

## THE LIBRARY'S RELATION TO ITS COMMUNITY\*

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HAVING driven up from Cambridge this afternoon, I have come from a city with many libraries of a contrasting kind. If you look at them you at once see how through the centuries the library's relation to its community has altered. If you go into a college and look at the college library, you find a little dark room, often the original one, tucked away very near to the central buildings of the college; right there at the centre, the chapel, the hall, the library, and around them the rooms of the college. And yet most of those libraries now are show libraries; they're not very suitable to work in; they relate, really, to a society which a college sometimes pretends it still is, but hardly ever is now at all. As you come into the actual world of modern university work, you get something quite different in an almost defiantly assertive and separate way, that university library over the river: clearly a specialized function, a place to which you travel, not a room among other rooms, a development within the house, at the centre of a little community; but a separate specialized institution. This does its best to assert itself in a city already crammed with things drawing the highest attention. Almost deliberately, one might feel, it sets out to create a sense of awe. I often have to speak to undergraduates like a father (this gets easier with the passing years) to assure them that nothing very terrible will happen to them if they go inside that building. I remember very distinctly, at eighteen, having to summon every last resource of nerve to go up those appalling steps and through, eventually, those gilded doors. Now I say to people: "when you get inside it won't be too bad. By about the second day you might even be able to read." But still, undergraduates leave Cambridge, in spite of the awful assertion of that building, without having gone there. And this is possible because they have the other kind of library which is the Faculty Library, the library specialized to a subject. These are smaller places, very varied, but usually much more popular.

These are libraries serving a large university and a community of professional scholars. Then among them you have the City Library and the County Library. For years—and this will be a problem with which many of you are familiar in one form or another—the City has been promising the library better accommodation. As it is now, you look up from the market square to one of those biscuit blocks which are so common around the country—porridge blocks you might also call them—and if you find your way round the back, round to the tradesmen's entrance as it were, you will find the library. A very good library in unbelievably cramped quarters. And if you go up the hill, up Castle Hill, you find the Shire Hall, a rather greyer tone of biscuit but otherwise much the same: that square solidity with which our local authorities tend to present themselves to the world, and there you will find in the grounds a very nice little modern, wood and glass building, but, of course, in the shadow of the Shire Hall.

This is just a rough sketch of the variation of a library and its environment that you get in one city, of course, not a typical one. I use these illustrations to begin the discussion of what will be my main theme: that in the siting and character of a library building, in relation to other buildings, exist real social relations. In most periods we are not very conscious of the social relations which most deeply govern us. Even when we become conscious of them it is often not much help, since it is very difficult in any period to escape those which are predominant and powerful. And yet, living as we do in a period of obvious and rapid change, we are forced more and more into this activity of becoming conscious of the great variation of these relations, and of their implications.

In a simple sense we think of buildings as for shelter, for use inside in a simple way. We sometimes forget that buildings, particularly public buildings, very powerfully communicate social

\* Edited version of a Paper delivered at the L.A. Annual Conference, Guildhall, City of London, 15th May, 1966.

meanings and are intended to. These social meanings are often seen very easily by a visitor from another country, by a visitor from another generation; as we ourselves are when we look at such buildings from the past, where the meaning that is embodied in that building and its relation to others is quite clearly and openly there. It is worth dwelling for a moment on this because we have not been fortunate in our tradition of social thinking in England. We have not learned to see buildings as, in a way, means of communication. And yet this fact is very deep in the history of any kind of community. For many people the sense of a community, the meaning of what it is to be living together in a particular place, is organized around some prominent mark or place: often at first, and in some places still so, a natural feature, sometimes improved, and one's sense of that feature is a powerful and continuing sense of what life in that place is. Once men begin to make communities, often at a very early stage they put what can seem to others a disproportionate amount of effort into making that central social feature, that man-made feature, which sums up the meaning of life in that place. I need not give too many historical examples, but we can all think of the development of the mound into the pyramid, or of the cathedral—obviously the most important example in our civilization, where the sheer proportion, the size and wealth of the cathedral, overshadowing as it so often does the huddled medieval streets, make it difficult for us to believe, from the values of a different civilization, that people could ever have drawn those proportions between houses for men to live in and a house in which they worshipped: a deliberate putting of resources on a massive scale into something which was felt as the central place, the place where the meanings were concentrated.

So deep is this need to be able to find your identity, and the meanings of your community somewhere visually enacted outside you, that the community which does not provide for it often dissatisfies its members in a way which they find very difficult to define, but the sense of lack is quite clear. And yet, while many understand this need in terms of the cathedral or the mound in earlier and different periods of civilization, because in a sense those are received things, with traditional meanings, only a few can apply the same kind of analysis to the visual organization, the embodied social relations of our own communities. We pass historically through a bewildering succession: for example through the time when the palace became much more important than the cathedral as the public building where the meanings of the

society were concentrated. But even there we are still within a traditional mode—the one big public building associated with a traditional kind of authority. As we move towards communities nearer our own, we find something very different, and an evident confusion. One of the greatest problems we encounter in thinking about re-making our own communities, is to know what the central buildings ought properly to be. We have the visual experience very richly, if richly is the word, in England, of one modern definition. In the Industrial Revolution, in the new towns, it was perfectly clear where the meanings of the society lay. They lay there in the places of work—the mills, the factories, the warehouses—which powerfully and sometimes brutally asserted their priorities over the lives of all those within sight of them.

Today, with better transport, we find it unnecessary to site factories in the middle of what (to find a special word for living) we now call residential areas. We find it in many ways convenient to segregate what we call industrial and residential zones. But then we find ourselves with communities which seem to have no natural centre. And so we wonder what to put in the centre. That's looking towards the future. But let us try to imagine what a visitor from a different generation looking at our actual contemporary organization would make of it. What would he identify as the buildings which do evidently express the dominant meanings of the society? I think he would identify the buildings of the administrative and financial institutions—the great offices, the assertive squares and towers of offices—as the buildings into which the meanings of this society, however inadequately, are concentrated. This is the point of my reference earlier to the Cambridge City Library round the back of the Guildhall, and to the County Library there in the shadow of the Shire Hall. The buildings that do emerge from our muddled environment, with a certain confidence, are these institutions, and I don't mean only those of the local authorities. We see in the centres of cities the building societies, the insurance companies, the banks. And if you look in some of the new banks, particularly if the queue is fairly long and you can forget momentarily why you came there, you can indeed sometimes feel that you are in a temple; the decoration, particularly where it goes towards that kind of brawn marble, often seems to suggest that, and there is even a certain reverent hush. And so, in our kind of society, when it is asked what should be there at the centre of a community, the answer does seem to be

pretty regularly the financial institutions, the administrative offices.

We must then take up a position towards this. It won't be an easy position, it requires a lot of shading, it is in any case controversial. But the point of the theme I've been discussing is to lead us towards the consideration of possible alternatives. Towards the financial institutions, attitudes are inevitably controversial. And, yet, really, the first thing to discuss is not attitudes. These meanings that are communicated, like any meanings, do not arise from a separate, thinking part of the mind; they're an expression of quite real social relations. The most evident thing in Britain, for a generation, has been the ease with which it is possible to finance buildings of that kind, and the difficulty of financing buildings of any other kind. The real social relations in that sense are there, but our awareness of them flows along familiar channels, and it's only in certain violent cases of contrast that we come to question whether these relative values do indeed have any general assent.

This last week I was writing a chapter in a new novel that I'm doing about making a new town in rural Wales, something that may indeed happen in the next five or ten years. I found that, almost without having looked for it, a situation came up in which you had as one of the first penetrations of this area for development, one of these very smart, new garages, which call themselves service stations. And one of the services that they provide is, of course, sanitary, and this is quite good, given the all too probable sanitation of mid-Wales. But the scene that came almost without me having thought about it, was one in which there, on opposite corners of a little country road, were the gleaming new garage with its facilities, and the little old village school, with its earth closet round the back. I didn't have to invent this; it only summarized what in a sense has been the situation in English society since the war, where you can see side by side situations which are conventionally interpreted with different parts of the mind. At the public level this is a society that is in one sense schizophrenic. Because, when you point to the village schools, and there is one within three miles of the Backs in Cambridge which is exactly like this, then you find that you are told: "you mustn't be unreasonable, it will get done in time, it's a question of money, we've got to watch the way we spend our money." As if it was a special sort of currency, you know, and not like the other sort of currency. It will take time, but half the kids are away with dysentery, as happened in this village I'm

thinking of—well, I mean we've all got to take our share of life's knocks! Except, when you move on to a different network the reasoning is totally different, totally different. There is not that sort of argument about the furnishing that goes into the new bank, the new building society office, the new insurance office.

Now, all right, this may be totally justifiable and rational; it evidently is to the people who run those institutions. But for the rest of us, watching it, looking at it, asking what the arrangement of our communities in these physical terms expresses of our own meanings? Well, the answer is not so easy. Clearly, people talk about money in totally different ways, when they are talking about institutions which have a certain weight of authority behind them, and about institutions that other people are trying to build to express their own meanings, and their sense of a possible future. Money flows along the channels that are laid down. Yet the channels which are deepest in any particular period are not necessarily those which correspond to the wishes, the feelings, the aspirations of people at that time; they may simply be the deep, well-built channels of the past. And then their very existence, their very confidence may be a barrier, in a time of rapid change, to precisely the kind of thinking, the kind of feeling, and the kind of building which is going to express the life of a growing community, coming into existence.

It seems to me that the society that is coming into existence in Britain is going to be one of two kinds, and I have no real certainty which it will be. It will either be a predominantly commercial society in which quite different criteria are attached to a directly commercial activity from those that are attached to any other kind of activity at all, and in which the other things that we have to have, from libraries to hospitals, are so to say inserted into that structure. That is what is happening in some places in the country now. Or, we shall have a society which, in my opinion, much more correctly understands the practicalities of contemporary living, because what most strikes me about that first version of society is that it is in so many ways deeply unpractical.

The second kind of society would be one which was inevitably educative; educative in a sense that I think we have still to fight for in England, because education in England still too often means schools. The French have a very useful term *éducation permanente*. Education, in the sense that they are using this phrase, permanent education, is something very different. They point out, quite rightly, that by the time the child

goes to school, whether at five or six or seven, he has already learnt from his family, which is a major source of influence, from his house and the street that it's in, from the way that street relates to others in the centre of his city, an idea of himself and his world. All the time that he is going to school, as well as what he is being taught on the curriculum, he is learning something about the way the school relates to the town, what it is that visiting dignitaries value when they come and look round the school, is it the same thing that the teachers value? He's comparing things in this way, all through school, and when he goes home from school, he's again immediately involved, not only in the home and the street, but in all the sources coming from far outside, the television, the newspapers, the wireless, and so on, and as he grows up, there's a process of comparison going on between those meanings that are built in, that are there in the social relations, and the meanings he's being offered at school. And this is why it is permanent education, because that process does not stop when he leaves school, and he does not continue it only by taking a refresher course in this or that, by getting some more training or by using his public library. He gets it by the work relations he finds himself in, he gets it by the way his city is shaped, he gets it by the way the whole country he belongs to presents itself to him, and that country's relations to the world.

Permanent education—it is strictly that. Most people try to diminish it, and just call it the facts of life, with the implication that that's unchanging, solid reality. But in fact it is a process consciously directed to train people to believe certain things, to behave in certain ways. It's not just a solid reality which happens to come into existence. It came into existence for real reasons; it's continued in certain ways for real reasons.

Now, as we move towards a society which is going to be democratic in one or other of its senses, in that it will be impossible to ignore the real interests and the real lives of the great majority of people, whatever is done, that educative process has got—if there is to be success—to correspond to the developing needs of that majority. This fact is accentuated by the very rapidity of change, because all the time people will have to revise the meanings they are getting and to learn new ones. Nobody now becoming an adult is likely to finish his working life doing a job very comparable to that with which he begins; even if it's called the same general activity, the job itself will be very different, and the need to learn is going to be crucially import-

ant. But when we have said this, then I think we have re-defined what the necessary meanings of society are, what the essential meanings of this sort of world coming into existence are, and then I think we have our answer about what to put at the centres of our cities. Whether physically in the centre, in the literal sense, or culturally at the centre, in the sort of importance we accord to them, the sort of emphasis we give them, the way we group them. But in any case what we put at the centre are the cultural buildings: the libraries, the colleges, the museums, the exhibition halls, the theatres, the concert halls, the cinemas, rooms of various kinds for different kinds of meetings, the arts centres.

So if we are talking about a library building in relation to its environment, to the community that it's serving, we have, I think, to stop talking about a minor specialized service, or even a minor general service. We have to talk about something that we are going to put at the centre of our community, because learning is the deepest meaning of the society we are trying to create. And what we must associate with the library is not only the museum. I think the way in which those two words have got stuck together in English is worthy of some remark, because, magnificent as both are, the orientation towards the past which they can suggest is precisely what we do not need. I am as deeply oriented towards the past as anyone, but the whole point of my kind of emphasis on learning—on a new and permanent education for growth—is that the natural buildings with which you associate the library are not only the museum, but the theatre, the cinema, the record club, the college, the concert hall, the restaurant, the rooms for meetings. These are the places to which we can all come, where centrally we can say we belong to a city. Not merely to the past, for which it's comparatively easy to get money in England, but to a sense of making, using, experimenting, of opening a very different range of life from that to which the majority of us have been exposed. All these things together, not as the record of the past, but as concentrating the meanings of an educative society. So if the most practical, central need of our society is permanent education, keeping a learning process going as long as possible in every mind, for the most evident social and economic needs, quite as much as for those spiritual or cultural needs which are usually isolated, then we have rediscovered what we can put—and proudly put—at the centres of our communities: the cultural buildings and, I'm bound to say to this audience, good, bigger libraries among them.