



**Fig. 1:** A glimpse into the Central Library's central reading room (© SLUB / Florian Bieler).



**Fig. 2:** A photo of the SLUB building and its recognisable architecture (© SLUB / Henrik Ahlers).

# More kitchen than grocery store. The SLUB Dresden as an example of functional change and library developability

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*“Our libraries should transition to places to do stuff, not simply places to get stuff. The library will become a laboratory in which community members tinker, build, learn, and communicate. We need to stop being the grocery store or candy store and become the kitchen. We should emphasize hospitality, comfort, convenience and create work environments that invite exploration and creativity.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is the image the American librarian Joyce Valenza invoked more than a decade ago, accurately describing a necessary paradigm shift in libraries. As a result of increasing digitalization and the easy accessibility of information and knowledge that goes along with it, as well as changing expectations among younger generations, libraries of the future will have to be much more than media repositories and lending stations. The guiding concept is no longer the categorization of content but rather high-quality ‘knowledge work’ in a significantly broader field of activity. The ability to combine effectively both the digital with the real world, as well as the fascination for new learning and communication culture with what is worth preserving of the old, is a crucial criterion for the new library concept. Essential, too, is a fundamentally changed partnership between specialists and users. “Libraries *for* people is the old way of looking at libraries,” asserts the library scientist Richard David Lankes. “The new way sees instead a library *of* people”. The living interaction between librarians and their community and its ideas and engagement are an integral part of what both characterizes and strengthens a library.<sup>2</sup>

Founded in 1556, the Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB) is one of the largest and most diverse academic libraries in Germany. It is the library of the Technische Universität Dresden, the state library for the free state of Saxony and an important center for innovation and service in the German library sector. As have all institutions traditionally engaged in distributing and storing information, the SLUB has experienced profound changes in the 30 years since the introduction of the World Wide Web. While the number of downloads at the library has more than tripled over the last ten years, physical loans have dropped by almost half. At the same time, the character of the inventory has shifted. Each year fewer printed works are bought and documented, and two thirds of the budget is spent on non-physical media such as large digital references and full-text collections, all of which affects

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Valenza, Library as domestic metaphor. 25.8.2008. <http://blogs.slj.com/neverendingsearch/2008/08/25/library-as-domestic-metaphor/>

<sup>2</sup> Richard David Lankes, Expect more. Demanding better libraries for today’s complex world (Jamesville/NY 2016), p.62. Cf. Eric Klinenberg, Palaces for the people. How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization and the decline of civic life (New York 2018).

the use of space and staff numbers. In the face of rapidly growing demands in the areas of hardware maintenance and software development, the IT department has doubled to 50 employees, 1/7 of the total staff. In addition, many new qualifications are being required of the workforce, for example, in the fields of event management, web and social media design, facilities management and staff development.<sup>3</sup>

In order to participate as actively as possible in shaping the contours of this transformation while maintaining enough valued educational and sharing services to secure continued support for the library, the team produced a strategy paper with input from users entitled “SLUB 2025.”<sup>4</sup> In it, the SLUB, as an academic library, defines its tasks along the entire research cycle. It describes services and tools for data management, for academic writing and publishing or for impact analyses of publications and guarantees the long-term accessibility of all self-produced data. As a public institution, it also considers itself obligated in a particular way to supporting a free, knowledge-based society. Therefore, openness, equal opportunity and diversity are especially valued in the development of services as well as in social interactions.

In accordance with the theses advanced by Valenza and Lankes, the SLUB considers itself to be a protected space in which people with different interests, diverse cultural backgrounds and lifestyles learn from and with each other and work together. As a public center for information sharing, it is concerned with supporting the democratic ideal of a responsible and informed citizenry. The vision of organizing true two-way communication in multiple disciplines within the library, and promoting a healthy give and take of knowledge and experience is already evident today in the SLUB labs.

### **Interactive laboratories displace rows of shelves**

The SLUB initiated the first dedicated laboratory in 2015 with the SLUB Makerspace. The concept arose from the recognition that libraries would remain committed to available knowledge codified in texts, whether analog or digital, but also had to pay more attention to increasingly significant non-textual systems of signs and worlds of knowledge. Makerspaces are open workshops dedicated to the practical aspects of gaining knowledge. They foster the rapid production of objects (rapid prototyping), the discovery and dissemination of new technologies, experience sharing and networking. Basic equipment includes devices such as 3D-printers, laser cutters and CNC-mills alongside smaller supporting tools, ideally complemented by spaces for more conceptual or documentary works as well as presentations and storage areas. Innovations and productive exchanges arise from the personal interactions among computer experts, designers and creators, each with their own specific talents and capabilities. Our goal is to encourage the most open accessibility to and free circulation of knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Achim Bonte, *Befähigung im Wandel. Personalgewinnung und -entwicklung in deutschen Bibliotheken*, in: *Bibliothek Forschung und Praxis* 41 (2017), pp. 115–121. <https://doi.org/10.1515/bfp-2017-0014>

<sup>4</sup> Cf. SLUB 2025. *Wissen teilen – Menschen verbinden* (Dresden 2019). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:14-qucosa2-357501>

The first lab was established at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Since then, the Makerspace initiative has become a rapidly growing, organized global movement that has gradually come to include libraries. The library-based Makerspace certainly does not compete with those at universities, which are often pre-existing, high performance engine rooms of individual faculties, but is rather a previously missing component in the workshop and device landscape of a university, taking on a complementary and propaedeutic role associated with features such as “openness,” “accessibility,” “interdisciplinarity,” and “sustainability.”<sup>5</sup>

Following the motivating experiences in the SLUB Makerspace, the library has enthusiastically applied the idea of common experimental and experiential spaces and the slogan “knowledge comes from doing” to other areas. In 2018, in cooperation with the TU Dresden, the SLUB Text Lab —a Makerspace of words, in a certain sense — was established as an open workshop in which analog and digital writing and editing processes could thrive through consulting services, practical exercises and group exchanges. In the Text Lab there are various settings and enough space for both collaborative and solitary writing: a large, well-lit and inviting writing area with flexible desks, seminar rooms and group workspaces as well as a writing café. Parts of the exterior area serve as a communal garden, which in good weather becomes a green writing zone. Since writing should always be understood as a physical process as well, a relaxation area invites guests to rest and recover or practice yoga. In addition, the lab hosts events such as readings, writing workshops and book groups.

The library’s current project and most recent addition is the SLUB Open Science Lab. Jointly developed consulting services and tools aim to make all the elements of the research process increasingly accessible and sustainably usable. The focus is on topics such as open-access publishing, the management of open research data or alternatives to the traditional bibliometric systems (altmetrics). With a view to libraries’ social impact, Makerspace, Text Lab und Open Science Lab are geared to citizen scientists as well, in order to promote exchanges between academia and society. The labs were purposefully not established in the central SLUB building, but rather each in one of the six decentralized locations making up the whole system. This spatial distribution prevents the main building from becoming the central point of attraction and exceeding its capacity. At the same time, this arrangement protects the decentralized sites from the effects of the continued erosion of classic, media-related library functions since they are better able to meet evolving needs with their specialized, innovative offers. Proving that the SLUB is on the right track with its lab concept is the positive feedback among professionals and the public. In 2017 and 2020, the SLUB Makerspace and SLUB Text Lab received the “Zukunftsgestalter in Bibliotheken” (Trailblazers in Libraries) prize.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Theresa Willingham / Jeroen de Boer, *Makerspaces in Libraries* (Lanham i.a. 2015)

<sup>6</sup> The prize has been awarded annually since 2012 in cooperation with the journal “Bibliothek Forschung und Praxis” and the association Zukunftswerkstatt Kultur- und Wissensvermittlung and is donated by the De Gruyter publishing company.





**Fig. 3:** A popular and flexible learning environment: the SLUB Forum (© SLUB / Crispin Iven Mokry).



**Fig. 4:** With its modern and welcoming interior, the SLUB Forum is an inviting and communicative space (© SLUB / Henrik Ahlers).





**Fig. 5:** The SLUB Makerspace – an experimental and experiential laboratory (© SLUB / Lukas Boxberger).



**Fig. 6:** As a “third place”, the SLUB regularly hosts various cultural and scientific events (© SLUB / Christina Schneider).

## **New requirements for buildings and premises**

New library functions are usually not organized in new, purpose-built premises. Plans for the SLUB's main building, opened in 2002, originated mainly in the pre-digital era, if one considers the introduction of visual web browsers, high-performance internet search engines and mobile devices as the fundamental milestones of the digital revolution; and Dresden's library satellites were, with few exceptions, originally not meant to house libraries, but were intended for other purposes. Nonetheless, because of the new functions attributed to the library as a center for communication and experience, even the original buildings are expected to fulfill much higher expectations. Along the same lines, the increasing rigidity of academic programs and the acceleration of the whole academic enterprise has rendered time an especially precious resource. For these reasons, libraries are no longer merely shelves, tables and chairs, but rather flexible workspaces with reliable wi-fi, round-the-clock service and well-run cafeterias. The same is true for the range of information itself. Preparatory library orientations seem increasingly anachronistic where intuitive usability or individualized, just-in-time support is expected.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop, the SLUB is currently preparing the main building for a far-reaching renovation and spatial remodeling project after 18 years of uninterrupted operations and 30 million visits. In the mid-term, efforts include a new climate control system and new exhibition areas, improvements in the existing system at checkout and information counters, a modern research reading room and an expansion of the cafeteria. In light of the continuing work on the library's product range, it was clear to all involved that minor functional adjustments and changes must remain possible, even before the start of this large construction project. As a result, the SLUB rededicated the classic map reading room as a Makerspace in 2015 and thoroughly revamped the main library's 460m<sup>2</sup> main entrance hall in 2017/18. The card catalogue cabinets, set up as the catalog area when the building first opened, were bit by bit removed as the library transitioned to a fully electronic catalogue system. Since the cabinets were mounted on long tables, this area just beyond the entrance was soon informally transformed into a space for study groups, accessible with jackets and bags, now known as the SLUB Forum. Almost by chance, then, the library gained a new, welcome space to accommodate the growing need for groupwork areas. On the other hand, the extra capacity in the regular groupwork rooms and the absolute gain in work spaces brought with it some qualitatively serious disadvantages that could not be overlooked. The noise level rose noticeably, especially in the front section of the library, and spread disruptively through the lower levels, as preventive construction measures were lacking. In addition, groups worked tightly packed together, without any privacy, at inflexible furniture groupings hardly suited to the purpose.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Olaf Eigenbrodt / Richard Stang (eds.), *Formierungen von Wissensräumen. Optionen des Zugangs zu Information und Bildung* (Berlin 2014); Achim Bonte, *Was ist eine Bibliothek? Physische Bibliotheken im digitalen Zeitalter*, in: *ABI-Technik* 35 (2015), pp. 95–104; Diane Koen / Tracy Engel (eds.), *Library design for the 21st century* (Berlin ; Boston 2019)





**Fig. 7:** Sometimes having a break and taking part in a current discussion just requires taking one step outside (© SLUB / Annemarie Grohmann).



**Fig. 8:** The grass-covered roof of this underground building also functions as a recreational area(© SLUB).



A productive dialogue between employees and library users, with the support of an interior design firm and a communications agency, yielded a satisfactory solution: the basic functional advantages of the ad-hoc groupwork area were preserved while the negative side effects of the arrangement — unacceptable in the long term — were neutralized through a new, more versatile group workspace made up of smaller, less unwieldy furniture choices.

While libraries adapt to varied needs and forms of learning beyond their unchanged, valuable functions as important places for reading and concentration, the central question remains: What are the characteristics specific to libraries compared to public institutions and private enterprise offering similar services? Or in other words: What makes a library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a library? At first glance, the guiding paradigm seems ultimately to unite the capabilities of Amazon, Apple, Starbucks and co-working spaces and to emulate these successful role models when creating products and services. In this analogy, Amazon stands for fast, round-the-clock, customer-oriented content delivery, Apple for attractive devices and intuitive user interfaces, Starbucks for comfortable places to sit and reliable culinary provisions, and co-working for the opportunity to exchange knowledge and engage in intellectually stimulating encounters. Aside from the fact that this sort of profile would have to be measured on the quality standards set by the above-mentioned companies, what actually arises as a result is merely a catalogue of services that is not necessarily associated with or essential to the library as an institution. For example, an organization like the oldest coworking space in Berlin, betahaus, can offer an experience somewhere between a Viennese coffee house, a library, a home office, and a school campus;<sup>8</sup> imagine if similarly competitive concepts prevailed directly within university settings. Just as a thought experiment, for instance, a few years ago architects at the TU Dresden proposed a “campus center with an academic cinema, exhibition space and areas for collaborative initiatives.”<sup>9</sup>

Libraries’ decision to invest in spaces that prioritize the quality of visitors’ experiences is still the right and only one – there are no viable alternatives. Of course, in order to contend successfully with potential competition, the mixture and quality of services must be appropriate and special conditions must apply. One sofa doesn’t make a chill-out zone, and a 3D printer isn’t by itself a Makerspace. In order to avoid the dangers of mere imitation, especially in the face of limited resources, it makes sense to carefully consider local circumstances and proceed in a more consciously site-specific, granular manner rather than using a one-dimensional, cookie-cutter approach. Indeed, the coworking space betahaus, mentioned above, describes its own aims not as a generic, but rather a “truly unique” combination of the four integrated service packages it offers.

It is just as important to make deliberate use of the substantial strategic advantages of public educational and cultural institutions when developing services and capacities.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.betahaus.com/our-story>

<sup>9</sup> Sächsische Zeitung (5.1.2015), “Campus” insert.

Compared to the internet industry, public libraries are, as a rule, considerably disadvantaged in terms of the scope of resources, creative freedom and the dynamics of change. On the other hand, they still enjoy a high level of trust and social approval in the field of information and knowledge, unlike many private companies. They are rightfully considered to be less concerned with profits than with the common good, to be mostly non-ideological, accessible and open and can implement changes that have been accurately assessed as correct with a steady hand free from pressure from demanding shareholders. By paying careful attention to these valuable attributes, skillfully cultivating their image and conscientiously creating services and products, libraries can successfully position themselves as “unique” for their defined clientele and will be able to compete in the long term with commercial service providers. Conversely, if aimlessly following trends, squandering limited resources and deprioritizing quality and transparency dominate decision-making, the mantra of the library as a living laboratory could very quickly prove to be mere autosuggestion.