

# *Adelante con juicio*: from the BEIC a message of confidence for the future of Italian libraries

The launch of the construction site for the realisation of the European Library of Information and Culture marks the point of no return of a path that began a quarter of a century ago, when, thanks to the initiative of Antonio Padoa Schioppa, the association “Milano Biblioteca del 2000” was founded, which promoted the idea of building in the Lombard capital – similarly to other great Western capitals – a large and modern library firmly hinged on the coordinates of European cultural identity. After alternating events and a new start, the project has regained shape and vigor thanks to the funding that the Government has reserved for the project as part of the complementary interventions to the PNRR and is taking shape according to the planned schedule: a new concept of the library designed in 2021 to incorporate the profound cultural and technological changes that have characterized the first two decades of the new century, an international design competition launched in 2022, the announcement of the winners and the final and executive design completed within just 15 months, the commencement of construction in November 2023 and the opening of the new institute expected by 2026 (barring unforeseen circumstances).

Such an important infrastructure, on an unprecedented scale for Milan, Lombardy and Italy, is destined to produce different effects: to give life, within a specially conceived, highly technological and fully accessible building, to a public library programmatically capable of integrating analog and digital services, use and production of content, study and participatory learning, sociality and public discussion, implementing the model described by the latest revision of the *IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* of July 2022; to guide and support, through an appropriate cooperation strategy, the evolution of library services in the metropolitan City of Milan; to mark the recognisability of a quadrant of the city in strong transformation, proposing itself as the focal point of a new urban centrality with a cultural and creative connotation and revitalising a neighbourhood full of contradictions and not free from criticalities; to have a positive impact on the real, everyday liveability of the city, offering a mix of opportunities that act on intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, on the self-esteem of some groups of 'marginal' residents, on engagement and stimulation of active participation as a vector of cohesion, on the attitude of investing in oneself in terms of skills.

This ambition involves a specific design attention not only to the architectural, technological, functional, managerial and environmental and economic sustainability aspects but also a careful assessment of the direct and indirect impacts produced on the urban and social fabric, of the risks and contradictions that constitute their inevitable corollary and a reflection on the most effective strategies and approaches in relation to the desired effects, in the short and medium term, in the contexts and communities to which it is addressed.

Multiplicity is the distinguishing feature of the BEIC and the management of instances of such a diversified nature will pose a further challenge, that of building a staff in which, in addition to the usual library profiles, there are professionals not normally covered by the staff of cultural institutions and difficult to recruit with current insolvency procedures: it will require a multicultural staff, versed in digital technologies open to collaboration and capable of exploiting relational and transversal skills, high also in fund raising, European and cultural planning, digitisation of cultural heritage, etc.

The construction of the BEIC and of the new Public Library of Turin (built with the National Plan funds complementary to the PNRR) and the new Sapienza Library in Rome, authorise a cautious optimism: after decades of stagnation, investments in new libraries on a metropolitan scale are being resumed, replacing obsolete structures and filling a delay, when not a void, compared to other countries. This is a sign of confidence in the role of libraries as antidotes to the loss of faith in the future and a challenge to cognitive poverty, new illiteracy, inequalities in access to knowledge that undermine social cohesion even in the richest and most developed urban centers of our country.

The hope is that the storytelling, the sharing, the active involvement of librarians, citizens and all potential stakeholders will reopen the public debate on the role of libraries and may finally change the perception of their role, making its potentialities evident and favoring a flywheel effect that leads once again administrations to see their libraries as a factor of collective growth and not a mere cost item.

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