Reflection paper master thesis process

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Graduation studio: Complex projects
Graduation project: Pockets of exchange

The posed problem

Due to increasing digitalisation, the traditional role of the library is changing. The exchange of knowledge between reader and writer through physical books is becoming less central. Today, most written information can be accessed within seconds on our phones. However, while this digital access gives us a huge amount of information, we risk losing another important form of knowledge: our social knowledge.

Public libraries have always been places where people from different backgrounds meet. Because of this, the library still has strong civic value. It remains an important space for social connection, and therefore it must continue to evolve. A modern library should not only provide access to information, but also strengthen social ties and support community life.

We already see libraries transforming into social and cultural hubs, placing more focus on encounters and interaction. But to truly support the exchange between diverse visitors, active participation is needed. When visitors are encouraged to take part in activities, workshops, discussions, and shared projects, the library becomes a place of circular exchange. People do not only receive knowledge, they also contribute to it. In this way, the library becomes a richer, more engaging space that enhances a cultural uplift.

Research Question
How can a library foster active participation?

1.Preliminary results from research

In response to the identified problem, a concept of active participation has been developed. This idea will form the main focus of the new library in Milan and can also serve as an example for future library buildings. In this new library, visitors should be continuously exposed to different activities. These moments of encounter are meant to spark curiosity, which can eventually lead to participation and the enrichment of knowledge.

Active participation not only allows visitors to learn new practical or creative skills, but also gives the opportunity to learn from each other. Through shared experiences and interactions, social knowledge between different groups of library users can grow.

2. Relationship between research and design

Based on the research, a set of requirements has been established for the new library design. These requirements were developed by examining not only the needs of future users but also the existing building and the ambitions of the Fondazione Feltrinelli group, which currently occupies the site. The building's current program presents an interesting interaction between past, present, and future, represented through the museum, the library, and Microsoft. This overlap of different functions and knowledge exchanges

creates opportunities for an additional layer of participation. These typologies have therefore been integrated into the new building program.

The project explores how these diverse functions can be meaningfully connected. Architecturally, this is translated into a vertical organisational strategy: a continuous route that runs through the entire building, linking all external program functions such as the museum and the technology centre. The connector is the library, the present that connects to the history and the future.

Research on participation showed that user empowerment is a key aspect. In architectural terms, this is expressed through the use of varied spatial conditions, from large gathering areas to intimate pockets, allowing users the freedom to interpret and use the space according to their own needs. To support this, the design introduces spaces with the potential to host events and activities, without fixing them to one specific purpose. This flexibility strengthens user empowerment and encourages active participation.

Another insight from the research is that exposing activities can stimulate curiosity and motivate people to join in, ultimately fostering active participation. From this idea, the requirement *"the building should perform as a collection of stages for creation and technology"* was formulated. This is reflected in the design through a connecting space on each floor that showcases different forms of activity or exhibition. It is the first space visitors encounter when they arrive on a new level. Each of these spaces contains small stages that mirror the functions on that particular floor. For example, the level with the dance studios includes a small platform for performances, while the floor with start-up offices has a larger public space functioning as the technology centre.

Throughout the design process, the research also evolved. Certain design questions could not be fully answered by the initial research alone. Making informed design decisions requires looking at more existing projects, understanding what has been done before, what works, and what does not. Ultimately, ideas are only truly tested once a building is in use. For this reason, I studied many reference projects, not only libraries but also other social typologies such as music buildings and museums.

By designing, testing, and comparing these choices with reference projects, key decisions could be made. This created an ongoing cycle between design and research, forming the foundation of the project.

3. Relation graduation topic to master track

My graduation project, the design of a public library, fits well within the Complex Projects studio and the MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences program.

In the studio, we work with the idea of the *civic*. A library is a strong civic building because it brings people together and supports community life. My project explores how

a library can encourage participation, interaction, and shared learning. This connects directly to the studio's focus on public value and social engagement.

Within the master track, the project relates to key architectural themes such as public space, collaboration, user experience, and flexible design. It looks at how different types of spaces support different types of use and how architecture can invite people to take part in activities. In this way, the project links design, research, and social questions, showing how architecture can respond to the needs of today's society.

4. Value of approach and methods

Research, site visits, references, and testing through variations were important steps in the method of this project.

First, the site visit was essential for establishing the foundation of the project. As mentioned earlier, architectural ideas can only be fully tested once a building is completed and in use. Although the existing building aims to create connection, this ambition is not fully achieved because the building acts as a barrier on the site. The plot itself has much more potential for connection and participation, as it lies in an important transition zone between the historic centre and the newer urban area. Understanding the site and identifying the shortcomings of the existing building helped define clear requirements for the new design.

In the early design phase, form studies were very important. We tested different volumes from three perspectives: client, site, and program. By placing these volumes on the plot, we were able to test how each option performed in relation to the requirements. Creating many variations helped form a strong foundation for both the design and the overall concept.

This method of constantly testing extremes continued throughout the entire design process. At the beginning, I found it difficult to test so many different options. It felt as if I was not making decisions and kept starting over again. Later, it became clear that this testing actually strengthened the design choices and made them more grounded.
By repeatedly asking why and sometimes excluding certain options, the reasoning behind each decision became stronger and more closely connected to the design ambitions resulted from the research.
Using different design strategies, such as fieldwork, sketches, digital modelling, physical models, impressions, and iterative drawings at various scales, helped keep the design closely aligned with the research throughout the process. This resulted in a proposal that directly reflects the ambitions set out in the research.

5. Academic and societal value

The graduation project has both academic and social value. Academically, it adds to the discussion about how the evolving role of the public library. In the future, a library may no longer be mainly a place to find books, books will not define the library anymore. It may be a place filled with social activities and shared experiences. This project shows

how architecture can bring different users, functions, and ambitions together into one building that offers something extra to the city and strengthens its civic role.

Socially, the project is also important. It redefines the library as a cultural hub that not only offers space for creativity but also actively encourages people to join in. By constantly exposing visitors with new activities and forms of exchange, the building helps people learn new skills and learn from each other. In this way, the library becomes a lively place where community life can grow.

The project suggests that libraries can become important social infrastructures that support civic life and community connection. Ethically, the building presents itself as an open and welcoming meeting place for the diverse local population. It becomes a safe and accessible space where people can come together, experience new things, participate, and feel part of the city.

6. Transferability of results

Although this project is designed specifically for this site in Milan, several principles can be carried into future research. The concept of exposing visitors to activities in order to encourage participation is highly valuable. In addition, the strategy of connecting different programs in a way that stimulates collaboration introduces a new dimension of participation that can inform further studies.

Many cities face similar challenges related to digitalization and the loss of social connection. Libraries can play an important role in addressing these issues through active participation. Other civic typologies can also learn from this approach and place greater focus on participation as a way to strengthen social ties and support the exchange of knowledge.

The bottom-up approach of user empowerment is another important aspect that can be integrated into different projects. This not only increases the relevance and use of the library but also leads to greater flexibility and long-term adaptability. As future needs and changes remain uncertain, it is essential that buildings can adjust to new requirements. The proposed library is prepared for this, offering a structure that can easily accommodate shifts in program while maintaining the core ambition of participation.

Limitations of the project
Although the project offers a strong vision for the future library, it also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. One of the main limitations is the limited amount of direct, physical input from the wider community. While the project is based on research, site visits, and architectural testing, it could have benefited from more active engagement with users, such as interviews, workshops, or surveys with local residents, visitors, and cultural organizations. Gathering more first-hand feedback could have provided deeper insight into the social needs of the community and could have helped validate or adjust some of the design choices.

Another limitation is the speculative nature of the concept. The design proposes a new way of activating participation in libraries, but it is difficult to predict exactly how users will respond until the building is actually constructed and used

Lastly, the project is strongly shaped by the context of Milan, meaning that some design solutions may not directly apply to other cities without adaptation.

Challenges of the project

A key challenge was learning to embrace exploration. In the beginning, testing many different options felt like restarting the process each time, but eventually it became clear that this strengthened the final design decisions. Another challenge was balancing programme, user needs, and architectural expression while keeping participation central. Designing for future change also required finding the right balance between fixed elements and flexible spaces that can adapt without losing the core ambition of participation.