

A Multitasking Public Library. Case Study on Triple Function of Central Library of Ervin Szabó Metropolitan Library.¹



It is not a rare thing if the tasks of a library are mixed: for example National Széchényi Library is over the national library's function at the same time a special library of the Hungarian literature and history, Ervin Szabó Metropolitan Library's Central Library is a public library and carries out special library function in sociology, too.

But it is really unique, that this Central Library includes the third, more or less university library function in addition of public and special library's tasks. The challenge is to fulfil all these requirements, to satisfy the different tasks listed in laws and regulations, to serve the different user groups – all from a budget given to us as a public library.

Some years ago, in autumn 2012, leaders of Hungarian libraries and library associations came together on a countryside conference which aim was creating a new strategy for Hungarian libraries till 2020. One of the keynote speakers (director of a university library) declared that because of the very different functions of libraries, it is impossible to summarize this multicoloured and multilevel task-conglomerate in one strategical document. His proposal was to create separate strategies for public and academic-university libraries. Fortunately, the conference refused this suggestion and took a stand on common handling of the community of libraries. Anyway, this case shows that the ways of different types of libraries are extremely divided.

As for the strategy, the 2012 conference drew up recommendations for the Ministry of Human Capacities in connection of the most important tasks of the Hungarian libraries. Despite of this, the Ministry had not compiled a common strategy for libraries for the period 2013 – 2020. At the same time the university and academic libraries made up their own strategies till 2024. Now, in 2019 the ministry decided again to create a national strategy for libraries from 2021 and called together a committee from determining members of Hungarian librarian community for preparing the new strategy.

In a usual and traditional case public libraries serve inhabitants of a county, a city or an other settlement with educational, entertaining, local and popular scientific literature and information. These libraries concentrate more and more on personal contact with their users, following them from small childhood to old age. They often organize popular literary, music and other kind of programmes. This description is true today for the smaller public libraries, but for the bigger and busier ones (like the Central Library) not necessarily, their tasks are more complex.

In contrast of it, academic libraries collect and serve scientific documents and information mostly for graduated persons: scientists, lecturers, professors and other seriously inquiring specialists. University libraries serve both students and lecturers of a given university, with special respect to the local and remote access of information. Very important part of both types of libraries is the intensive acquisition of special databases.

General introduction of Central Library (CL)

Location

The library located in the heart of Budapest. Nearby we can find metro stations, walking streets, museums, a lot of restaurants and at least six or seven universities, so we can say that it is settled in one of the most popular and crowded area of Budapest.

The building



The building of the Wenckheim Palace-library, on the left the building and garden of the Music Collection

¹ Edited and updated version of a presentation held in International ILIDE Conference, Jasná in 2016. 03. 14.

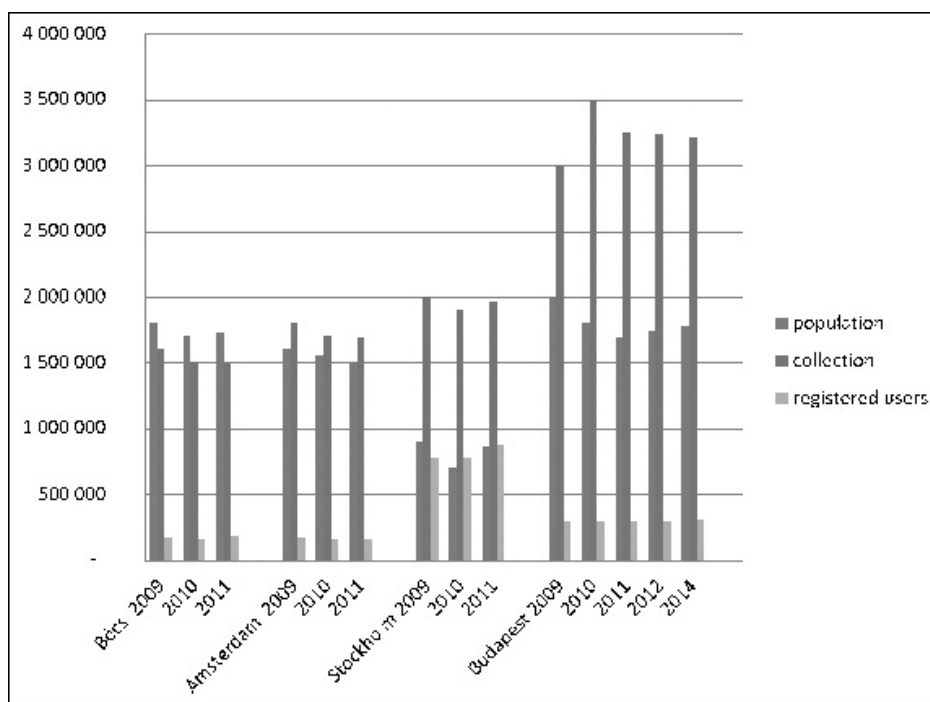
The building itself is a mixture of historical and modern architecture. The main building of the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library is the one-time Wenckheim Palace. It was built by Count Frigyes Wenckheim, a well-known aristocrat of the end of the 19th century. The Central Library was reconstructed between 1998 and 2001, with joining two modern side-wings. As the result of the reconstruction, a modern metropolitan library was created both in function and services. It is not only a subjective feeling², that one of the most beautiful library of Europe was born in Budapest in 2001.

The public

The users of the Central Library came from different parts of society – as usually in the public libraries. The picture is coloured by the high percentage of university students registered in the library, coming from different universities nearby. The proportion of users according to age is very various: we operate a children library, a family library and for the adults 6 different reading rooms, so we hope that every age-group can find their interest in Central Library.

Comparison with some European metropolitan libraries

The number of registered users (green) shows stagnation (with the exception of Stockholm, where this number is slowly increasing). The largeness of the collection of Budapest library partly come from the special library function, because the archivation of historical documents is much stronger here, than in an average public library.



Vienna – Amsterdam – Stockolm – Budapest libraries in main figures³

Public library functions of the Central Library

Given the central location, a beautiful building and modern infrastructure, the question is how can we fill this shell with rich content?

In this study I don't want to speak too much about everyday activity of the library, I try to concentrate on the three functions. We have a more or less well working IT system (not only for the CL, but for the whole network of the 49 libraries), a centralized acquisition policy, automatized lending system in CL, and a quite high number of users.

Central Library is the biggest public library in Hungary, the number of registered users is between 70 – 80 thousand a year.

One of the most important things in the life of a public library is the high level of usage. The library makes efforts to reach the possible highest usage by developing its services. That's why we introduced an automatic lending system in 2012, worked out the possibility of remote paying for different services and published photos of Budapest Collection on our website.

But at the same time, a very attractive force for visiting the library is the atmosphere of the place, with the sight of the rooms, with crowded areas and happy feeling.

² The library got more international and local awards, e.g. Europa Nostra award, and Pro Urbe Budapest award.

³ Source of the data are till 2011 is the homepage of IFLA METLIB: https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/metropolitan-libraries/publications/annual-statistics/annual-statistics_2011/metlib-survey-summary-2011.pdf.



Ball-room in the past – Reading room in present

Citizens' use of the public library in their local community is explored, focusing on social activities and how the libraries function as meeting places. Some years ago Ragnar Audunson, a Norwegian LIS professor conducted a very important empirical research on the public libraries as community places.⁴ He defined the public library as a complex arena, where most of the visitors are strangers to each other, people are not categorized by profession or as being unemployed, a patient or a client, but are all library users. According to these characteristics he categorized the public library as a low intensity community place, in contrast with the high intensity meeting places, where people meet each other for an exact purpose (e.g. language learning, attending a course, or a study group, etc.). The study contributed to understanding the role of the public library in a multicultural context. The public library as a unique and complex meeting place has important implications for future librarianship. And this is also true for the Central Library.

Besides the community space function, a very important and popular part of the public libraries' activity is the complex system of different events. Planning these programmes we always have to take into consideration that they have to connect to the activity of the library: we don't want to organize any kind of events in the library, our aim is to choose such programmes which are in closer relation with the mentality of the library. We often organize virtual events, too, e.g. recently was running a popular quiz about the contemporary Hungarian literature. We are at the very beginning of building up a new project in the CL, establishing a complex club programme including concerts, showing films, literary and popular scientific events. Fortunately, in the palace-building of the Music Collection we are in possession a beautiful ballroom for this purpose. We try to find for this club a proper business model, which produces some income for the library.

Special library functions of CL in the field of sociology

In Hungary there are 12 national special libraries⁵ in different fields of science. One of them is Ervin Szabó Metropolitan Library which has a special collection and a rich service system in the field of sociology. The origin of this special function had rooted in the historical past, when Ervin Szabó was appointed to the Metropolitan Library, and he became its director in 1911. He was a sociologist by profession, and he was the first important librarian in Hungary, who introduced the British-Saxon model into public libraries. It means that he made efforts to make services of the institution available for the masses, with special regard to the socially handicapped people.

This sociological direction remained in developing collection and services of CL. It is very interesting, that Central Library from the origin to 2000 was much more a special, than a public library. After the renovation of the building, the public (and university) library function became stronger, because of the possibilities of the new space, the will of the management and the changing requirements of the public.

⁴ Audunson, Ragnar: The public library as a meeting-place in a multicultural and digital context: The necessity of low-intensive meeting-places, *Journal of Documentation*, 2005. Vol. 61 Iss: 3, pp.429-441.

⁵ Budapest Technical University National Technical Information Centre and Library, National Library of Health Sciences, Library of Hungarian Scientific Academy, National Agricultural Library and Documentation Centre, Parliament Library, National Library of Foreign Literature, National Educational Library and Museum, Ervin Szabó Metropolitan Library, Library of Central Statistical Office, Library of National Digital Archive and Film Institute, Ministry of Defence, Institute for Military History Museum and Library.

The history of the library has been interweaving with the Hungarian sociology since the very beginnings. In the 70s Library Act of 1976 designated the Central Library to be the national resource library of sociology. This activity circle remained unchanged in the Act of 1997 about the library supply. On the 1st July 1973 the Sociological Documentary Department came into being in the Central Library which is known as Sociology Collection now.

As a result of renovation the historical building in 2000, special reading-rooms with 8 000 volumes and 200 different kinds of Hungarian and foreign periodicals welcome the readers, whose number has multiplied in the renewed library since then.

The rest of the so called 'sociology collection' is not separated, it is an integrated part of the main collection of the library. The books on sociology and social sciences are estimated as 1/3 of the books' collection of the library.

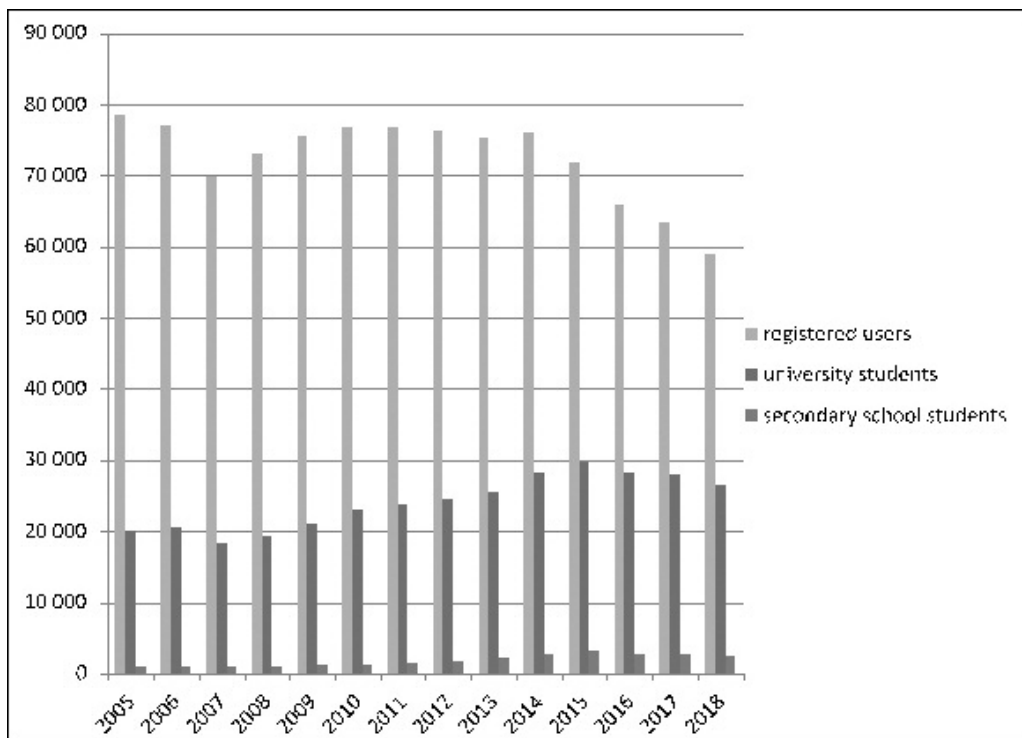
The most important Hungarian and foreign databases have become accessible on the internet (Sociological Abstracts, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, Web of Science, Social Science Citation Index, EBSCO SocINDEX etc.).

In 2014 the Ministry of Human Resources issued a decree on the main tasks of the national museum, the museums with national tasks, the national library, the special libraries with national responsibilities and the state university libraries.⁶ The ministry's decree deals – among others – with digitization and handling e-documents in these kinds of libraries.

We have started digitizing the collection in 2003, to protect the sociological and the scientific heritage. The Digitized Sociological Archive is accessible free on our website.

On the website⁷ we published the Hungarian sociological bibliographical database which is the only comprehensive bibliography in the field of Hungarian social sciences. From 2007 the sociological bibliography has been incorporated into the library's online catalogue. This year (2019) the database of the Hungarian sociological literature contains more than 185 000 records. (Titles of books, chapters, articles, and in increasing number electronic documents). Sociological bibliography can be searched separately in the catalogue, and in EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS).

As for the future, we try to strengthen the activity of the library in the field a sociology. We continue the collection of sociological bibliography, the digitization and the acquisition of traditional and electronic foreign periodicals and books. Our special opportunity in the near future is to create closer cooperation with other national special libraries in Hungary. One other task is to focus in a stronger way to scientific partners and organize more events (lectures, exhibitions etc.) in the topic of sociology.



Proportion of university and secondary school students in CL

⁶ 30/2014. (IV. 10.) EMMI rendelet az országos múzeum, az országos szakmúzeum, a nemzeti könyvtár, az országos szakkönyvtár és az állami egyetem könyvtárának kiemelt feladatairól. (30/2014. (IV. 10) EMMI order on the main tasks of the national museum, the country-wide special museum, the national library, the country-wide special library and the state university library) - <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1400030.EMM>

⁷ http://www.fszek.hu/english/?article_hid=9766

University library functions of Central Library

There is not any official document, which would declare that CL is a university library. As a matter of fact, it is not that, after all the maintainer is the Municipality of Budapest, and the tasks according to the Library Act include "only" public and special library obligation. But at the same time, the number of university students is almost the half of total registered users, and although the total number of users is decreasing, the proportion of university students is stabile.

Students from secondary schools came to visit the library in larger number than before, thanks to the special programmes organized by Central Library for them, and the frequent organized visit tours in the Palace for student groups.

It is a general experience that one part of university students uses library only as a learning place. That is why they need only a table, a chair and internet access, usually not important for them the library's PC, they use their own mobile equipments. These students don't use the collection of the library, but in the time of exams often visit it, and they are staying in the library from morning to night. In these periods CL is very crowded and busy. It is a new development that some years ago we opened a special room for them, assuring the common learning for groups.

At the same time, the other significant part of the users from universities definitely lay claim to the services of the library. They often borrow compulsory literature and therefore we have to purchase much more exemplars of these books than in a usual public library. Naturally this fact affects the budget of the library, it is much higher than it could be without this task. This claim also indicates that the most popular books for lending (except of bestsellers) are the basic handbooks of sociology and other social sciences.⁸ And the third indicator of this interest is that these books are very popular not only for borrowing, but for stealing, too (in spite of our strong security system).

One other consequence of the university library function is the intensive use of international databases. Besides of very important sociological databases (which results from the special library function of CL), we order some general content databases (e.g. EBSCO Academic Search Complete, Encyclopaedia Britannica, JSTOR), electronic collections from the field of humanities (e.g. Gale Literature Resource Center, Middle English Dictionary, Oxford Art Online and Oxford Music Online), and from the field of business (Emerging Markets Information Service/EMIS).

As for the future of university library function, it is not up to us. If the interest of students henceforward continues, CL will develop its services into this direction, too.

Summary

The different types of libraries supply various groups of people. In a usual case public libraries serve inhabitants of a city or other settlement with educational, entertaining, local and popular scientific literature and information. Academic libraries collect and serve scientific documents and information mostly for graduated persons: scientists, lecturers, professors and other seriously inquiring specialists. University libraries serve both students and lecturers of a given university, with special respect to the local and remote access of the information.

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Dippold Péter

dippold.peter@fszek.hu ■

(Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library)

⁸ e.g. Babbie, Earl R.: The practice of social research; Smith, Eliot R: Social psychology; Cole, Michael: developmental psychology; Berne, Eric: