INTRODUCTION

In 1985 a competition was held for a new public library to be constructed within the historic city center of Münster and would act as a major part of the city’s 1,200th anniversary. The competition requested a popular, active and open information center. (Sanin, 1994, pp. 5,24) Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson + Partner won this competition and in December of 1993 construction on the new Münster City Library was complete.

EXTENDED SPACE

The design of the Münster City Library reshapes and redefines the urban environment of the city center as well as the rest of the city. The city of Münster has many layers with complex relationships between them. The library integrates itself within the existing urban spaces in the historic city center and also extends its own spaces into the urban environment. The site is located near all major public spaces and monuments within the city. On the east and west sides of the building are two major streets that connect the site to the Promenade Park, the Alter Steinweg and Mauritzstrasse. (Sanin, 1994, pp. 8,9) In addition, Lamberti Church is located at the end of the axis created in between the two buildings that comprise the library.

The schism between the two buildings creates an outdoor public space with terraces at each end. The book building is more programmatically traditional with book stacks, reading rooms, etc, while on the information building (the more dominant building) houses modern digital information as well as the library’s more public spaces. A powerful axis starting at the apse of the Lamberti Church and travelling eastward is thus generated in between the two buildings. This pedestrian rout is called the Büchereigasse, or Library Alley. (Sanin, 1994, pp. 9-10) This space helps establish the Library in the urban context as it connects the library’s spaces with other important public spaces and urban elements in the city.
The flow of spaces is a significant part of the library’s design. The Münster City Library has many different spaces that interconnect and flow into each other. This flow is captured in a sense of moment throughout the library. The system of movement begins at the circulation desk in the information building. Beyond the circulation desk, one encounters the main public space within the information building reminiscent of a street arcade that has been sealed off from the outside. Furthermore, the book building is comprised of a series of fragmented spaces with an emphasis placed on movement and exploration. (Sanin, 1994, pp. 17-20) There is also a sense of flow and movement between the two buildings. They are connected through a bridge that runs over the Büchereigasse and they both share the same underground level which contributes to the system of movement in the library.

The main public rooms also act as spaces of movement (horizontal and vertical) that link the different levels and connect with the paths of the library. The two main public spaces within the building run parallel with the Büchereigasse and act as internalized versions of the Library Alley. In the information building, movement is horizontal and parallel with the Büchereigasse axis. In the book building, the movement in the main public space is vertical, up and down the stairs. (Sanin, 1994, pp. 13-15) Flow and movement of space also exists along the exterior. The Büchereigasse is a place of movement with no physical connection with the interior of the building. It is the center of the library but it serves to move people along the exterior space and to the off-axis entrance. (Sanin, 1994, p. 11)

A strong sense of flow exists between the exterior and the interior of the Münster City Library. The building acts as a major monument that allowed a flow between the urban environment an public life. (Sanin, 1994, p. 8) Flow between interior and exterior spaces exists at the entrance located at the end of the Büchereigasse nearest the Lamberti Church. An outdoor terrace at the entrance, called the Büchereiplatz, has a spatial connection with the interior as well as with the Büchereigasse. The foyer just inside the entrance and the outside are separated only by a glass wall and the floor is a continuation of the same granite paving that exists on the Büchereigasse. Furthermore, the copper roof that runs along the information building does not extend over the entrance, assisting in the spatial flow between outside to inside. And a skylight at the entrance also reinforces this flow. In addition, a café left of the interior foyer faces the outdoor terrace and has a strong connection with the outside, yet is separated by glass. From the café, one is close to but separate from those traversing the Büchereigasse. (Sanin, 1994, p. 16)
SPACE DEFINED BY INTANGIBLE QUALITIES

There are also intangible qualities that help define the spaces of the Münster City Library. For example, the two main interior public spaces (one within each building) are similar but have different qualities. This is due to the direction of flow within each of the main public spaces – as discussed previously, the flow is largely horizontal in the information building and vertical in the book building. This makes the main space in the information building more open and free while the main space in the book building feels fragmented, making it more formal and traditional. In addition, the basement spaces have their own intangible qualities. The character of these spaces is revealed through the qualities of the different pieces of furniture and the variation in the wall surfaces. For example, in the Mediathek, a place where one can experience audio and video material, the pieces of furniture have a vehicle-like form reminiscent of parade floats. (Sanin, 1994, pp. 18-19)
SMOOTH AND STRIATED IN THE CITY CONTEXT

The concept of smooth and striated space also helps us understand the spaces of the Münster City Library. Over the past centuries, various buildings of different uses have occupied the site of the library. (Sanin, 1994, p. 9) This reflects the history and evolution of Munster, but nothing has influenced its development in recent history more than World War II. For most of its history the city has existed in a striated state with well-defined edges and boundaries, a focus on the center of the city and strict organization imposed by sedentary people/governments/religious organizations. But on October 10th, 1943, 95% of Munster’s center was destroyed by allied forces air raids. This pushed Münster into a largely smooth state of existence that was disorganized and without any central leadership. After the end of the war many significant buildings were reconstructed in an attempt to preserve the historic center of the city. While the urban plan was closely preserved, much of the architecture within it was either not historically accurate or not reconstructed at all. (Sanin, 1994, p. 5) The city was built back into a striated state but with the reconstruction not 100% true, the historic city center retained some elements of a smooth landscape. The spaces of the Münster City Library are a reflection of the condition created from the change between striated and smooth. The library redefines the urban structure and speaks to both the repressed and explicit memories of the city’s history. (Sanin, 1994, p. 23) It attempts to make the center of Münster more cohesive but at the same time allowing greater flow. In other words, the Münster City Library attempts to harness a condition where the city is simultaneously smooth and striated.

References:
- All original images from “Münster City Library : Architektburo Bolles-Wilson + Partner”
At the scale of the building’s immediate site as well as its interior, the form of the Münster City Library by Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson + Partner establishes unique organizational systems and patterns of flow. At a larger scale, the library’s form is an attempt to unify the historic city center and establish a cohesive urban environment.

THE IMMEDIATE SITE

The site of the Münster City Library has several interesting patterns and systems that are established through its form. The form of the entire library is analogous to metabolic systems found in nature where individual elements assemble to create a more complex form. Library elements include the newspaper room, the café, the book stacks, the deliveries wing and the reading spaces. These areas can be seen as unique self-contained cells but if one or several of these elements were taken away the overall form of the library would feel unresolved and incomplete. When the assemblage of these elements is complete the library feels whole.

The relationship between these different elements is a kind of natural and organic system with soft boundaries between them that allows for fluidity, which takes form in the flow of people, flow of dialogue and the flow of information. With this pattern of transfer and flow, the interior form of the Münster City Library is comparable to the organizations and systems of nature (ie: the fundamental transfer and flow of energy and matter in nature). It is as if the library is an attempt to turn technology and architectural form into a more natural process.

The form of the Library Alley also creates a distinct pattern of flow and organizational system. The exterior roof-like shells of the library that runs adjacent to the alley are largely not perforated by windows and they have no entrances. Instead, they serve to keep the flow of pedestrian traffic moving through the alley and also directing people towards the entrance. In this rift between the two buildings, the library forms connections with its surrounding environment through a network of movement that flows through the alley, around the building and into the library itself.
THE GREATER CITY CENTER

The immediate library site works to create its own systems but the building also works with the existing systems in the city center of Münster in order to create a more cohesive urban environment. The form of the Münster City Library has a tremendous impact on it surroundings while at the same time the building is greatly influenced by the historic city center where it is situated. While modern architecture often fragments cities and society, the form of the library is a deliberate attempt to unify the urban environment.

CONNECTION WITH NATURAL SYSTEMS

Again, an analogy with nature becomes useful. In natural systems, as previously discussed, there are elements that are critical to the existence of the overall system. If one of these elements were examined on its own it would have little meaning. But when analyzed in the context of the entire system its significance becomes clear. The Münster City Library is one such element that when analyzed in the context of the city center it becomes clear how important it is. The library has made the surrounding urban fabric more tightly nit as it helps to establish a more natural and cohesive organization for the urban area. The library helps define the ‘urban organism’ as a complete and connected environment, as if it is mimicking a more natural environment.

In nature, connections between elements work to create strong and meaningful organizational systems and such connections are present in the Münster city center. The urban environment around the library does not feel like buildings have been arbitrarily or artificially placed, but instead they have been constructed so that there are links between them. The Münster City Library enhances these connections, whether they are physical, spatial or connections in terms of flow and movement. Such connections are established in the way the form of the library addresses the streets and pedestrian pathways, in the way the north side of the library integrates itself within existing urban buildings, in the way that east-west offset of two buildings responds to and influences flow, and in the way the library alley directs the flow and movement of people. If the library was removed, there would be a sense of an unnatural empty void in the city center.
connecting buildings designed by
Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson + Partner

integration with existing buildings

pedestrian and automobile accessibility

existing buildings

existing buildings

existing buildings
HISTORICAL CONNECTION

The form of the library was greatly influenced by the urban geography and historical stratification of Münster’s city center. The form of the library helps one consider the building and its urban surroundings as a whole, not just physically but also with respect to the passage of time. The past and present are reflected throughout the architecture of the historic city center as newer buildings are integrated with older ones. The Münster City Library is a perfect example of this as it is situated within a very old and established portion of Münster. The library’s form gives it a strong connection with the older buildings in the area, including a triangular urban block of buildings to its north and the much older Lamberti Church to the west. The Lamberti Church, as well as other historic sites such as the Cathedral of Saint Paul, the Prinzipalmarkt and the Promenade Park encircling the city center, are all connected to the library through the Library Alley’s powerful spatial axis created by the building’s exterior form. In order to try and unify the library with its surrounding architecture, the city itself, including its plan, becomes a crucial factor in deciding the form of the building. the library does not embrace mythical forms of the past nor nostalgia, it is a reaction to both the past and the present. Ultimately, the library may have a specific function but it relates to a continuing tradition of life in the Münster city center.

LIBRARY AS AN ACCESSIBLE FORM

Given that the library integrates itself within the existing urban fabric and enhances its connections, the building is not an imposing nor a dominating form. This is a public library that has been designed to invite and encourage people to experience it by utilizing a form that does not impose and that directs the flow of people around the building, through the Library Alley and towards the main entrance. It’s a form that initiates participation. Furthermore, the form does not generate any codified authority and individuals are largely free to experience the library as they choose. This creates not only a free-flow of human traffic but also a free-flow communication, dialogue, ideas and experience in and around the library.
Münster City Library
Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson + Partner
The Münster City Library relates to the body in several ways, including organic systems of organization, the movement away from strict logic, and the human body as part of the building’s spaces.

ORGANIC ORGANIZATION

While the foundation of western architecture lies in the rules established during the Renaissance and Classical periods, the Münster City Library does not follow a strict logic of human proportion laid out by Vitruvius. One might argue that the Library Alley is analogous to the human naval since it’s the central aspect of the building, as the naval is in the human body. But here the connection with the human body is a little more subtle.

If the body is a system of various proportions relating to each other, then this is certainly analogous to the design of the library. The body is an abstract system of formalization and this has been incorporated into the library’s architecture as form, evident in the building’s orders, hierarchies and organizations. The interior and exterior appearance of the building are arranged so that the members and passages are appropriately located, just as the interior and exterior members are correct for the human body. Specifically speaking, the internal spaces of the library are organized according to need, just as the internal parts of the body are organized. In the case of both the body and the library, each member is designed to serve its subsistence, harmony and government.
MOVEMENT BEYOND STRICT LOGIC

Instead of taking on Vitruvius’ strict proportional logic, the Münster City Library adopts the language of the historic city center where it is sited. The city center acts as a readable text that can be broken down into fragments, where each fragment can be broken down further. The library itself becomes one of these fragments. Furthermore, the library is influenced by the organization of the city center, where the library is a small city, the city is a big library and the library is made up of smaller libraries. And as the inner members of a city are organized according to need, so are the internals of the library, as previously mentioned. In addition, the Vitruvian man does have some influence since it can projected on the city center with the Cathedral of Saint Paul at the naval of the body. Here, the library is a member of this system of organization for the city center but it is not a literal and direct as other built environments influenced these Classical proportions.

As the library breaks from Vitruvian logic by drawing from the organization of the city, it has within its design a hint of surrealism. Andre Breton provides a definition for surrealism:

“The Surrealism, n. Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought’s dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.” (Breton, What is Surrealism?)
The library becomes a search for something more resourceful than logic that would give greater significance to life. Logic can restrict the imagination and limit our ability to dream and to think unfiltered. The library pushes back logic to reveal infinite possibilities in a concrete world where the goal is to reach physical and metaphysical satisfaction and a deeper and more passionate consciousness of the sensory world. This is all an attempt to create a closer relationship between the observer and the building.

BODY AS PART OF THE LIBRARY

When someone is in the Münster City Library, their body is not merely in space, it is part of it. Here, the body and the space they occupy are together treated as a holistic work of art, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In this manner, the ‘aura’ of the library is incommunicable by means other than experiencing it in person with the body and the space united. The aura in the library is a sense of something outside of our vision – qualities of the unseen that make the building more functional and meaningful. The spaces of the library ‘look back’ at the body, uniting the two.
EXTENDING HUMAN LIMITS

The library helps one widen their field of perception, allowing them to better experience the rest of the historic city center. Motor and perceptual habits help widen our field of experience, perception and sensation because they become extensions of our own body. The Münster City Library also becomes an extension of one’s own body as it draws from the organization and aura of the city center and allows someone to see the city’s language more clearly. The library is an example of how cybernetics and how the boundaries of the human body are constructed rather than given. Cybernetic systems are made up of flows of information, like the blind man’s cane acting as a conduit for information, and the library helps inform someone of their environment.
Münster City Library
Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson + Partner

TECHNIQUE
The Münster City Library by Architekturbüro Bolles-Wilson + Partner does not merely a form based entirely on function and efficiency. Instead, it is a building that departs from generalized modernist forms and harnesses rhythm and the informal in order to establish itself as something greater than science and logic.

BETWEEN SCIENCE AND METAPHYSICS

The library attempts to fill a rift that was created as logic and mathematics came to dominate aspects of modern architecture. In the same way that the library attempts to unite the urban fabric of the historic city center of Münster, it also acts to repair the rift between that which can be explained by science and that which cannot. Science cannot explain everything, including much of human behaviour. Furthermore, logic and theory cannot come to terms with reality. They can help define formal relations but do little to define a relation to the human body. The problem began with a shift in architectural practice from a holism that included mysticism to a technical challenge where all problems were ‘solved’ using numbers and geometry, and knowledge became systematized and mathematized. This was the divorce of metaphysics and science, of thinking and doing. Technological theory alone cannot come to terms with the fundamental problems of architecture. In light of these issues, the library is an example of architecture that bridges the gap between science and metaphysics. It tries to provide a greater meaning to architecture, as it is not obsessed with formalism or design without inner significance.
ARCHITECTURAL POETICS

The Münster City Library is bigger than science and logic as it embodies architectural poetics. In the way that art often cannot be reduced to mathematics and logic, neither can the library. Symbolism and metaphor are important in the library, which are concepts that cannot be defined by science. For example, the ‘guardian’ statue just outside the entrance acts as a symbol of transition between inside and out. It is a gate-like sculpture that people must pass through in order to enter the interior of the library. In addition, there are other figurative elements including a 7m tall sculpture of an abstracted human figure entitled “Uberfrau” that stands along the axis of the Library Alley and represents the relationship between body and architecture. The library is not only perceived by the mind, as it can be expressed on paper, but it is also perceived by the body, a process which cannot be calculated or quantified. And it was not designed as a formal exercise to be marveled at by designers, but instead it was made as an expression of Münster to be experienced by anyone. Meaning within the library is not something that has been calculated or derived from numbers.
RHYTHM AND THE INFORMAL

The method in which the library acquires meaning and inner significance is through the employment of the informal. In this strategy, there are no distinct rules and rhythm and variation reign supreme. This is particularly evident in the use and choice of materials. Much of the interior and exterior surfaces are fairly smooth and lightly coloured, but the use of materials such as tile, timber and copper are used effectively to create rhythm and variation. The inside panels of the Library Alley shell are made of timber and furniture, along with other interior details, are also made of wood. Furthermore, the exterior portion of the shell is made of copper sheeting, a material that is helps define the Library Alley as well as the entire building. The copper sheeting helps establish the powerful axis which runs along the pedestrian alleyway and copper is used in other portions of the exterior. In addition, paving used in both the interior and exterior at the entrance of the library add another layer of variation and rhythm. The interior foyer and the outside terrace are separated only by glass and both spaces have the same small granite paving. And the interior walls here are coated in white plaster similar in texture and grain to the exterior. This use of various materials is part of the informal nature of the library, and compliments other informal features of the buildings such as the Library Alley shell which breaks from tradition and acts as both a roof and a wall simultaneously. The interior exposure of the rib structure that supports the shell is also informal design. The library is not fixed nor predictable and it is defined by its rhythm and informal composition taken as a whole.
As previously touched upon, the design of the Münster City Library is a clear departure from modernist form. To begin with, the library does not subscribe to a rigid Cartesian skeleton. The right angle still finds a home in the design of the library but there is not a strict or imposed grid of boxes. But the library’s move away from such an arrangement does not leave it with forms that approach meaningless sculpture – they are still highly functional as well as contain meaning. And instead of neutral spaces of steel, concrete and glass often seen in modern architecture, the surfaces, shapes and materials give substance to the form. In this way, the rooms are not ‘empty’ forms created merely to delineate space. At times the goal is a rigid delineation of space (interior and exterior), but on many occasions there is an attempt the blur boundaries and create flow between compartments, such as at the entrance where the exterior terrace blends into the interior foyer. The makeup of the library is more like a mix between order and chaos where internal improvisation and rhythms create a coherent overall form. The building has an intuitive rational that breaks free from a cage of restrictions and creates potential for events and interactions.