress coincided with the beginning of the global economic crisis and the explosion of the internet (both a friendly and concurrent tool), which led to a progressive decline in libraries. Australia withdrew its candidacy for the following year's congress (replaced by the rich Sweden); considering that only a few years

1 Cfr. *IFLA in 70 scatti: culture, tradizioni e biblioteche a confronto*, reportage fotografico di Vittoria Bonani, testi di Vittoria Bonani, Wilma Leone, Anna Maria Vitale, a cura di Vittoria Bonani e Mauro Guerini. Roma: ALB Sezione Campania, 2010.

2 Cfr. *In primo piano*. In: Associazione italiana biblioteche, *Rapporto sulle biblioteche italiane 2009-2010*, a cura di Vittorio Ponzani, direzione scientifica di Giovanni Solimine. Roma: Associazione italiana biblioteche, 2010, p. 9-69: p. 36-43.



earlier the president had been the Australian Alex Byrne, who in September 2019 was high honor awarded for his contribution in favor of the international sphere libraries. The 2009 is a date which marked a break in many social fields. The strategic commitments made in Lisbon in 2001 were interrupted or reconsidered: the knowledge society, the centrality of lifelong learning for the growth of citizens' skills, the social cohesion and the economic development; thereafter education and libraries as fundamental learning places for all. On this issue there is a connection between an apparently very wide message, indeed a political one (libraries build open *polis*) and the daily life of our libraries.

Was the economic crisis the reason or an alibi not to continue on the path indicated by IFLA Milan 2009? Italian policy makers have in fact ignored or devalued the Congress demands and so far have not understood the profound social, and cultural, value of the library. At a central level, inattention towards a policy of funding and investment in human resources for libraries in our country has led to a lack of attention to professional exchanges, left too often to individual availability; Italy really risks isolation. Numerous librarians would have been interested, but the tightening of cultural expenses, for libraries in particular, and to the financing of missions, especially by municipalities, began in those years, in the biennium 2008-2009. The responsibilities are not only of politicians but also of librarians, most of them (although they can afford to be enrolled and participate in IFLA) consider the IFLA and the internalization as meetings and values distant or even unrelated to their profession.

What impact has IFLA had on the Italian context? I have been asking myself this question and postponing the answer for ten years because, perhaps, I still don't consider it mature or I (wouldn't want to) conceive it negative; I still have hesitations in writing. I limit myself to a few considerations.

IFLA Milan 2009: an investment or a wasted opportunity? More and more Italians (including some who did not take part in IFLA 2009) have been urged to commit themselves throughout the year and have assumed important positions as chairs, secretaries and section communication managers, members of the Government Board (Anna Maria Tammaro); an Italian woman, Raissa Teodori, played the Professional Committee chair role effectively. Was there, therefore, and which was (and is) the return to the Italian community? The obvious aspect is that despite the unusual context – Milan in the middle of summer – Italian colleagues have shown they can efficiently organize a world event like this, which saw the participation of 4,496 librarians, volunteers and journalists from 120 different countries: to this day the most numerous participation in an IFLA congress.

A IFLA congress in Italy, strongly wanted by the AIB and by a large number of librarians, with a considerable help from *Biblioteche oggi* and by the Stelline organizers (in particular, Massimo Belotti), supported by the main European library associations and by the ALA thanks to a 'diplomatic' work that lasted a few years, it couldn't radically change a situation in which libraries have been victims of an economic, social and cultural policy for decades that doesn't consider them an investment for the present and the future; a very different condition from the one of the Netherlands, of the Scandinavian countries and in general of Northern Europe and, outside our continent, in addition to the USA and Canada, also South Korea, Singapore and China, countries economically developed only in recent decades.

From the end of the 20th Century, some regions and several municipalities gave a resolute support for innovative projects in library building and modern libraries whose architectural structure had been conceived as a positive message for the technological, cultural and social services range offered, including the various souls of the community and for the network relations with the territory. However, to this upward thrust did not correspond and hasn't corresponded an adequate institutional drive to start designing libraries

and knowledge access renewed system as a common good on which the present and the future of a community are based. In fact, except for some virtuous examples (fortunately, more and more widespread), the 'surfing at sight' policy has continued to succeed, that is to pursue contingent and non-strategic objectives aimed at the community 'superior good'.

The AIB and libraries answer to this policy, more precisely to this library non-policy, has not been and is not the resignation or fall-back in self-soliciting ivory towers, rather a daily commitment to the library advocacy which becomes a democracy defense, a support for the citizens' rights to free and uncharged access to information and resources, although these aims are not always asserted by certain politicians, in particular at the local level. Even more than in the past, in fact, libraries are characterizing themselves as the open society defenders; especially the public ones which stand out as minorities defenders of any kind. From this point of view Italian libraries – often found in precarious circumstances – have become the 'third place', one of the few non-commercial public space, without consumption obligation, open to everyone without distinction of class, skin colour or religious faith.

The AIB plays a decisive role as a civil, open and participatory movement promoting reading, culture and research, as well as a representative and defender of the librarian profession.

The 2009 IFLA Congress was a moment in which the Italian libraries richness was highlighted, documented by numerous reports and by the volume *Italian libraries*³.

IFLA Milan 2009 is to be read as a historic event for the Italian librarian community for having contributed to spread the library function awareness within the local and national cultural structure; the IFLA Congress, with its vast and highly successful program, gave an impulse to Italian colleagues in realizing that the true 'librarianship music' sounds at international level and that, in particular, young colleagues are invited to move towards commitments suitable to the cosmopolitan context and to try to gain experience outside of Italy, in libraries and other international cultural institutions. Last but not least, IFLA Milan 2009 was the event that put training in the center: IFLA means standards, guidelines, vision, innovation, and discipline. Those few who take part in the IFLA congress without doing cultural tourism know this well by working throughout the year in the divisions and various committees; it is, therefore, decisive to stimulate as many librarians as possible, for the professional and Italian libraries quality, to participate constructively in IFLA activities, by expecting state funding, as requested so many times.

The statute of the librarian, in fact, can only be oriented to the models representing the most advanced state of art and shared at a global level, combining technology with the enhancement of our peculiar cultural heritage.

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³ Cfr. *Italian libraries*. [Roma]: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali: Associazione italiana biblioteche; [Pavona]: Iacobelli, [2009].