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The Turin City Library System and the City.

In the last two centuries Turin was one of the chief protagonists of the Italian history and in various occasions it faced the challenges posed by change.

Recently, reacting to a major crisis of the Fiat car industry, which involved the whole town, Turin opened again to change.

Nowadays, Turin is a city looking forward to its future, proud of its positive Olympic experience (but with no exaggeration) and engaged in the economic recovery, made harder by the severe global crisis.

For what concerns the economy: Fiat is recovering at fast speed, even if hampered by the recent global crisis. We are going out from the FIAT monoculture as well: thanks to a skilled manpower, industry is also oriented towards other new advanced mechanical and technological productions. From Turin the creative ideas of many protagonists of industrial design (e.g. Pininfarina and Giugiaro) reach manufacturers all over the world.

In the ICT field, Turin houses the most prestigious research centre in Italy and hosted until a few months ago the Southern-Europe research centre that Motorola chose to establish in Turin, no doubt also for the presence of our well appreciated Polytechnic University.

Specially after the Olympic Games, Turin is betting on tourism as well, thanks to its proximity to the Alps, its historic centre, full of baroque buildings and monuments, and the presence of several museums: like the Egyptian Museum, which is the second in the world, the national Museum of Cinema, the Museum of Mountain, and so on.

In July 2006, after the extraordinary Olympic experience, the City of Turin, together with the other municipalities of the Metropolitan Area and with the main economic and social actors, approved the second Strategic Plan for the whole Metropolitan Area of Turin.

In this frame we may take into consideration the role of the Turin City Library System in the age of the knowledge society and also the building project for the new Central City Library.

The essential goal of the Strategic Plan is to promote and foster the transformation of the whole Turinese metropolitan area towards the Knowledge Society and Economy, first of all acting on human resources and innovation.

Knowledge is considered, in fact, the strategic factor for the development and the core in the creation of economic value. It “doesn’t mean only valorising the existing excellences, but also increasing the common knowledge in the local society”, and facilitating the sharing and transmission of tacit knowledge and individual experiences as well, “in order to enrich the residents’ situation by improving the range of professional and social opportunities they can avail themselves of”¹.

It requires a large co-operation among all the social actors, because “even though development based on knowledge offers great possibilities, it also brings with it heavy social effects and could transform itself into a powerful vector of disintegration”².

For that reason the Plan proposes to act on human resources and innovation through “policies of inclusion, lifelong education, technological transfer, urban integration, and social quality”³, in order to enhance people ways of reacting to change and social difficulties.

In fact, the final goal is a model of innovation and development as concerted as possible because of a social and economic situation that requires contemporaneous efforts in policies both for surviving the present emergency and for developing a better future.

With those goals in view, Turin City Libraries confirm themselves as a strategic tool, giving their contribution to the accomplishment of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan: notably for avoiding exclusion from knowledge and information; but also fostering and stimulating individual creativity.

Multi-medial information and documents are available to everyone and they are chosen taking into account interests and cultural levels of the various population groups, including migrants; reading groups, meetings with authors, foreign language conversation groups encourage and increase individual

¹ Associazione Torino internazionale, *2° Piano strategico dell’area metropolitana di Torino*, Torino, Torino internazionale, 2006, p. 18.

² Ibidem, p. 27.

³ Ibidem.

reading and communication skills; lifelong learning is promoted, particularly for less educated adults and migrants, also in the ITC field; through mutual acquaintance, we offer opportunities for meeting different cultures and overcoming prejudice.

The buildings of and the services offered by the branch libraries in the peripheral areas of the city are an element of strong urban qualification as well, both in terms of social cohesiveness and urban presence: in some of these areas, libraries are the only cultural chance and the only meeting and socializing place for the inhabitants, be they children, adults, or senior citizens.

A few words about the Turin City Library System: presently it includes the Central City Library, a library Network Centre for technical services, 14 branch libraries, one lending point and two prison libraries. The specialized *Andrea Della Corte* Music Library, also belonging to the City, is functionally linked to the Civic Music Arts Department.

We have also a Reading garden (*Mausoleo della Bela Rosin*) and further library services to the citizens are available through other structures, only partially managed by the City Library System.

There are three service points in other public structures. Managed by the City Library System (in co-operation with the local health services) is the *Bibliotechina H*, a lending point at the San Giovanni Bosco Hospital; books of the City Library System can be borrowed also in some City offices devoted to special social groups (Immigration Office and Family Welfare Office).

In some areas, where in these times of economic crisis we cannot afford to open new branch libraries, the presence of the City Library System with reading and lending points has been achieved with the co-operation with other actors: a migrants' association (Centro Alouan), a local agency for urban re-qualification (Biblioarquata) or a network of different actors as in the case of the opening to the general public of the Manzoni School library (the school itself, the local municipality, the agency for local development of the San Salvario district, some associations).

Networking with other partners (community-based organizations, specialized agencies and so on) is a key factor to work with social groups

otherwise harder to reach: *Bibliomigra* allows to contact migrants through a hand-cart laden with books along the streets of the largest Italian open market in the Porta Palazzo area. Other activities (storytelling and playing) have been organized in the yards of the council houses of a peripheral district (Mirafiori Sud), co-operating with a boy-scout group.

Thanks to the diffusion of the internet and mobile phones, the City Library System activated some remote services: *Chiedi alle biblioteche*, Turinese version of the reference service internationally known as *Ask a librarian*; SMS service for informing patrons of the availability of previously reserved documents.

More traditional services remain, e.g. delivery of audio books to the visually impaired through the postal system.

The Library website is fully compliant with Italian law and international accessibility standards: we pay strict attention to actual and general availability of our online contents.

The inter-system and interlibrary loan services and the presence in all the libraries of video-magnifiers and multilingual speech synthesis devices facilitate the access to books and other materials.

Some global figures of the City Library System for 2008:

1,277,313 visitors;

920,649 loans (compared to the numbers of public libraries in other countries, this figure may seem meagre, even if it outstrips most of the public libraries of the largest Italian cities. Apart from Bologna, in fact, the central libraries of the main Italian cities are more like research libraries than public libraries: in Turin we had 857,265 loans in our branches, but only 63,384 loans at the Central Library);

1,544,805 holdings; 1,427 current serials (1,016 in the Central Library);

82,443 internet sessions by the patrons;

537,781 reference transactions by the librarians.

The development of the diversified range of cultural activities offered in the different branch-libraries of the System is meaningfully linked to the modernization of the library buildings and mostly to the opening of new branch-

libraries in the last years, better equipped with proper meeting spaces: conference halls, small groups activity rooms (e.g. for conversation groups in foreign languages or storytelling), IT laboratories.

The 69,044 user presences in 2008 (74,472 in 2007) were recorded during 647 activities, for a total of 3,085 events. The presence of common users (24,059 adults, 7903 children) refers to 385 activities (285 for adults, 100 for children), for a total of 1,246 events. The 203 activities for school recorded the presence of 25,758 pupils, for a total of 1,057 events. Special and collective users were 11,324 during 59 activities for a total of 782 events.

In the view of giving an effective contribution to the principles of the Strategic Plan, we are developing our library policies along a threefold direction:

1. the strengthening of the City Library System;
2. the construction of the new Central Library;
3. the integration and coordination of the City Library System with other libraries in Turin and in the metropolitan area.

But we also need to bear always in mind the importance of the adequate communication with the final users of those services. We still have a lot to do for that.

Now, let me offer you some reflections from our everyday experience.

First of all, if it is obvious that different kinds of activities need different kinds of spaces (particularly, adults vs. children activities, individual vs. collective use), the need arises of different spaces for activities with different levels of noise.

Therefore, we need spaces for groups or otherwise noisy activities (rooms with many computers, internet points, lending counters, etc.), but also quiet places for individual studying and reflecting.

The public library may not be only a silent place, but it cannot become only a meeting and socialization space.

Also our public libraries are more and more becoming "third-places" where:

- different cultures can overcome mutual incomprehension thanks to the possibility of meeting other people;

- people can meet in spontaneous groups and with associations who cannot afford to rent a place;
- to find “other” solutions to the non-communication in family and at work, thanks to courses and meetings to encourage aggregation;
- to find comfortable and flexible spaces that the users themselves can customize.

They are also “first places” for people in trouble and “second places” for people who lost work (unemployed, temporary employees, retired people, but also people with mental disorders).

About our public, firstly we have to remark that public libraries are one of the few institutions, which are still free and open to everyone. Therefore they are places in which different cultures and social classes can meet and melt.

As a matter of fact, living together in our libraries may be difficult and may sometimes produce several problems, worsened by the arrangement and the lack of space.

We need to continue to pay special attention to different kinds of our patrons.

As today in Italian schools reading promotion isn't really a specific item in pupils' curriculum, we are going to develop specific projects addressed to the schools in order to help young weak readers.

In broader terms, particular services - included in a project called “Library beyond walls” – are intended for weak or non-readers: for instance, during pre-delivery courses in some hospitals, a female librarian explains to the future mothers the importance of reading to their babies since their first days of life or even during pregnancy.

Furthermore, we think we have to involve strong readers in the development of our collections, as we are aware that an up-to-date collection meets both the library's service goals and the needs of assiduous readers. Also to this end, some librarians of us regularly run reading groups and we started to train other ones to do the same thing.

We cannot forget other user targets that deserve our attention:

- young adults who completed their compulsory education courses and have no opportunities to improve their ITC skills beyond a simple browsing of the internet, and therefore meet difficulties to find a job;
- senior citizens with visual impairments who cannot find large-type publications, still lacking in Italy, or people in late adulthood who want to learn how to use a personal computer, to browse the internet and to send an e-mail message.

In the last few years, Italy turned from a country of emigrants into a destination for migrants from all around the world. The latest official data count in Turin 103,079 foreign nationals coming from 152 countries (11.43% of population), most of them from Romania (41,159) and Morocco (16,416).

The Turin City Libraries are most involved in promoting the cultural and social integration of the various population groups by:

- hosting multicultural intermediaries providing with community information migrants belonging to the main linguistic groups;
- promoting Italian conversation groups and courses to encourage and improve individual communication skills;
- providing civics and citizenship courses for migrants and refugees. These courses have been organized in co-operation with other actors: migrants' associations, local agencies or networks of different actors, as in the case of the successful course "Torino è la mia Città" (Turin is my city) intended for women just arrived from North Africa after a family reunion process. It may be interesting to remark that, while mothers are following the courses, their kids are involved in storytelling sessions with librarians.

The new poverties generated by the global economic crisis demand the traditional library services are offered in new and different forms, both in terms of time bands and of additional services. Going back to the example I made before, while mothers are following language or ITC courses, their children may be looked after by librarians with storytelling sessions.

We all know that public libraries are for the use of each and every person. However, the presence of the homeless, of people with mental disorders or drug-addicts sometimes can become a problem. For some of them, the library often means the last and extreme contact with normal life. To manage special situations, therefore, librarians need not only to co-operate with other actors (as community-based organizations, specialized associations, and social aid agencies) but also to plan library spaces taking into account the presence of those users, for instance when choosing location or fittings for the restrooms, or when deciding how to provide self-service wardrobe lockers, that often are monopolized by those users.

About us, the librarians: in order to deal with present problems and future challenges, for librarians it is more and more vital to team not only with their colleagues, but also with other professional actors. Besides acting as an intermediary between books and readers in the role of an indexing or of a reference technician, we have to increase skills in linking the different actors of the cultural and social sectors.

We have to become more and more mediators, more flexible, able to link library network to other cultural and social agencies and to team with different professionals.

Without forgetting that, first of all, we should be able to welcome and pay attention to every person as a human being: information comes later.

About the future of our Turin City Library System, we believe that libraries will increasingly offer different kinds of services to their users:

- traditional or digital information services, available both in the library and at home, through the internet;
- points of public access to communication networks;
- places for self- and lifelong learning;
- places for multimedia self-productions.

But they will never cease to be places for meeting and amusement and will always have to offer silent corners to relish a book picked up after browsing among the shelves.

In this frame we can take into consideration the construction of the new building for the Central City Library.

It offers the opportunity to add an extra element of quality to the major transformation process of the city already under way, with the inclusion of a public building capable of symbolising both in architectural and in functional terms, right in a central area, the commitment and the steps taken by the City to create its own future in the technological age of information and communication.

The new Cultural Centre will be a major architectural complex, also in terms of town planning. On a net surface of about 20.000 square metres (about 215.000 square feet) in a vast disused industrial area, it will develop on several levels along a new avenue crossing the whole city, located in a strategic point next to the underground and the national and local railway stations, as any Central Library has to be.

The final planning phase has been already completed by architect Mario Bellini. The City of Turin, in the meanwhile heavily engaged with the Winter Olympics, also from the financial point of view, is now searching for the most adequate means to fund the construction, in concert with other institutional actors of the Turin area.

As a matter of fact, in the new global crisis scenario, the City firstly needs to pay off the debts taken over for the Olympic Games, debts that we do not question as the Olympic Games were a good investment for the future of Turin.

We have designed new, architecturally attractive, user-oriented cultural spaces: the final aim of all that we are doing is to offer through the new Central Library endless opportunities for leisure-time pursuits, for lifelong education, for getting information and communicating with other people, and for playing a better, more active role in society, as public libraries offered since the beginning of their history.

I am sure we will need such a public service also in the future global society.