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The Public Library:
a living room for the city

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the transformation of the Amsterdam Public Library (OBA) by looking at how its added public functions have transformed over its three main locations: Keizersgracht (1919 - 1977), Prinsengracht (1977 - 2007) and Oosterdokskade (2007 - present). Public libraries are increasingly being recognised as multifunctional hubs for learning, social interaction and cultural engagement. By analysing key documents such as the Dutch Public Library Law (Wsob) and the Amsterdam Library Vision, this thesis first defines the concept of added public functions. It then traces the development through detailed case studies of the three main OBA locations. At Keizersgracht, the library strictly operated as a lending and reading facility with no broader public functions. At Prinsengracht, a major shift occurred: for the first time the library introduced public functions such as a coffee corner, listening bar and shared study tables. Creating a more accessible and socially oriented environment. The current location at Oosterdokskade, marks the most significant change. Designed as an experience library, it contains a wide range of public functions including a makerspace, (youth) theatre, conference facilities, exhibition zones and restaurant. This evolution shows how the OBA has grown from a traditional book repository into a dynamic cultural and social meeting place. Serving not just as a library, but as a living room for the city.

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1. Introduction

Today's library is more than just a place to borrow books. Modern libraries have become multipurpose places that include exhibition spaces, theaters, shops, public computers, study areas, conference rooms, cafés, printers and many more. But why have these additional public functions become part of a structure initially designed for reading and learning?

The OBA (Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam), often known as the *Amsterdam Public Library*, is a network of 27 branches located throughout Amsterdam, Diemen and Ouder-Amstel. This network is organised around a central hub, currently located at Oosterdokskade, alongside smaller neighbourhood branches. The Oosterdokskade building, designed by Jo Coenen in 2007, is the primary location, however this was not always the case. When OBA was established in 1919, its original location was at Keizersgracht. In 1977, the public section moved to Prinsengracht. And, it was not until 2007 that the main library relocated entirely to its purpose-built facility at Oosterdokskade. (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019)

Even before its opening in 1919, the demand for public libraries exceeded the capacity of the Keizersgracht building, sparking discussions regarding neighbourhood branches (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019). In 1923, the first branch opened in Amsterdam-Noord (De Standaard, 1923). Over time the popularity for these public libraries grew massively. Resulting in the neighbourhood branches expanding. In 1941, the OBA Suprinameplein debuted *de blokhut*, a wooden stage designed for small performances (Algemeen Handelsblad, 1961). In 1970, the world's first floating library debuted on the Amsterdam's canals featuring a large collection of children's literature (Het Parool, 1970). Despite constraints such as war, demand for libraries continued to grow, prompting the development of more branches. (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019).

To ensure the future of public libraries, a new act was passed in 2015 called the *Wsob* (Public Library Facilities Law). This law defines five core functions that libraries must perform: *providing access to knowledge and information*, *offering opportunities for development and education*, *promoting reading and enjoyment of reading*, *organising spaces for meeting and debate* and *introducing art and culture* (Meijer, 2000). These principles have shaped the modern public library into a multipurpose institution, far beyond its original role as a book repository.

Much is already known about the transformation of public libraries in terms of additional functions and community. Public libraries are getting recognised as places for social interaction. Specifically the OBA Oosterdokskade. But this sense of community building has not always been the case. Research on the public functions within the OBA network has been conducted, but mainly commissioned by the organisation itself. *The Public Library Vision* (2024), *Public Library Facilities Act* (2015) and *history about 100 years of OBA* (2019), are recent and incomplete pictures of how this transformation has occurred.

Against tech context, this research examines how the OBA building at Oosterdokskade has evolved compared to its former locations, in terms of its public functions. The study focuses on how the inclusion of new public functions altered the public library from its initial role as a place simply for reading and learning to a more vibrant public environment. This will be done by answering the research question:

'How have the additional public functions of the Jo Coenen-designed OBA building at Oosterdokskade evolved over time, compared to its two former main locations: Keizersgracht (opened in 1919) and Prinsengracht (opened in 1977)?'

This thesis is structured as follows. The second chapter introduces the concept of added public functions and defines it through an analysis of two key documents: the *Dutch Public Library Law* (Wsob) and the *Public Library Vision* from the City of Amsterdam. Chapters three, four and five present case studies of the different OBA locations, analysing floor plans, photographs sketches and texts. Each chapter focuses on identifying the public functions. Chapter six offers a comparison between the three case studies, examining how the public functions and overall library concept have evolved over time. The final chapter concludes the research by summarising the key findings and answering the central research question.

This research presents the OBA's transformation as a reflection of how public spaces, urban identity and cultural values shifted over time. What happens when a library stops being just about books? And starts becoming more about community?

2. Defining Public Functions

The evolution of the public library in Amsterdam has been guided by a core mission: to ensure that every Amsterdam resident has access to knowledge, culture and information, allowing them to grow and actively participate in society (Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheekvoorzieningen Act, 2022). Traditionally, the term library evoked images of silent halls, towering bookshelves and a space primarily used for borrowing books (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019). However, the library's role has shifted substantially over the years. In 2007, the concept of *belevenisbibliotheek* emerged, changing the library into a space for discussion and debate, moving beyond literature as the sole source of knowledge (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). By 2015, the concept of *maatschappelijke bibliotheek* (living library) had emerged, with the library serving as a neighbourhood anchor and contributing to the resolution of key societal issues (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). Looking ahead to 2030, the concept is centred around a *community bibliotheek*: a library supported in part by the local community, meeting its needs while being co-designed by its members. This library focuses not only on collections, but also on the community's knowledge and skills (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). This paragraph explores two major documents that help shape the future of public libraries in the Netherlands, and specifically in Amsterdam.

Dutch Public Library Law

In 2015, a new law, called the *Wet Stelsel Openbare Bibliotheekvoorzieningen* or *Wsob*, went into effect. This legislation, which defines the duties, obligations and roles of public libraries in the Netherlands, has greatly influenced how libraries operate, and guarantees that they are important social resources (Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheekvoorzieningen Act, 2022). Currently, the law is being revised, and the updated version is expected to take effect in 2026. The current legislation outlines five core functions that public libraries must perform:

1. Providing access to knowledge and information. For example, by lending books, establishing an Information Point for Digital Government and organising educational sessions on issues such as health, volunteering and sustainability.

2. Offering opportunities for development and education. For example, by providing language training for adults with inadequate reading and writing skills or by delivering media literacy education in primary schools.

3. Promoting reading and introducing literature. For example, by establishing reading groups, organising reading afternoons or encouraging parents and childcare providers to read about to children.

4. Facilitating meeting and debate. For example, by hosting themed cafés, lunches, quizzes or marketplaces, or by organising debates.

5. Presenting art and culture. For example, by organising lectures, exhibitions, films, concerts, city tours, workshops or performances.

These functions are essential in ensuring that public libraries remain relevant and valuable community hubs. (Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheekvoorzieningen Act, 2022).

OBA Library Vision

In 2024, the City of Amsterdam and the OBA-organisation jointly released a document outlining the vision for the public library and its designated future. This document, titled *Lang Leve de Bieb: de eerste Amsterdamse bibliothekenvisie*, highlights several important values that the OBA Public Library must uphold. These fundamental ideas can be divided into three main categories:

1. The Library for growth and development
2. The Library for digital participation
3. The Library for connection

Growth and Development

The public library plays is an important resource for personal growth and development. Through a variety of educational activities, it provides opportunities for individuals of all ages to develop their skills and knowledge (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). Key focus areas include early childhood literacy programs, such as reading initiatives that enhance language development from a young age. Language education is prioritised for children with a migrant background, ensuring that they have the necessary support to integrate. The library also promotes hands-on learning through de *maakplaats* (makerspace), a creative place where anyone may participate in making, design and technical innovation. From easy DIY-projects to using laser cutters and 3D-printers. While now mostly aimed at young Amsterdam residents, future plans seek to expand accessibility to adults as well. Furthermore, the library provides necessary study spaces, including a peaceful and well-equipped environment for independent learning. The public library provides these resources as a basis for personal and professional growth. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024).

Digital Participation

The public library offers secure access to the internet, computers and printers. Providing critical resources for people who do not have a laptop or computer at home, particularly those from low-income households. The public library gives access to online government serviced and navigational help through services such as the *Information Point for Digital Government* (IDO). The public library also provides programs to help people learn important digital skills, including utilising the internet, e-mail and other basic functions. This initiative allows individuals to fully participate in the digital world, therefore bridging the digital inclusion gap and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to join in online society. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024).
(Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024).

Connection

The public library is a welcoming space where people can meet others in an open and accessible environment. It serves as a *living room* for the city, encouraging relationships between individuals from various cultures, viewpoints and beliefs. By adopting the notion of a *living* or *community library*, it creates a forum for debate among those who have been affected by prejudice. Allowing people to discuss their experiences. Residents bring their many cultural backgrounds to the library, enhancing it with a range of perspectives. This method not only increases comprehension, but it also creates a feeling of community by providing opportunity to learn respect. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024).

In conclusion, Public Libraries are no longer just for lending books. They are also a relevant and valuable community hub that encourages to learn and interact. The *Wsob* and updated *Vision for Public Libraries in Amsterdam* show how important libraries are in supporting personal growth, community connections and digital inclusion. By offering language courses, beginner computer training, cultural activities, reading afternoons, drop-in coffee sessions or tax advisory hours, libraries continue to be valuable resources for everyone. These efforts make libraries inclusive spaces, that meet different needs and help build stronger individuals and communities. In the following chapters, the current central OBA building and its two predecessors are analysed with a focus on the additional public functions they offer: everything beyond the reading rooms and bookshelves which are specifically designed for lending and reading books. The analysis will be done in chronological order, starting with the first public library at Keizersgracht in the next chapter.

3. Keizersgracht 444-446

The first *Public Reading Room and Library of Amsterdam* was officially opened in 1919 at Keizersgracht 444-446, the precursor of the OBA (Amsterdam Public Library) as we know it today. The opening event was modest, featuring a speech by the mayor emphasising the municipality's desire to offer workers something more than just work and sleep (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019). It took more than 18 years to realise this library. At first, the City of Amsterdam did not take the initiative to establish a public library, despite the fact that they had been successful in other countries (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019). In 1912, the *Vereeniging van Openbare Leeszalen en Bibliotheken te Amsterdam* (Union of Public Reading Rooms and Libraries in Amsterdam) was founded, and in 1913 the location was chosen for its first library: the former offices of the municipal gas factory at the Keizersgracht. Construction and transformation of the building began in 1916. When the library was opened in 1919, it quickly became more than just a space for books. It was seen as a cultural center and a place for reflection. By 1920, the library boasted a remarkable collection of 45.000 items, setting a high standard for libraries in the Netherlands. Marking the beginning of a new era in Amsterdam's cultural landscape. (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019).

Layout

As described by Lakmaker & Veldkamp (2019), the public library at Keizersgracht had a distinctive layout that made the experience of visiting some what intimidating. The entrance was located in the souterrain (figure 2), which was not an immediately welcoming position for visitors. The full layout of the building is shown in figure 3. Upon entering, one would first come across the cloakroom, where coats and luggage could be placed. Visitors then had to go down a long corridor to reach the lending library area. The reading area was positioned on the first floor, resulting in a disconnected layout that was difficult to navigate. Library users were not permitted to select books freely from the shelves. They were required to visit the catalog room on the main floor, where they would compile a list of books they were interested in. Afterwards, they would return downstairs to retrieve the requested volumes, as the library staff would pull the books from the shelves. This process restricted visitors' freedom to explore and made accessing books more complicated. Additionally, the library had restricted accessibility for children. Children under the age of fourteen were not allowed to visit. And those between the ages of fourteen and seventeen needed written permission form their parents or guardians to use the library. At that time the library's only public function was the reading room, where visitors could read the available books. But no other services or public spaces were provided. (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019).



Figure 1 The reading room at *Public Reading Room and Library* at Keizersgracht 444-446 (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, n.d.)



Figure 2 Entrance *Public Reading Room and Library* at Keizersgracht 444-446 (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1949)

To conclude, the public library at Keizersgracht was simply a place to read and borrow books; it had restricted public access and no further public uses. Although it played a significant cultural role and marked the beginning of Amsterdam's public library services, its operations were modest. The OBA's move to Prinsengracht in 1977, a significant turning point in the organisation's history, is examined in the following chapter. This new location brought a broader set of public functions and a more inclusive perspective of what a public library could provide.

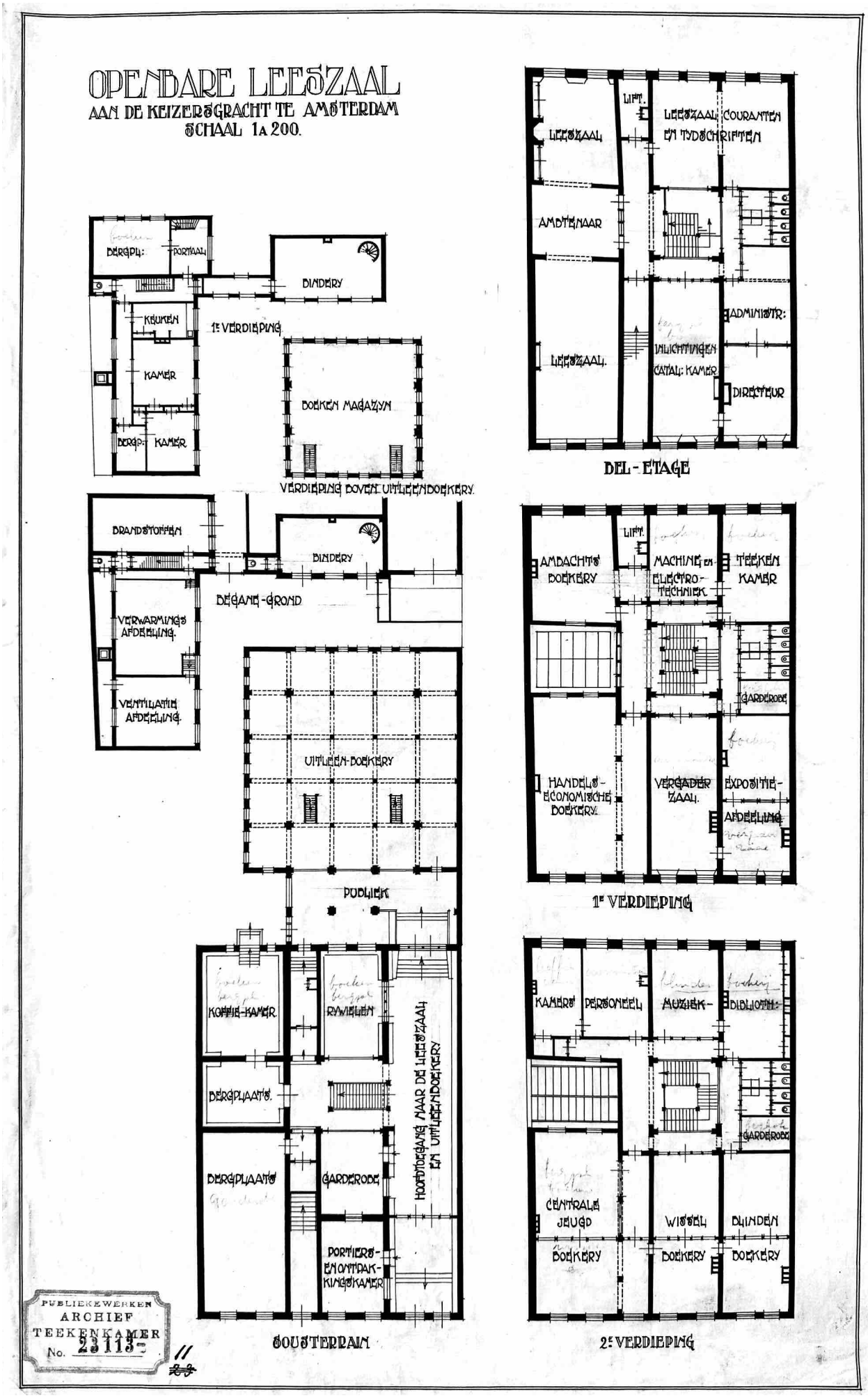

Figure 3 Architectural floor plans of *Public Reading Room and Library* at Keizersgracht 444-446 (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, n.d.)

4. Prinsengracht 587-607

According to Lakmaker and Veldkamp (2019), it was already clear before the opening of the *Public Reading Room and Library* at Keizersgracht, that one library alone could not serve the entire city. To meet this growing demand for books and reading spaces, smaller neighbourhood libraries were established. The first one opened in 1923 at Meidoornplein, quickly followed by a second branch on Kometensingel (figure 4) later that same year. Over the next few years, more branches appeared across Amsterdam in various districts such as Watergraafsmeer, Coöperatiehof and Roelof Hartplein. Despite these expansions, the library's collection at Keizersgracht remained limited. The building started to feel cramped. The pressure on space increased further after 1973, when the library introduced open lending: allowing visitors to retrieve books themselves. Previously, visitors had to make a list from the catalogues and submit it at the lending desk. This process was time-consuming and many books often turned out to already be checked out. This situation continued until 1977, when the library relocated to a larger building at Prinsengracht 587-607 (figure 5). This location had previously housed a textile factory, but it was dismantled in 1969 to provide room for a new structure. However, this structure was not originally intended to serve as a library. When the decision for relocation was made, the foundation had to be reinforced to support the weight of the book collection. The administrative offices stayed at the Keizersgracht location and were renovated, but the public library and its contents moved to their new building. (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019).

Ground floor

An open and inviting area is created by the numerous public functions held on the ground floor (figure 7). Visitors can leave their jackets and luggage in the cloakroom located just inside of the main entrance. The reception desk, which guests pass on their way into the main library area, is located across from the entrance. Before entering the library, visitors are invited to a newspaper reading room and coffee corner. There is a separate entrance to these spaces that open up directly onto the street enabling users to access them from outside of the main library. The staff cafeteria doubles as an auditorium where presentations, events and lectures could be held.



Figure 4 Neighbourhood library at Kometensingel, Tuindorp Oostzaan, 1923 (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019)

Second floor

The second floor (figure 8) is dedicated to the departments of humanities, education and the school library service center. To accommodate these various needs, it is constructed with a variety of study spaces, including tables reserved especially for younger visitors. The *kleine zaal* (small room) is one of the floor's notable's feature. Its oval table and sixteen seats depicted in the architectural plans strongly imply that the area was intended for meetings or group work. The fact that its entrance is directly connected to the library's public space suggests that it was purposefully made accessible to visitors.

Third floor

The natural and social science collections, which cover topics including law, economics, engineering and the arts, are located on the third floor (figure 9). With rows of bookshelves, reading tables and private, enclosed reading rooms, this floor resembles a more conventional library environment. Studying in these individual rooms can be more



Figure 5 *Public Reading Room and Library* at Prinsengracht 587-607 (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1977)

peaceful and private. The AV-room, which stands for *audiovisual*, is a noteworthy element on this floor. It is reasonable to presume that the room was designed with the usage of audiovisual material in mind, even though no additional explanation is given regarding this particular function. These materials frequently consist of audio cassettes, vinyl record, videotapes, CDs and DVDs (Yealink, n.d.). The inclusion of this room shows the library's goal to provide visitors with access to information and media beyond the traditional printed resources.

Fourth floor

On the top floor, the fourth floor (figure 10), the music library and discotheque are located. This level contains a variety of resources, including sheet music, music literature, CDs and cassettes. Visitors can listen to CDs and vinyl records in the listening bar and separate enclosed sections in the discotheque area. As seen in figure 6, the architect created unique racks to provide a well-organised and convenient manner to view the vinyl collection. In addition to the study tables found throughout the library, this floor has two specialised rooms: a music room and a theater arts workroom. There is a grand piano in the theater arts workroom and a piano in the music room. Both rooms offer a place to study or practice music. Additionally, there are two studios, one small and one larger, that can be utilised for various creative or educational purposes related to music and performing arts.

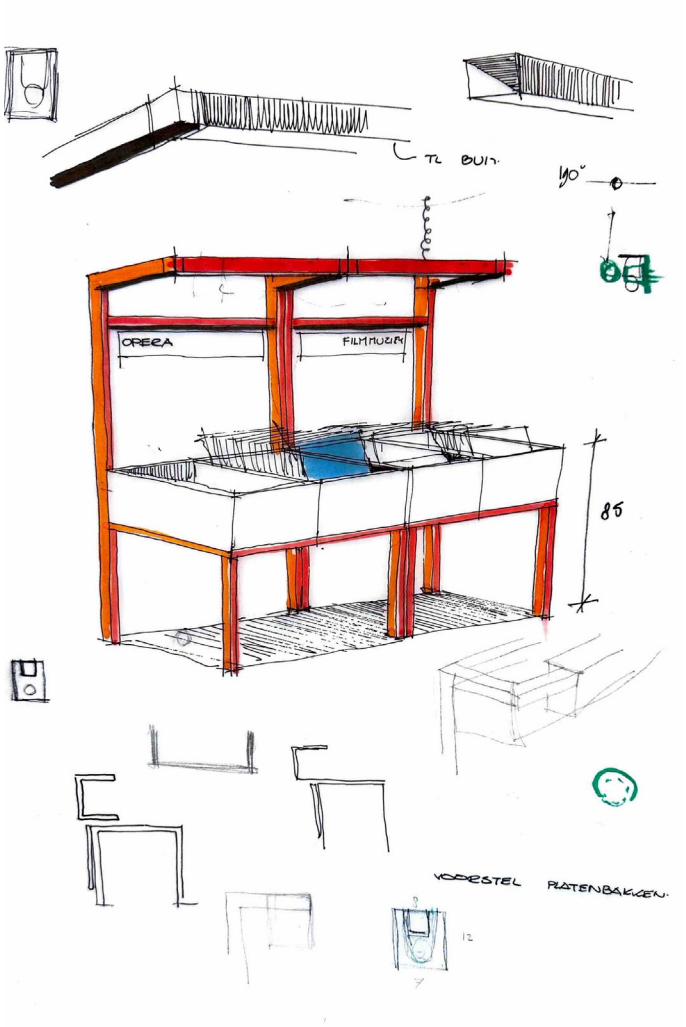

Figure 6 Sketches of a vinyl collection rack at public library Prinsengracht (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, n.d.)

The public library at Prinsengracht provided a variety of public functions in addition to typical book lending. Visitors could make use of a coffee corner, meeting rooms, study facilities and a discotheque with designated music listening areas. The library also had dedicated theatre and music rooms, as well as audiovisual equipment and creative expression areas. These functions represent the library's desire to become a dynamic space for learning, interactions and cultural participation. Despite the possibilities that the building provided, demand continued to increase (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019). The following chapter examines the final relocation to the purpose-built library at Oosterdokskade, where this ambition was further realised.

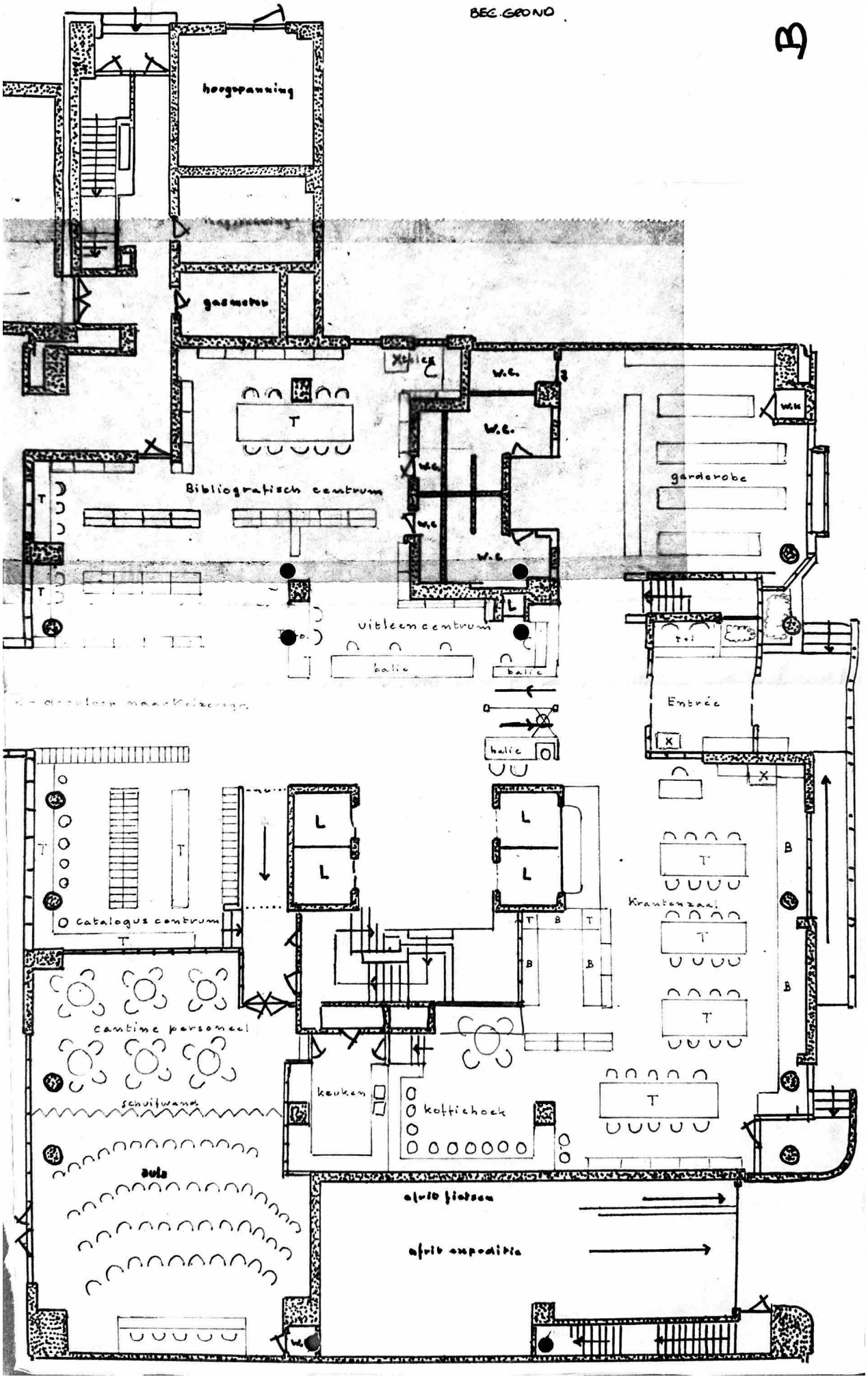

Figure 7 Ground floor, *Public Reading Room and Library* at Prinsengracht (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1976)

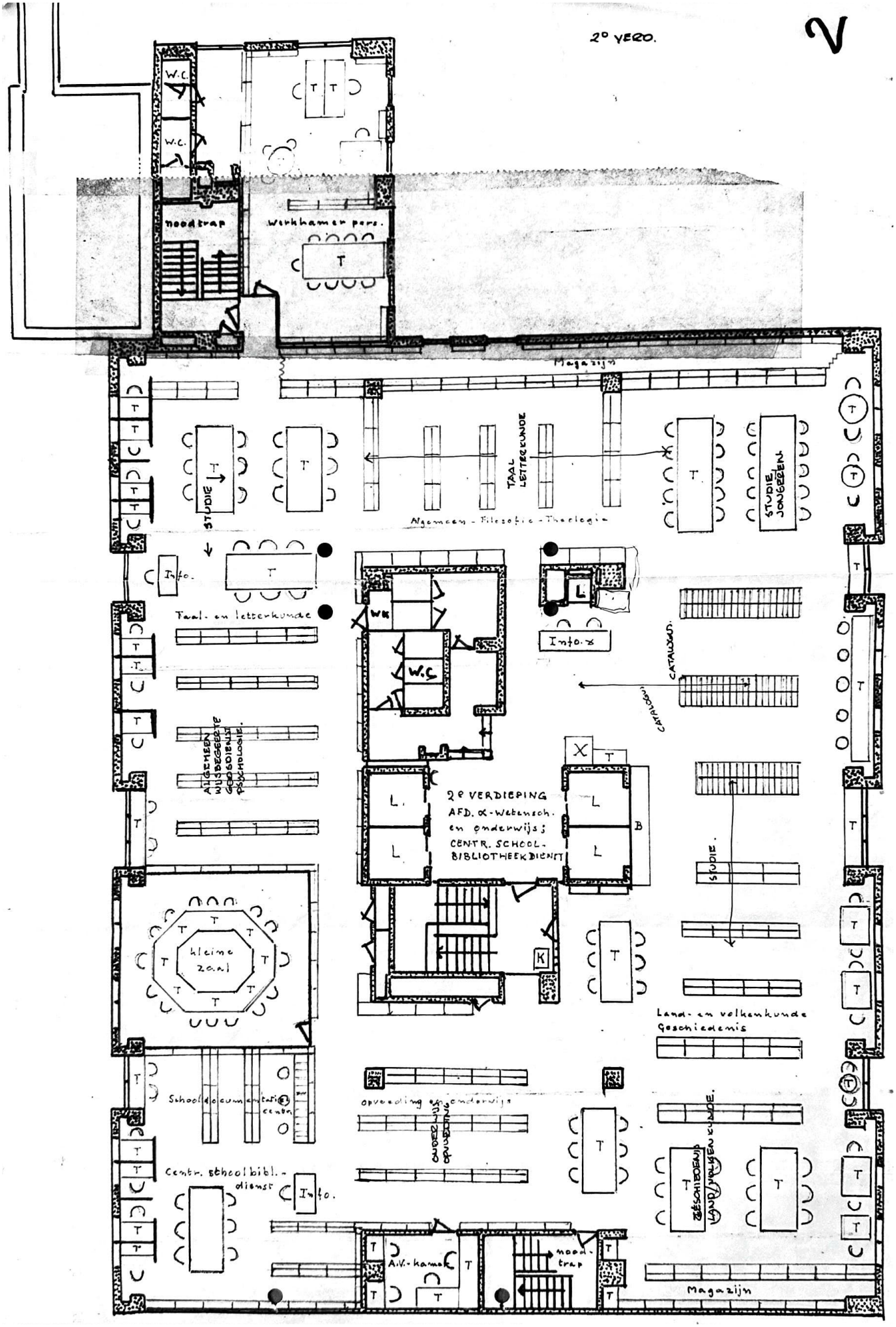

Figure 8 Second floor, *Public Reading Room and Library* at Prinsengracht (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1976)

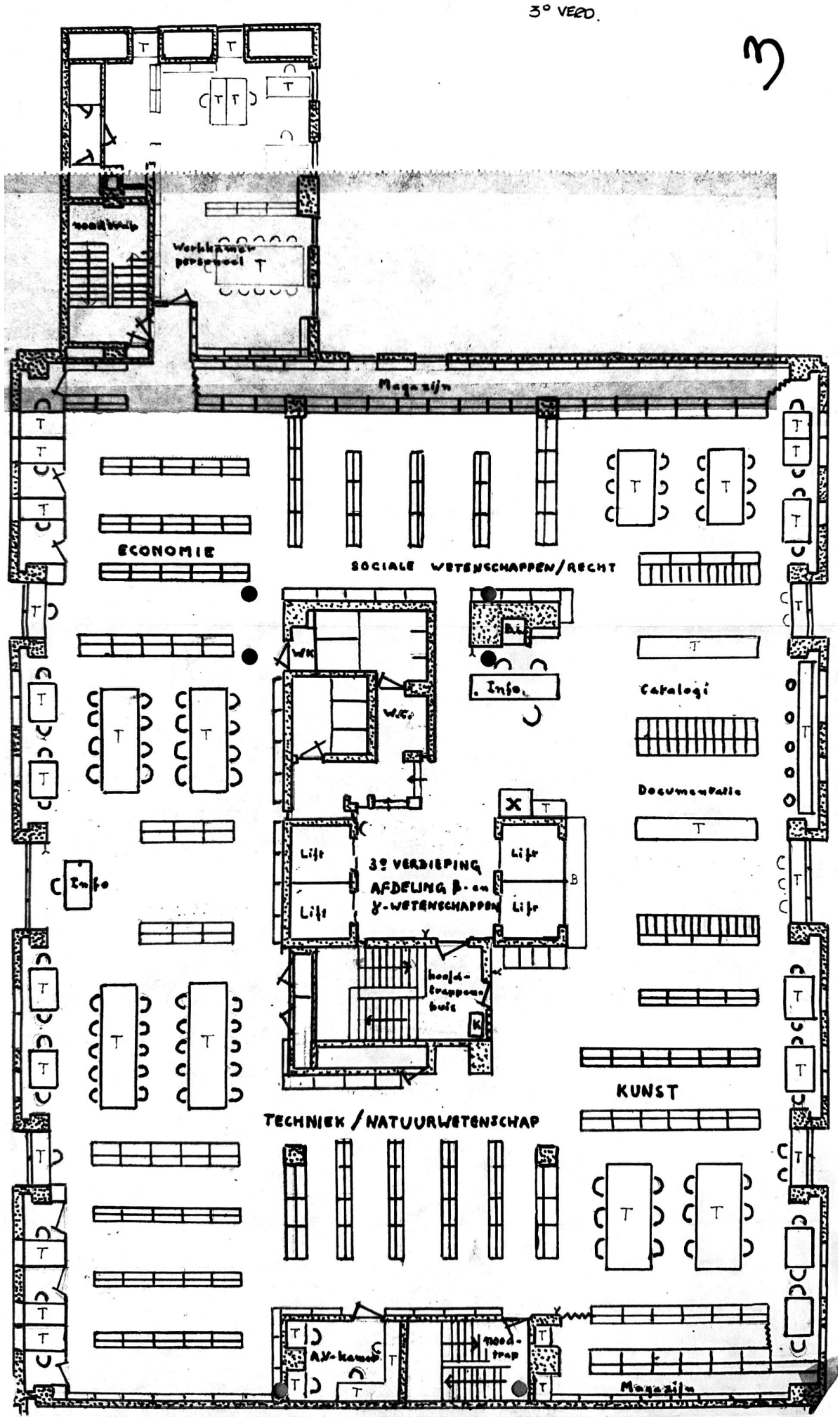

Figure 9 Third floor, *Public Reading Room and Library* at Prinsengracht (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1976)

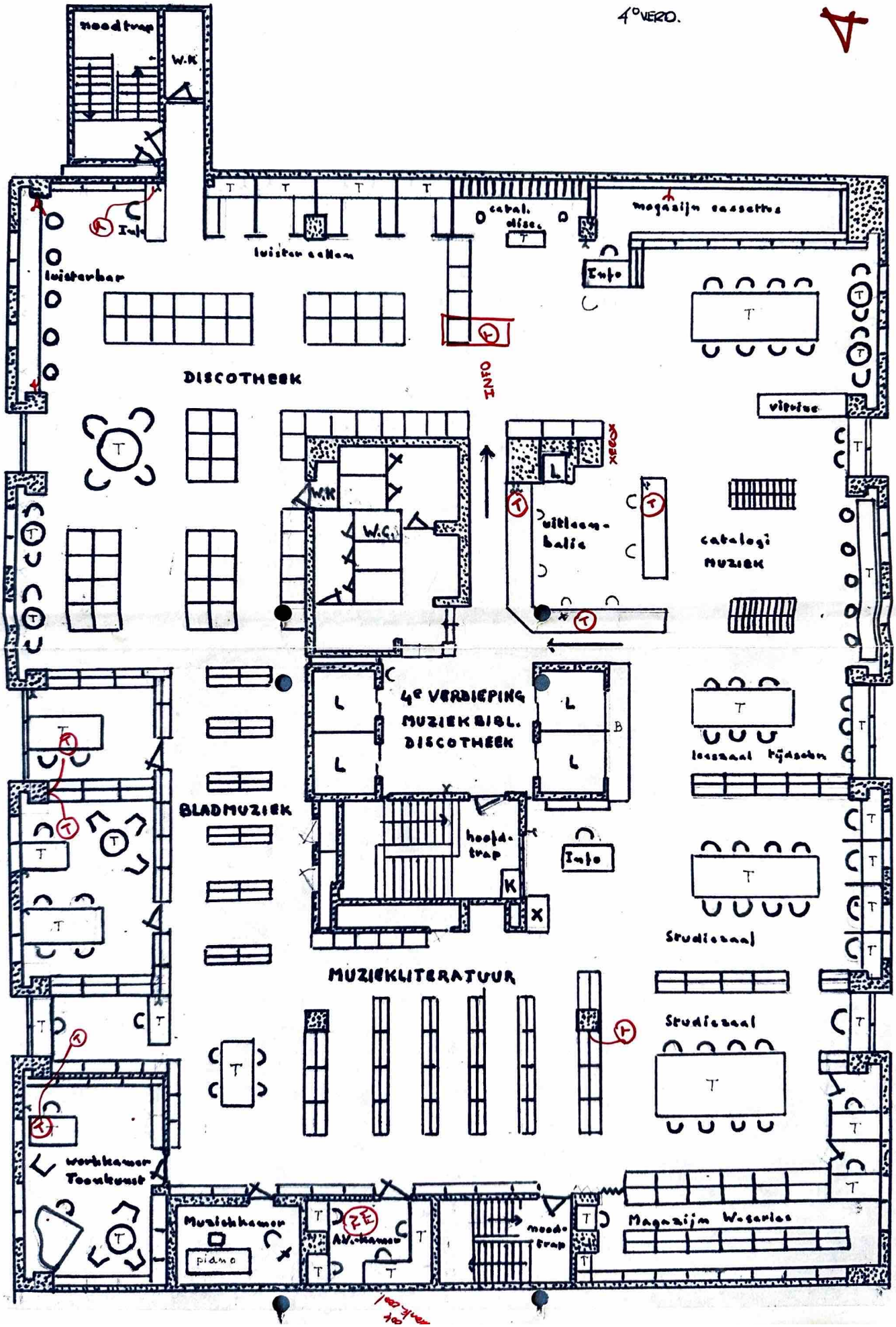

Figure 10 Fourth floor, *Public Reading Room and Library* at Prinsengracht (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1976)

5. Oosterdokskade 143

According to Lakmaker and Veldkamp (2019), as early as 1997, discussions had begun about the need for a new Central Library. The existing location at Prinsengracht had become too small to meet the growing demands of a modern public library. Particularly with the shift towards the concept of an *experience library*, significant changes were necessary. The old building lacked a dedicated auditorium for cultural programming. Musical performances, author readings and discussion events had to be held in the staff cafeteria. The new central library was planned for Oosterdokskade, a site designated for urban development by the City of Amsterdam. The design was inspired by international examples such as libraries in San Francisco and Phoenix, which featured thematic areas, multiple service desks and study zones. On July 7, 2007, the new Central OBA officially opened its doors at Oosterdokskade 143. With a total floor area of 28.000 square meters (measuring 40 meters in height, 40 meters in width and 120 meters in length) it became the largest public library in the Netherlands. The building was designed by Dutch Government Architect Jo Coenen as an *experience library*: a space intended not only for borrowing books, but also for meeting, discussion and cultural engagement. The vision was to create a *living room* for the city. (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019). The online architecture magazine ArchitectuurNL features critique of the new OBA building (2012). Arguing that it lacked a clear defined program, noting the limited number of quiet reading areas and questioning the need for extensive physical spaces in an increasingly digital age. The interior design also proved to be vulnerable to heavy public use: the white leather lounge chairs, minimalistic seating pods and sleek white walls quickly showed signs of wear and tear. Ten years after its opening, the library underwent a renovation. This included the addition of more study areas, a second presentation hall and expanded food and beverage facilities (ArchitectuurNL, 2017).

Ground floor

The ground floor (figure 19) serves as the library's main entrance area, with lockers, an information desk and self-service stations for borrowing and returning books. In addition to these practical services, this floor provides publicly accessible computers and workplaces organised around the centre void. All visitors have access to free WiFi and workplaces. The computers are free to use for OBA-members, non-members must pay a fee. The OBA Café, located at the back of the floor, offers a place to relax, enjoy a coffee and meet others. A grand piano is located in front of the café. In addition, a gallery space accommodates temporary exhibitions.

Junior floor

Visitors can access the junior floor (figure 19) by taking the stairs down from the ground floor. This level is dedicated to the youth collection (ages 0-12) and includes a range of books, informal seating places and colourful, organically designed furniture (Coenen, z.d.). It also houses the *maakplaats* (makerspace) (figure 11), which is described, in the library vision created by the OBA in partnership with the City of Amsterdam as: *a creative place where children can experiment with making, design and technical innovations*. From easy DIY-projects to using laser cutters and 3D-printers. This floor also contains computers that are suitable for children. The junior theatre organises a variety of events, such as storytelling sessions and other children's activities.

Second, Third and Fourth floor

Taking the escalator up, each floor has a similar layout. The conventional plan features a centre void (figure 12) surrounded by publicly accessible computers and workspace areas, dedicated study tables with power outlets and two conferences rooms near the elevators that can be rented for private use. The literature area, located on the second floor (figure 20), offers a diverse range of literary works. It also has a unique *Ronde Zaal* (round room), which is a tiny auditorium-style venue used for events like presentations, seminars and readings. The third floor (figure 21) is themed after Amsterdam, history and tourism. This floor has an exhibition area and a study corner featuring two historic study tables (figure 15). On the fourth



Figure 11 *Maakplaats* (makerspace) at OBA Oosterdokskade, Junior floor (image taken by the author, 2025)

floor (figure 22), the focus shifts to art and media, with a selection of art books, music, DVDs and CDs. This floor is also part of the library's silent area (see figure 14), which offers a peaceful space for reading, studying or working.

Fifth floor

The fifth floor (figure 23) has a similar layout and, along with the fourth floor, is part of the library's silent area. This level is largely intended for studying with extra bookcases replaced by study tables. A second void has been created, surrounded by more publicly accessible computers and workspaces. This floor also contains OBA-helpt (figure 16), a free program that assists citizens with digital literacy, finances and language development.

Sixth floor

This floor (figure 24) is dedicated to the OBA Congress, offering a variety of spaces suitable for presentations, meetings, workshops, conferences and private meals. This level has ten flexible rooms (figure 17), each named after a location in Amsterdam (such as the *Amstelzaal* and *Herenzaal*), and can accommodate up to 90 people (OBA Congres, z.d.). One of the key spaces is the OBA Forum, which has a retractable seating system. It has a base capacity of 57 and can be expanded to 90 using the adjoining balcony (OBA Congres, z.d.). The OBA Forum is designed for presenting and performances. The OBA Theatre, which is located ont he seventh floor, can accommodate even larger events.

Seventh floor

Restaurant Babel and the OBA Theatre are located on the seventh floor (figure 25). This is the last publicly accessible floor of the library. The restaurant has an adjacent terrace that also serves as a viewing platform, offering panoramic views of the city. The theatre is part of the OBA Congres facilities and is utilised for a range of events, such as performances, concerts, workshops and other public events. Some of these events are free, while others cost a ticket to attend.

Eight floor

The uppermost floor (figure 26) is not accessible to the public. It is allocated for personnel and consists primarily of office spaces that assist the library's activities.

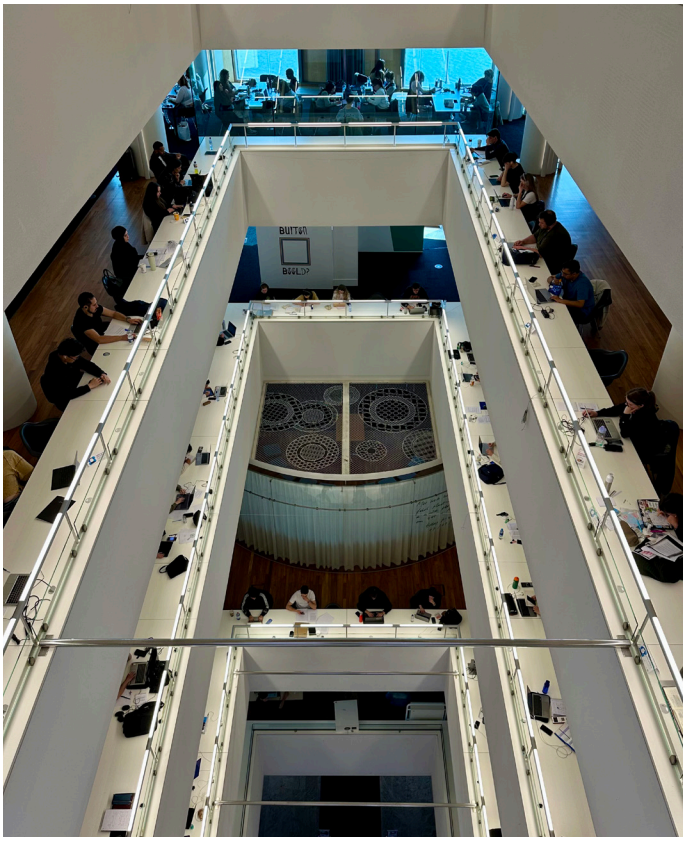

Figure 12 Voids surrounded by workspaces at OBA Oosterdokskade, sixth floor (image taken by the author, 2025)



Figure 13 *Ronde zaal* (round room) at OBA Oosterdokskade, second floor (image taken by the author, 2025)



Figure 14 Silent area sign at OBA Oosterdokskade (image taken by the author, 2025)

The OBA at Oosterdokskade is built to be more than just a traditional library. It is designed as a multifunctional public space that reflects the changing role of libraries in urban society. The building has evolved into a layered, experience-oriented environment that combines information access, learning, creativity and social interaction. Despite initial criticism, the OBA has transformed through renovations and functional changes. Each floor has a distinct purpose, all contributing to the goal of a *living room* for the city.



Figure 15 Historical reading tables at OBA Oosterdokskade, third floor (image taken by the author, 2025)



Figure 16 OBA-helpt room at OBA Oosterdokskade, fifth floor (image taken by the author, 2025)

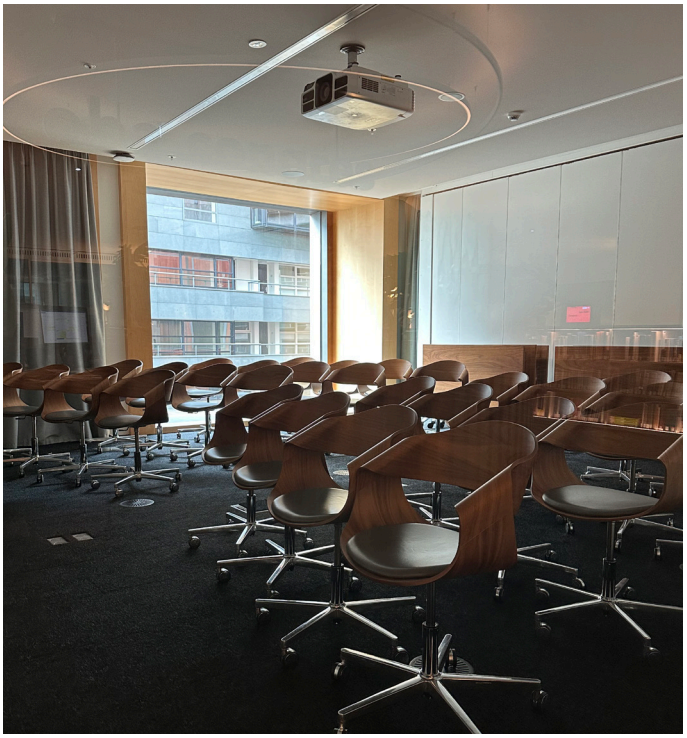

Figure 17 *Herenzaal* at OBA Oosterdokskade, sixth floor (image taken by the author, 2025)



Figure 18 Floor directory at OBA oosterdokskade (image taken by the author, 2025)

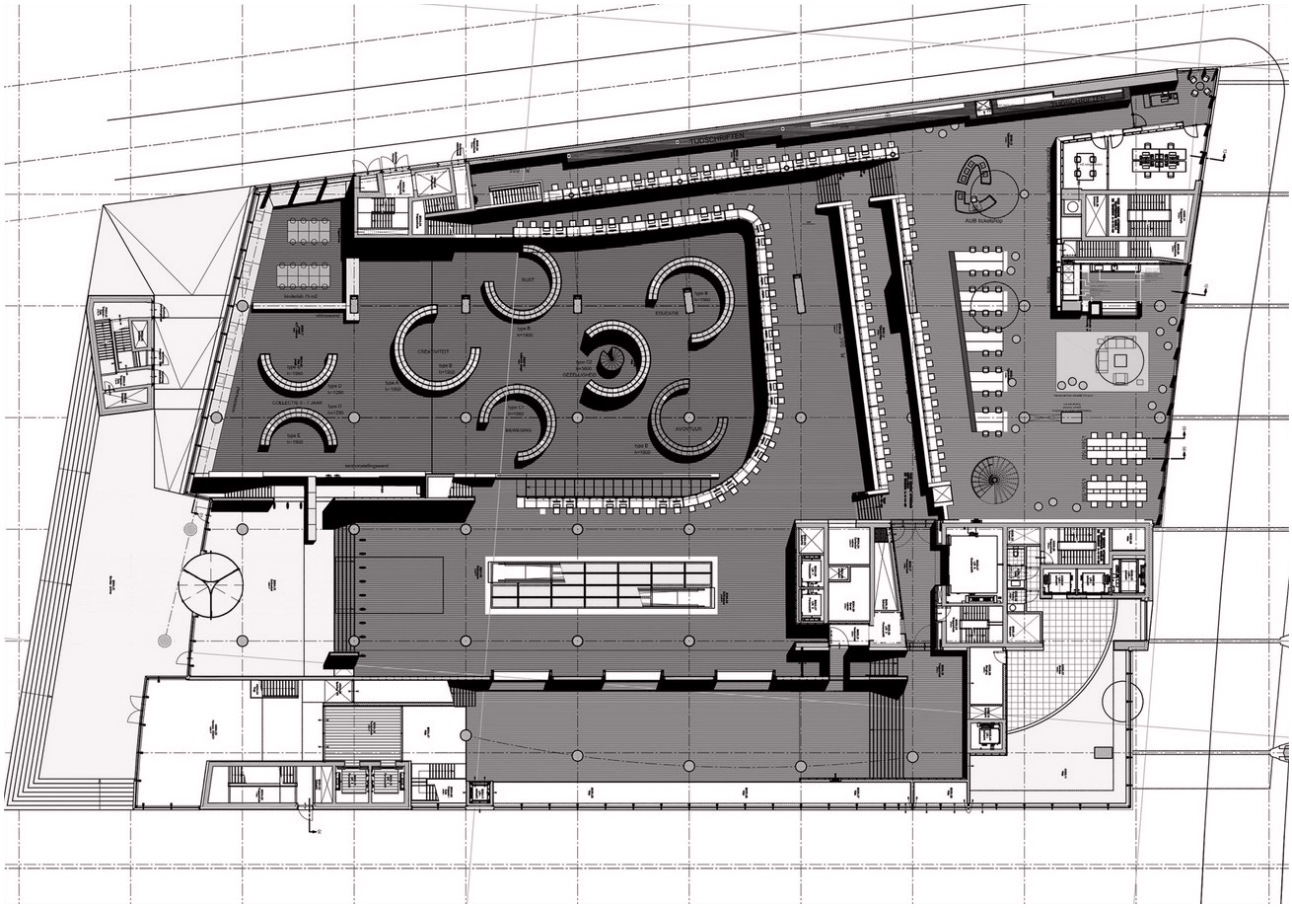

Figure 19 Ground floor and Junior floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

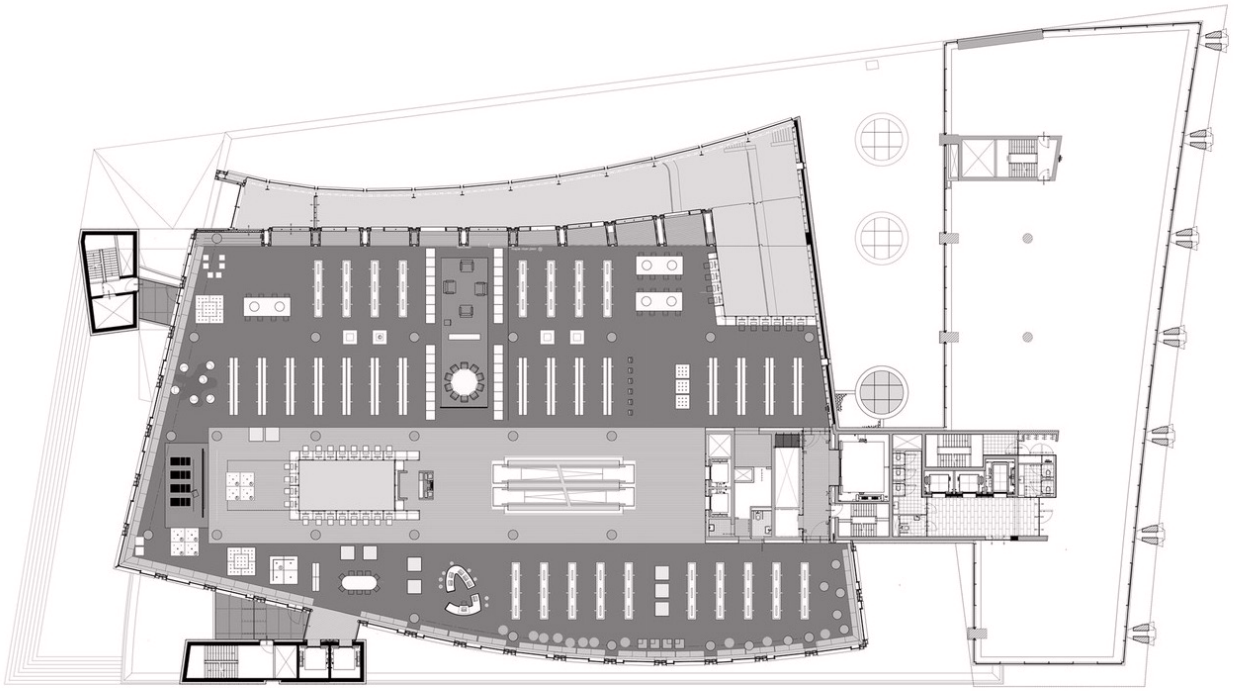

Figure 20 Second floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

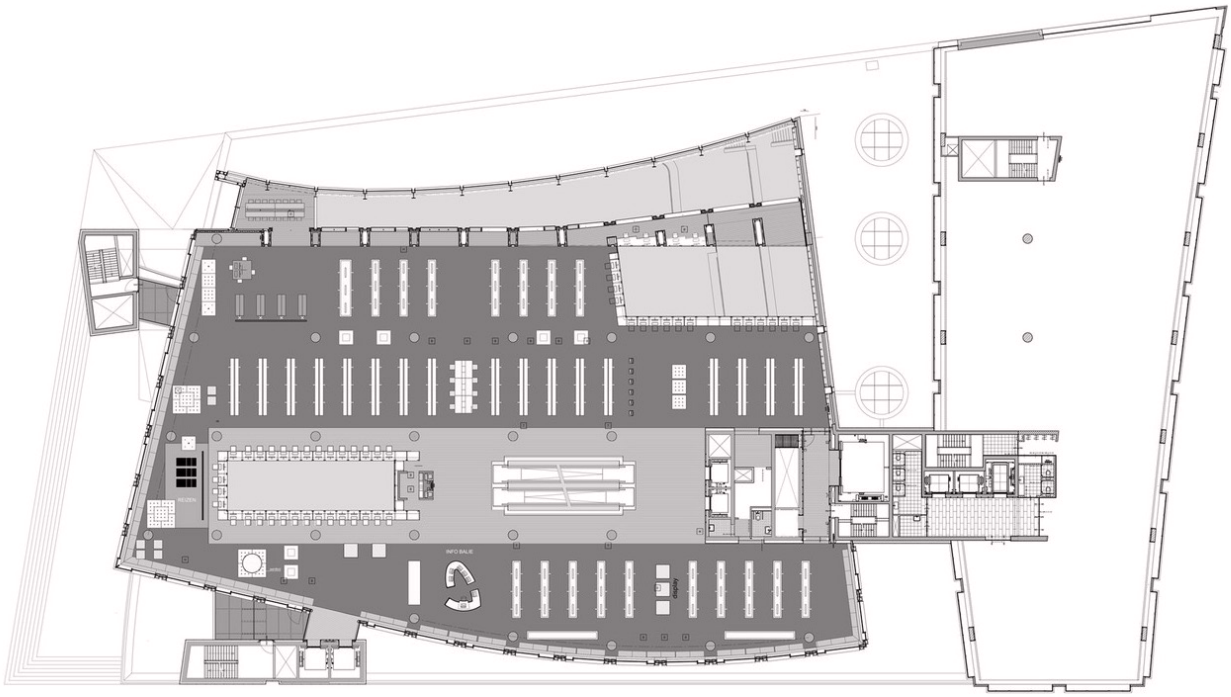

Figure 21 Third floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

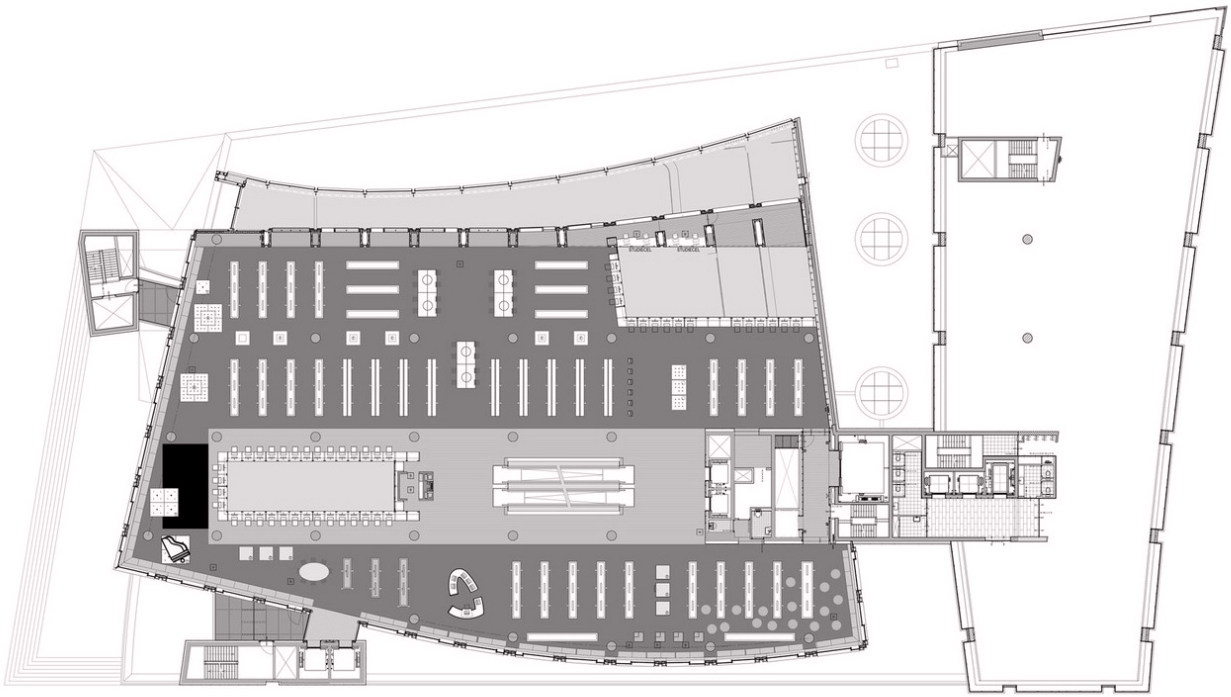

Figure 22 Fourth floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

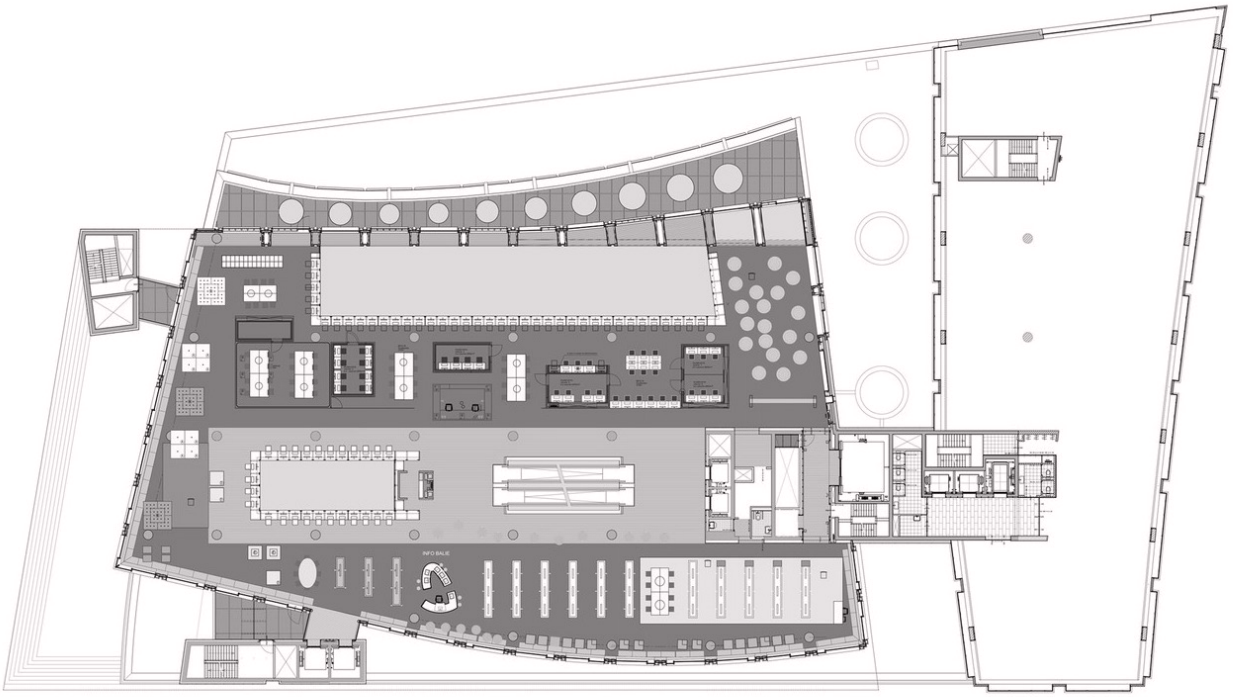

Figure 23 Fifth floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

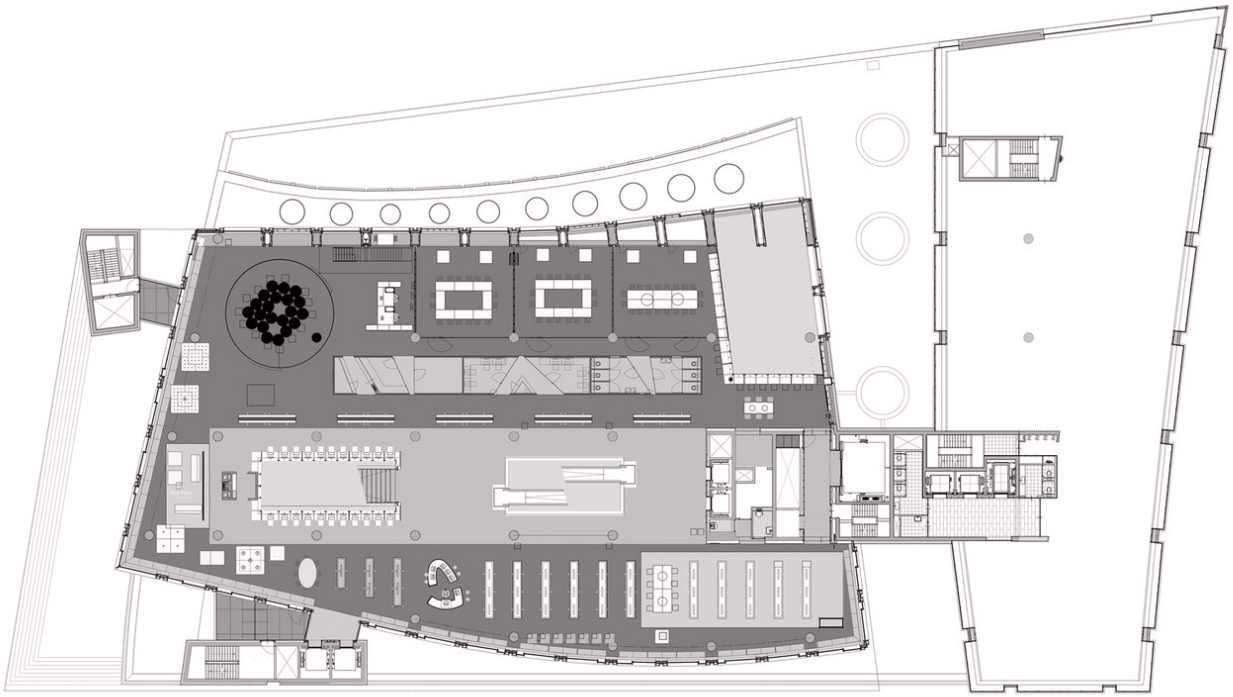

Figure 24 Sixth floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

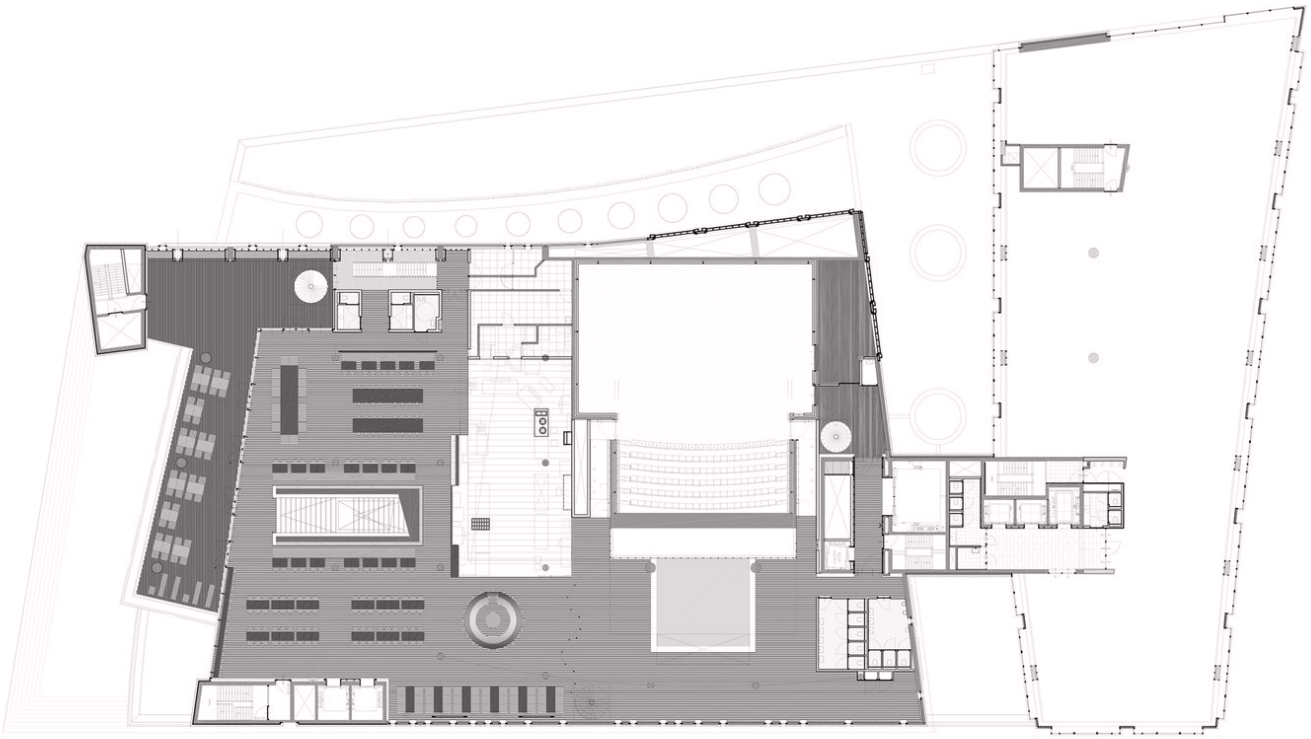

Figure 25 Seventh floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

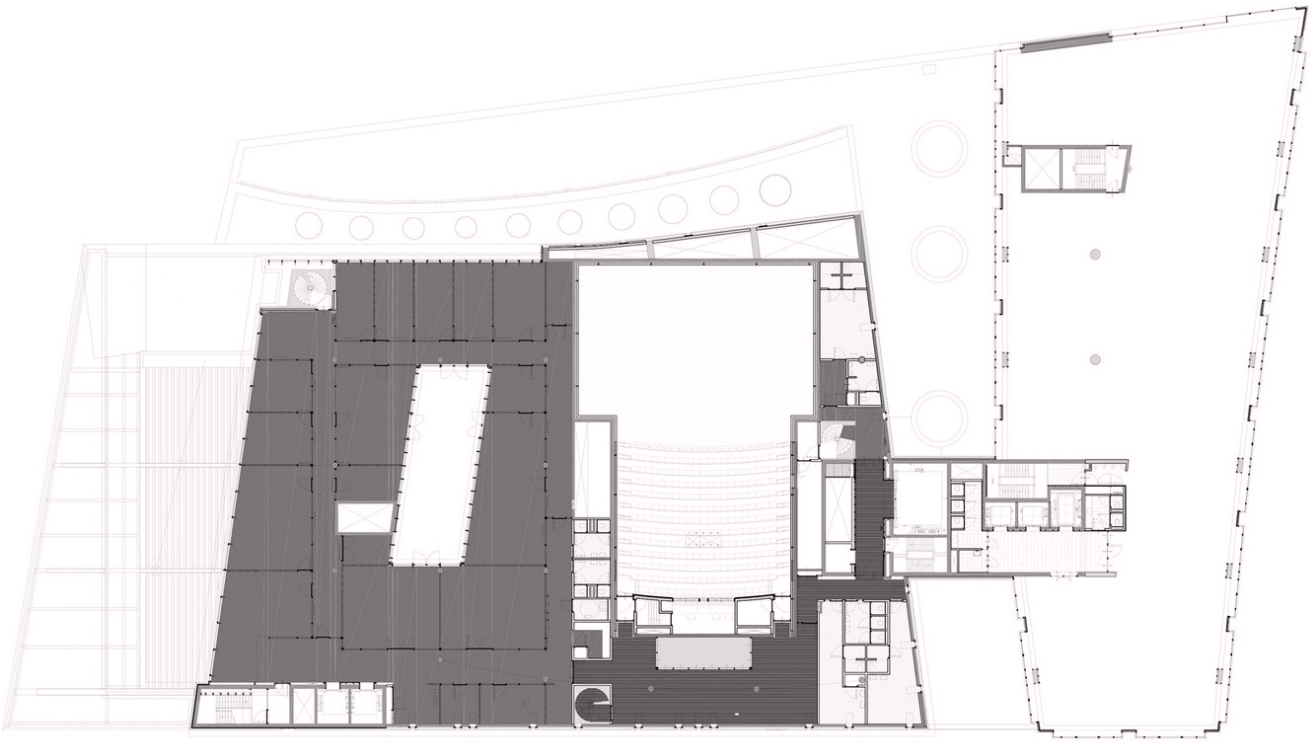

Figure 26 Eight floor, OBA Oosterdokskade (ArchDaily, 2014)

6. Comparison

The Public Library of Amsterdam (OBA) has evolved from a silent reading room to a vibrant cultural hub, indicating a considerable shift in thinking and execution of new public functions. The three main locations, Keizersgracht (1919), Prinsengracht (1977) and Oosterdokskade (2007), illustrate this growth, with each emphasising public functions that go beyond the traditional role of reading and lending books. The previous chapters examined each of these key library buildings in depth. This chapter combines these analyses by comparing them and investigating how the OBA's public functions have evolved over time, as well as how this transition has redefined the library's role within the city of Amsterdam.

Keizersgracht

The first location at Keizersgracht, opened in 1919, offered relatively limited public functions. The library consisted mainly of a reading room at the time, with no open access to the bookshelves. Visitors were required to consult a catalogue, submit a list of titles and then wait for the staff to retrieve the requested books. This setup emphasised a highly controlled system where users had little autonomy. Children under the age of fourteen were not allowed and those between fourteen to seventeen required written permission from their parents. The library functioned solely as a space for individual study and reflection, with little room for interaction.

Prinsengracht

The move to Prinsengracht in 1977 marked a turning point in how the public library was conceived. Compared to the former location on Keizersgracht, this library resembled more closely the kind of public library we are familiar with today. The new location was significantly larger and included a wide range of public functions that transformed the library into more of a cultural centre. The ground floor included a coffee corner and newspaper reading room, both were accessible from the street to promote social interaction. The library also contained meeting rooms, study areas, music departments and creative studios. These facilities represented a new library concept in which meeting, culture and education were integrated. Visitors were also given full open access to the book collections for the frist time: a major step towards user autonomy and engagement.

Oosterdokskade

In 2007, the OBA reinvented itself once more with its relocation to Oosterdokskade. Designed as an *experience library*, this new building was no longer solely a place for books, but also for socialising, learning, culture and leisure. With features such as a (youth) theatre, conference facilities, exhibition space, makerspace, study areas, café, restaurant and panoramic lookout, the library embraced a much broader societal role. It explicitly positioned itself as the city's *living room*: an open and welcoming space for all. The public functions have been significantly expanded to include free digital literacy help, financial guidance and language development initiatives. The building's architecture reinforces these responsibilities with open-plan floors, meeting zones and multipurpose rooms. Compared to the previous location at Prinsengracht, the Oosterdokskade library responds more directly to the digital developments and changing needs of Amsterdam's residents. However, in terms of facilities, little is fundamentally new. Most functions already introduced at Prinsengracht are simply scaled up (made larger, more accessible and more professional) rather than completely reinvented. While the transformation has generally been received positively, it has also sparked critical reflection. Some felt that the library had strayed from its original identity as a quiet space for reading and study. The growing emphasis on activity-based programming and multifunctional spaces could be seen as affecting the availability of calm and focused environments.

To summarise, a comparison of the three central OBA buildings reveals a clear evolution: from a closed, virtually exclusive study environment at Keizersgracht to an open and versatile hub at Oosterdokskade. This development reflects the library's function as a social and cultural hub within the city. Looking ahead, both the *National Library Law* (Wsob) and the *Amsterdams Library Vision* underline this direction. They define the library as a space for development, connection and digital participation. These frameworks show that the library is no longer just about books, but about learning, meeting and growing together with the city and its people.

7. Conclusion

This research sets out to answer the question *'How have the additional public functions of the Jo Coenen-designed OBA building at Oosterdokskade evolved over time, compared to its two former main locations: Keizersgracht (opened in 1919) and Prinsengracht (opened in 1977)?'*

The comparison of the three Central OBA libraries demonstrates a distinct and progressive shift in the libraries' spatial and conceptual identities. At Keizersgracht, the library represented the image of a more traditional, silent, structured space. The focus was almost entirely on lending services, with minimal room for other types of interaction. Public functies in the modern sense, were lacking.

The relocation to Prinsengracht in 1977 marked the beginning of a number of major public functions. The library included a music department, informal reading areas, café and group workspaces. This transition reflected a lager cultural movement towards a more open and accessible public institution. With not only facilitating individual learning, but also communal engagement.

The opening of the Oosterdokskade location in 2007 was the most important change in the OBA's development history. This library was designed from the ground up as an *experience library*, with the goal of serving as a cultural and social hub rather than just a home for books. The library offers a variety of additional public functions across eight floors. Including a (youth) theatre, event halls, makerspace, digital helpdeks, exhibition areas, cafés, panoramic terraces and quiet study zones. It parallels the larger transformation, indicated in both the *Wsob* (Public Library Law) and the *Amsterdam Library Vision*, from a traditional library model to a *living room* for the city.

This evolution is more than physical additions. It is about redefining what a public library is. The public library transformed into a space that actively responds to the changing needs of its urban community. It provides a secure and inclusive environment to study, meet, create and grow. It supports children's language acquisition, assists adults in navigating digital bureaucracy and provides people with a platform to express their stories and cultures.

The case studies show that this shift occurred gradually. With each new building reacting to the needs at that moment in time. What began as a functional reading space at Keizersgracht, has grown into a dynamic public arena at Oosterdokskade. This is closely alignes with the modern conception of the *community library*: a place not just intended for, but increasingly by the community. The library is no longer an archive, it is a home for the city.



Figure 27 OBA Keizersgracht (openend 1919) (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1949)



Figure 28 OBA Prinsengracht (opened 1977) (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 1977)



Figure 29 OBA Oosterdokskade (opened 2007) (Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 2008)

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