

# A Refreshing dive in Danish Libraries

## Impressions of a French intern librarian at the Royal Danish Library

**Den franske biblioteksinspektør-studerende Hugo Forster var i efteråret 2022 i praktik på Det Kgl. Bibliotek. Under sit ophold i Danmark besøgte han en række universitets- og forskningsbiblioteker for at undersøge "den nordiske model". I dette essay reflekterer Hugo Forster over forskelle og ligheder mellem det franske og danske biblioteksvæsen og kaster den udefrakommendes blik på de danske bibliotekers åbenhed, funktionalitet og digitalisering samt samarbejdet på tværs af sektoren.**

□ **Hugo Forster**, biblioteksinspektør og studerende på École Nationale des Chartes

It is not uncommon for French librarians to dream of the "library of the future" by evoking a certain "Scandinavian ideal". This idea speaks to the imagination, but it is difficult to rigorously define the model that the concept implies. A few ideas may come to mind intuitively: attention paid to the architecture; careful design of the interior spaces allowing a harmonious cohabitation of various publics; modernity of a professional philosophy which tolerates and encourages multiple new uses; widening the access to the whole society of what used to be seen as an elitist "conservatory"...

As a student at the *École nationale des chartes*, I am aiming a career as a library curator. If the term "curator" seems a little old-fashioned, it is used in France to designate a broad range of functions, ranging far from the traditional tasks of the librarian such as preservation and enhancement of heritage collection to cultural programming in state institutions. It was with the hope of bringing a breath of fresh air into my still naive understanding of libraries that I packed my bags at the end of September 2022, bound for a 2-month internship at the Royal Library. The intent of my study trip was to explore the "Nordic model", in order to gain a better knowledge of the specific circumstances and political impulses that have led to the emergence of such a "model" in Denmark.

### A nationwide library

My arrival in Copenhagen was accompanied by a dense program of visits and meetings, through the various sites and departments of the Royal Library. In two months only, I was taken to visit thirteen different research and study libraries across the country, most of which are part of the newly merged national institution. I was able to make an in-depth exploration of the *Sorte Diamant* – which remained my main base for my internship – to meet a myriad of Danish librarians





and information specialists, and even to attend the DFFU's summit in Middelfart. I was also given the opportunity to have a look at the Danish city library network in Aarhus and in Region Hovedstaden, a surprising experience, as it did not feel like visiting separate places of culture, but rather several branches of a bigger institution.

The places I had the opportunity to visit amazed me by their design unmatched by the austere reading rooms of traditional study libraries, by the amplitude of their spaces, the importance of sustainability... This attention to design, in my eyes, reflects a real reflexion on the different uses by the public, and the consideration of the library as a shared space. The conflation of these uses exists in France, of course, but are not as common as in Denmark.

## Open libraries

The feeling of disorientation that I experienced during my discoveries was in fact due to a difference between France and Denmark regarding the conceptualization of heritage and university libraries. While our French institutions require their readers to present legitimate reasons (minimum age, university degree, sometimes the mention of a specific research objective or even the recommendation of an authority), the *Sorte Diamant* has for several years now chosen to open its doors to all kinds of users, including simple onlookers, and even children! The national vault of culture invites its users to happily colonise its shared spaces, keeping the silent reading rooms for the more studious public. The sight of the Aarhusian branch of the Royal

↑ Statsbibliotekets  
bogtårn ved Aarhus  
Universitet.  
Foto: Hugo Forster.

Library is even more surprising, with its living spaces where you can find a cohabitation of study areas, group work rooms, workshops, relaxation areas, large tables that turn into a cafeteria depending on the time of the day, or even a fragment of garden. Perfectly integrated into the life of the university campus, the library greets an influx of students from the neighbouring student housings and from all the surrounding faculties as well. One could hardly imagine a greater distance between this case and the interminable hushed corridors of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) Mitterrand*, and its series of specialized reading rooms, cut off from public view, kept in the secrecy of the Parisian underground.

In Denmark, “serious” libraries are taking up issues that are usually confined to municipal public libraries in France (commonly called *médiathèques*). Where French establishments generally restrict themselves to the function of a sole workplace, firmly supervised by librarian mediators, the Royal Library integrates a “third place” dimension to its sites, by encouraging exchanges between users, and informal or organized meetings. Danish research libraries installations offer a variety of spaces for “being together”, ranging from alcoves where one can gather with friends, to a hall suitable for public debate. They have also recently added performance spaces to their services, based on the model of *fablabs* and *maker spaces*, to encourage the involvement and creativity of their users. It is no coincidence that, in public and research libraries as well, the success of an institution is now evaluated more by the number of admittances than by the quantity of book loans.

## Reaching out to new audiences

These concerns have only recently emerged in the various French national library institutions, and even then, only in the context of projects that are both ambitious and isolated. National public and research library functions are distinctly segregated between the *Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)* in Paris, plus the *Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire (BNU)* in Strasbourg (a legacy of the German period of this city), and the *Bibliothèque Publique d'Information (BPI)*, located in the Centre Pompidou, Paris. However, in recent years, French national librarians have reported a change in the perception of their tasks. For example, when restoring its historic site of the *Quadrilatère Richelieu*, the *BnF* decided to bring in a wider public. The building, constructed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a “fortress” able to protect science from the hazards of the contemporary work, is surrounded by thick, high

and quadrangular walls. Thanks to the renovation works, this enclosure is now crossed by a public street. Since September 2022, therefore, ordinary onlookers are now welcome to visit, directed to exhibition spaces or to the restored *Salle Ovale*, where some 20.000 books are accessible for free consultation. This collection is intended to introduce the *BnF*'s special heritage collections to the widest public, and also includes a large collection of comic books. Although more welcoming, most of the spaces in this new *BnF Richelieu* are left in their traditional layout and functions, serving a selected public. There are many parallels with the *BnF Mitterrand* site, in which there is a clear separation between the functions and the publics of the *haut-de-jardin* (though its access is still refused to those under fifteen y. o.), and those of the *rez-de-jardin*, which is solely devoted to confirmed researchers.

These recent developments are causing intense debates among *BnF*'s readers and workers, particularly regarding the expenses that such projects could generate, with the fear that they will draw on funds intended for the maintenance of core services. Since May 2022, chronic understaffing at *BnF* has led to a reorganization of services, resulting in deteriorating conditions of access to collections for researchers. The current crises in Europe, implying austerity plans, unfortunately expose any cultural institution willing to engage ambitious projects to this kind of risk. The hesitations that still surround the renovation project of the Royal Library's *Danskesal* are evidence of that.

The relatively strong debate that is currently taking place in France also stems from the fear, expressed by staff and readers alike, of seeing a weakening of the core functions of the library. With the integration of new functions to libraries, such as those linked to digitization, or those that were previously foreign to them (leisure, relaxation, catering, citizen services...), some consider that the centuries-old mission of academic education are in danger and fear a decline of the traditional research collections.

### *École Nationale des Chartes*

Since its creation in 1821, the *École Nationale des Chartes (ENC)* supports the development of historical sciences and the modernization of the conservation professions, mainly in archives and libraries. Today, it is located next to the historical site of the French National Library (*BnF*). It teaches future civil servants in the curatorial professions in its “archivist-palaeographer” cursus. Its students are recruited by a state competition, and are employed by the state even during their teaching as trainee civil servants. This curriculum coexists in France with more common university degrees in library and information sciences, ruled by a more conventional student status.

The ENC was for a long time part of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, where it trained the future library curators. It then moved in 1897 to the Sorbonne. Since 2014, it has its own facilities, while moving closer to its original location: opposite the historic site of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. The *École des chartes* library have even moved into an aisle of the latter.

→ Den Sorte Diamant, Det Kongelige Bibliotek i København.  
Foto: Hugo Forster.



## Digitization and empty shelves

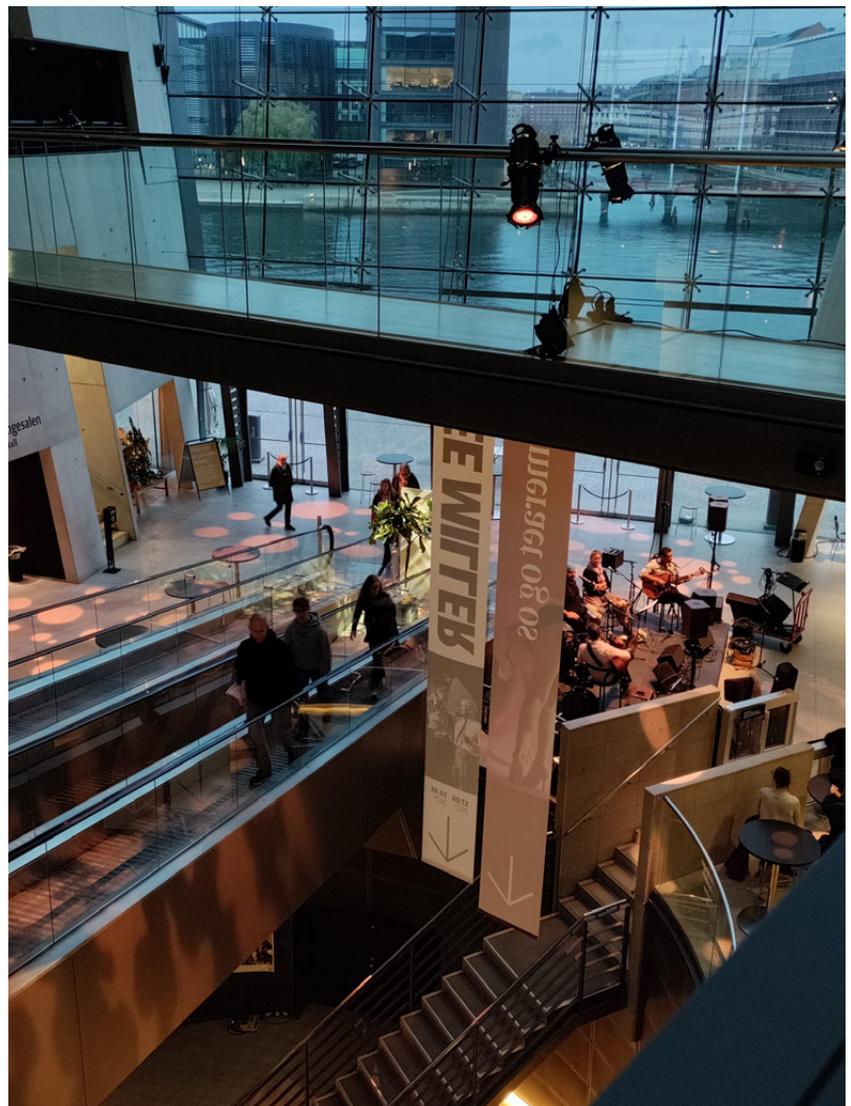
In Aarhus and Copenhagen as well, most of the books displayed in public spaces serve no other purpose than to remind people of the nature of the place, and are unlikely, apart from a few stubborn shelves of textbooks, to ever be leafed through again. At the *Sorte Diamant*, the collections are being evacuated to Vinge, where an external storage facility has been built several dozen kilometres away. This project is strangely reminiscent of a recent announcement by the *BnF*, that wishes to open a new branch in Amiens, which will be focused around storage and preservation functions. It is therefore sometimes difficult to find a meaning in visiting this ‘monument’ which, although it houses a few great scenes of life, most often seems a little empty, occupied occasionally by solitary students who find in their personal laptops all the material and tools required to do their work. With digitization, this versatile tool is increasingly sufficient – or mandatory – to fulfil the role of access to information, which was previously assigned to the library. Although the *Sorte Diamant* has only one specialized reading room, which is even shared with the Royal Archives, the number of free reading places on a weekday afternoon would make readers in the French institutions envious. It should be noted that readers may not have been present in the usual numbers during my internship, precisely because of the relocation to Vinge, that made the collections unavailable.

On the Aarhus campus, the university libraries at Nobel Park, Katrinebjerg or the Old Maternity Hospital – among other examples – can boast of being open 24 hours a day (a fact unimaginable in France!), although students will only find help behind the counters during limited time slots. The rest of the time, the “open library” is only as good as its self-service functions. However, we must not fall into the caricature of a “library without librarians nor books”. Even if the traditional opening times of the libraries are more restrained than in France, this time is used to its maximum: a number of options are presented to the users, from more in-depth guidance (see *Book a librarian* service) to teaching sessions on library skills directly at the University. Moreover, night-time opening provides a much-appreciated response to the lack of common work spaces outside the libraries on the university site.

The radical orientation of research and study libraries towards a digitization of their services and their desire to provide the best quality electronic resources are also relevant for a better understanding of contemporary Danish cultural institutions.

## Lively exchanges, collaborations and experiments

A striking aspect of my experience in Denmark was the wide variety of places of exchange that I was brought into contact with, and in which I was often immediately integrated. An invitation to the annual summit of DFFU showed me a good example of professional unity on a national scale and of exchange groups at the forefront of reflection on economic and social issues in libraries. Also, inter-library cooperation is not limited to national borders, with Danish librarians never hesitating to invite their German, Swedish or Norwegian counterparts. I witnessed such a collaboration, for example, at one of the *LearningLib* network meetings, which brought together librarians from Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, Lund, Bergen and Adger around the problematics of open pedagogical resources. The French situation regarding exchanges between library professionals also gives enthusiasm, with the existence of many powerful organizations, such as the *Association des Bibli-*

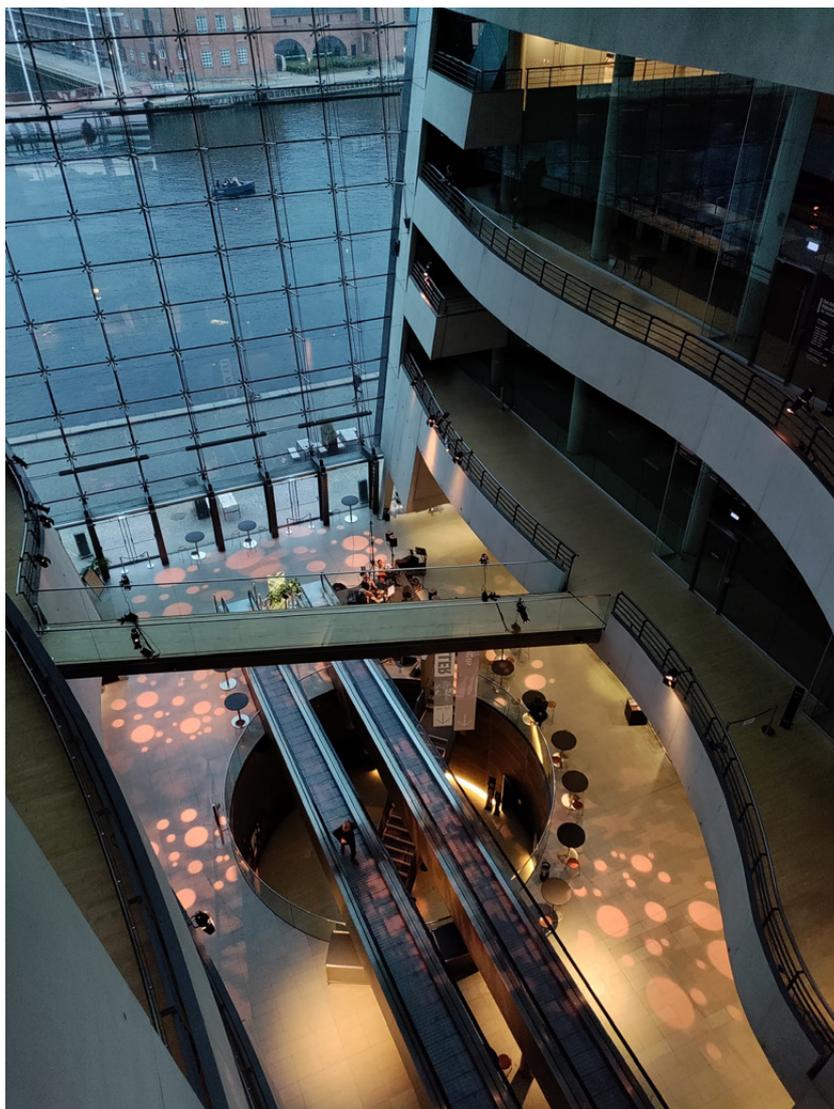


*othécaires de France (ABF)*, which has followed and participated in all the major developments of the profession since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We could also refer to the *Association de Direction des Bibliothèques Universitaires (ADBU)*, the hexagonal near equivalent to DFFU. Nevertheless, it should be noted that at the national level, cooperation between institutions remains rarer and more difficult than in Denmark, primarily for organizational reasons.

The upheaval since 2016 in the Royal Library caused by the merger policy certainly creates instability in the identification and in the functioning of the merging institutions, but it also establishes an actual sharing of expertise and working tools that French research libraries cannot aspire to. These are organized in a constellation of strong and independent centres, attached only to one of the 54 decentralised universities that are spread along the country, not to mention the institutes, the *grandes écoles* (such as the *École Nationale des Chartes* where I'm studying) and various private education centres located outside the university system, which also gives rise to the existence of independent research and teaching libraries. In this highly segmented framework, collaboration between institutions must often be limited to a few "core" missions, albeit supported by third party organizations, and not by the institutions themselves. We can here cite the maintenance of the "SUDOC", a catalogue common to the research libraries, coordinated by the *Agence Bibliographique de l'Enseignement Supérieur (ABES)*, which is also responsible for interlibrary loans between research libraries. Most of the exchange and collaboration work is done in small groups of specialists from the institutions, gathered in networks around common targeted projects. In this regard, The *BnF* has a leading role for every other library in France, but it remains in many ways an independent "island" in the national cultural landscape.

### Horizontality in professional relations

In Denmark, after the anxiety and setbacks of the first few months, the merger seems to have brought a great deal of relief to many librarians especially thanks to the economies of scale in terms of administrative and technical work. They allow for intense exchanges across the country. In this context of ambitious restructuring of institutions, I was pleased to witness the impact that the librarians' criticisms have already had on some aspects of this restructuring, their assessments leading to an encouraged experimentation and innovation. Perhaps this is the result of a hierarchical



organization that is much more horizontal than the French civil service system, which is still extremely attentive to the grade and status of its civil servants, despite local initiatives to flatten hierarchies inside the establishments.

The recent mergers could not have worked as well without a library network that was as tightly knit as it was in Denmark, even before the 2016 – 2017 mergers. This is evidenced by an extremely efficient inter-library loan system on a national scale, bringing together all the libraries and allowing virtually any reader to quickly access any document free of charge, from any library. In France, the *prêt entre bibliothèques* (a system that is absolutely distinct from loans between public libraries) is still slow, difficult and costly to access; readers still have to pay a certain amount for every document they request...

Moreover, the comparison of institutional situations is outdated: in Denmark, it was a question of merging two large libraries, their satellites and a handful of smaller institutions. In France, a merger plan would mean "tackling" several dozen institutions with contrast-

↑ Den Sorte Diamant,  
Det Kongelige Biblio-  
tek i København.  
Foto: Hugo Forster.

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\* My internship at the Royal Danish Library took place in an ideal setting, thanks to my attentive tutors and to incredibly welcoming librarians. Through an extended tour of Danish libraries, I have been able to question my philosophy of librarianship. What struck me the most was the interconnection and the collaboration that was possible – and necessary – in Denmark between “serious” libraries and public libraries, to assume that libraries should now belong to the readers, and not only to the librarians.

ing characteristics and strong identities, in a metropolitan area thirteen times larger than in Denmark. While closer cooperation between research libraries in France is desirable, the Danish horizon seems both unthinkable and undesirable, at least in this form, in a context radically different as that in France.

### Converging strategies

Nowadays, in a strategy towards openness, European libraries are proposing ambitious specifications. In France and in Denmark – to a lesser extent – the idea of a library as a meeting place does not exist everywhere in practice. Rather, it is the result of a common desire driven by cultural policies. The Scandinavian countries have had legislation specifying the role of the library as an open place since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whereas it must be acknowledged that French libraries have only recently been equipped with a real legislation without precedent (law of the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2021 regarding libraries). The latter still focuses exclusively on the mission of libraries to guarantee “equal access to culture for all”, without specifying the forms that these actions should take.

It is to be understood that in France, the implementation of the open library is still perceived by many as desirable but perilous. What would happen to a library that loses sight of its core services? It is to be feared that such an institution, wishing to constitute itself as a welcoming place of life, would in fact become a centre of activity that would lose sight of its readers, who would become mere atomised users of undifferentiated services? Moreover, in the current economic crises in Europe, the communities and institutions affected by its consequences must show the greatest ingenuity to uphold even their original mission of popular education. In this context, ambitious projects of openness and inclusion that are poorly implemented can risk sucking the lifeblood out of a library’s core services.

The “Nordic model” is perhaps attractive to French librarians because it gives the impression of being several years ahead. This feeling, nourished by the observation of a relative proximity of the issues that animate Western European cultural institutions, is nevertheless hampered by the diversity of the forms of action chosen by libraries, reflecting profoundly different economic, organisational and socio-cultural contexts.