From welcome to hospitality: a new sense for the library

In 2016 I was wondering if the triumphal architectural project of French libraries no longer served as a showcase rather than as a service (to) the public[1]. After five years and a prolonged health crisis I have to change my mind and reconsider the social (and health) usefulness of large spaces offered by French media libraries: the only open places when every other public counter was closed or overcrowded, these structures had anticipated and exceeded limits to physical distance and social interaction. Already ubiquitous in urban and suburban areas, in rural areas and in mountain villages, libraries enjoy a territorial capillarity, which has proved invaluable in times of crisis. Capillarity that went far beyond, during the subsequent lockdowns, thanks to the active and dynamic presence of the spaces on the web of some libraries, on platforms and on social networks.

The long months of the Covid-19 epidemic and the precautionary measures that have forced children, adults and elderly people at home show that space (physical and digital) makes the difference, especially when physical distance must be controlled and social relationships must be limited and mediated, even if they are coveted and sought after more than ever.

Thus libraries-cathedrals, certainly intimidating and distracting, now offer the ideal perimeter to be 'alone among others', without any risk. In addition to offering personal services, 'cultural welfare', differentiated cultural consumption, requests for information and education, places for cognitive and social exchanges, they are the origin of dynamic and appreciated digital spaces in times of forced isolation: exchanges, reflections, debates, shared resources, the possibility of consulting voices and qualified sources on social problems find an ideal environment to grow and evolve.

Online spaces managed and animated by municipal libraries seem to redistribute and make more fluid for citizens the possibility of accessing useful sources and documents in times of pandemics, when more than ever they want to be informed, to access knowledge and understand.

Experiences of virtual exchanges and debates, born from the initiatives of those municipal libraries that have decided both not to close and to strengthen their mission during the three lockdown periods (from March 2020 to May 2021), have brought life stories online more or less constructed or legitimate, evidence of how people different from us inhabit the world, have different perceptions of crises and find new solutions.

Then the library, already hospitable as a place, becomes hospitable also and above all as a crossing point between the voices of ordinary people, and not only of recognized and dominant authors. Thus the online space of the municipal library, whether large or small, modern or ancient, can become a political place that hosts stories and life stories, con-

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1 Mariangela Roselli, *La bibliothèque dans les quartiers populaires*, «Mondes sociaux», 13 dicembre 2016, <https://sms.hypotheses.org/author/roselli>.

stituting that set of common and shared resources, necessary to think, understand, imagine. Proximity to everyday citizens' life, tested and extensively tried out during the crisis, must be reinforced to stabilize and strengthen cultural and social public action of these structures. The rush of empathy and solidarity could become a starting point for giving a change to libraries' action, as some structure managers proposed in France.

The recent congress of the Association des bibliothécaires de France (ABF, June 2021) focused on the experience of the health crisis for libraries and their visibility for citizens, young and less young. It is clear that library, having remained open where school was closed, offered an opportunity for emancipation, especially in areas where it was the only public institution continuing to offer services and, above all, to offer available spaces[2].

Certainly, among civilian missions traditionally carried out by municipal libraries, that of proximity services has proved to be the most visible in citizens' eyes and above all the most useful for those who have been able to solicit its multiple uses (for example, let's think about numerous students who, upon returning home, made use of the municipal library's services to multiply their reading of online documents, obtain books, magazines or even get a rare original through the interlibrary loan service).

Actually, proximity's advantages, doubled by new and deeper personal relationships with users and by solidarity that develops in times of crisis, combined with the extreme human, technological and cognitive adaptability of these structures, have brought to light a new sense of the library.

In small villages and neighboring areas where all other services – health, social, welfare – were delayed, the library served primarily as an information desk and as a rescue anchor, when all services were closed or occupied. We went to the library first of all to break isolation, re-evaluating that function of stability referred to by the homeless who find refuge in Parisian Bibliothèque publique d'information[3].

The library, a hospitable place, is therefore revisited and re-evaluated, with the technological advantage of connected spaces accessible with services, animations, platforms, media, workshops and, above all, human contacts and social interactions (at a distance!). A new sense of hospitality emerges around the structure which, traditionally associated with reading, has in fact found itself used for unprecedented uses as a sui generis information center, a coaching point for isolated people or people without a web connection or even a mediation and socio-health consultancy desk.

Aware of the breaking point and the possibility of renewal that health crisis represents for libraries, Raphaëlle Bats[4] launched the initiative of a reflection and exchange seminar during the first lockdown (March 2020)[5]. Reception conditions, since long at the center of the public reading professionals' concerns, have proved decisive in this context: safety, health, comfort and atmosphere. But it is the spaces on the web that have considerably

2 Hovig Ananian, *Table ronde "Les bibliothèques en temps de crise, retour sur un an de Covid": Congrès de l' Association des bibliothécaires de France, samedi 19 juin 2021*, «Bulletin des bibliothèques de France», 12 luglio 2021, <https://bbf.enssib.fr/tour-d-horizon/table-ronde-les-bibliotheques-en-temps-de-crise-retour-sur-un-an-de-covid_70040>.

3 Serge Paugam; Camila Giorgetti, *Des pauvres à la bibliothèque: enquête au Centre Pompidou*, avec la collaboration de Benoît Roullin [*et al.*]. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2013.

4 Raphaëlle Bats, *Les bibliothèques en 2020: quatre points de rupture*, «Arabesques», 2021, n. 101, p. 4-5, DOI: 10.35562/arabesques.2520.

5 Seminario Biblio-Covid-19 "Les bibliothèques en temps de crise" (marzo-dicembre 2020), <https://www.enssib.fr/seminaire-Biblio-Covid>.

expanded libraries' role in social interactions, with social networks and with animations organized on remote exchange platforms, bringing to the fore these little structures (and in particular on computer and smartphone screens) scarcely frequented in normal times.

The digital mediation that currently sees libraries as protagonists on platforms and animations must guarantee those four points of reception also on virtual space. By doing so, it will be possible to move from a welcoming library to a hospitable library because it is accessible everywhere and always open, as well as being useful (healthy to raise everyone's levels of knowledge), comfortable and safe for those who want to physically attend it. In other words, the paradigm would become 'giving and receiving' from users – and not just giving to users –, to enrich both of them with the uniqueness of stories, testimonies and interpretations of how, elsewhere, people crosses and overcomes difficulties. In this way, the structures for public reading could offer hospitality (physical and digital) as an organized and equipped place to take care of those who pass, circulate, settle or transit[6].

The first lockdown linked to the sanitary crisis brought to the knowledge of librarians not problems of users' accessibility to library, but needs of confined persons, needs that went well beyond the access to library. With the experience of sanitary emergency, libraries have also had to redefine their role to take care, from a receptive social perspective, of the suffered vulnerabilities registered by citizens. In other words, the lockdown situation has created unprecedented conditions for librarians to empathize not only with users, but with citizens in general, whom they usually do not meet.

For example, empathy arose from vulnerability's discovery in which isolated or sick people found themselves. But this experience is not enough to give a profound change in the sense we give to the library: for this, it is necessary to become aware of the many vulnerabilities of people (with training suitable for professionals) in order to be able to imagine technological, 'social' and 'psychological' isolation and develop the right skills to respond to situations such as addiction to screens or isolation from social or virtual fracture. In this sense, library's public service mission, founded on the principle of equality among citizens, can include an ethical dimension, based on solidarity and social responsibility. Only in this way can the library project its action in a dynamic and reactive way with the society in which it is included, certainly making available resources to know and understand the reason for the crises, but also becoming an engine of contact and circulation between ideas and debates that allow anyone – even those who are not registered as readers – to have access to rich, qualified and controlled sources with a view to education in complexity.

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6 Thierry Paquot, *De l' accueillance: essai pour une architecture et un urbanisme de l' hospitalité*. In: *Éthique, architecture, urbain*, sous la direction de Thierry Paquot, Chris Younès. Paris: La Découverte, 2000, p. 68-83, DOI: 10.3917/dec.youne.2000.01.0068.