

Newspaper Article from DER TAGESSPIEGEL - Science

Testing the New "Stabi" Reading Room

Nice work in the orange crate

3 April 2013 10:46 am by **Anna-Lena Scholz**

Free access. The open staircase leading up to the research reading room in the Berlin State Library Unter den Linden is impressive but also carries noise upwards. - PHOTO: MIKE WOLFF

Fancy chairs, fast scanners, but few quiet areas: We put working in the new research reading room at the Berlin State Library (German: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin) through its paces.

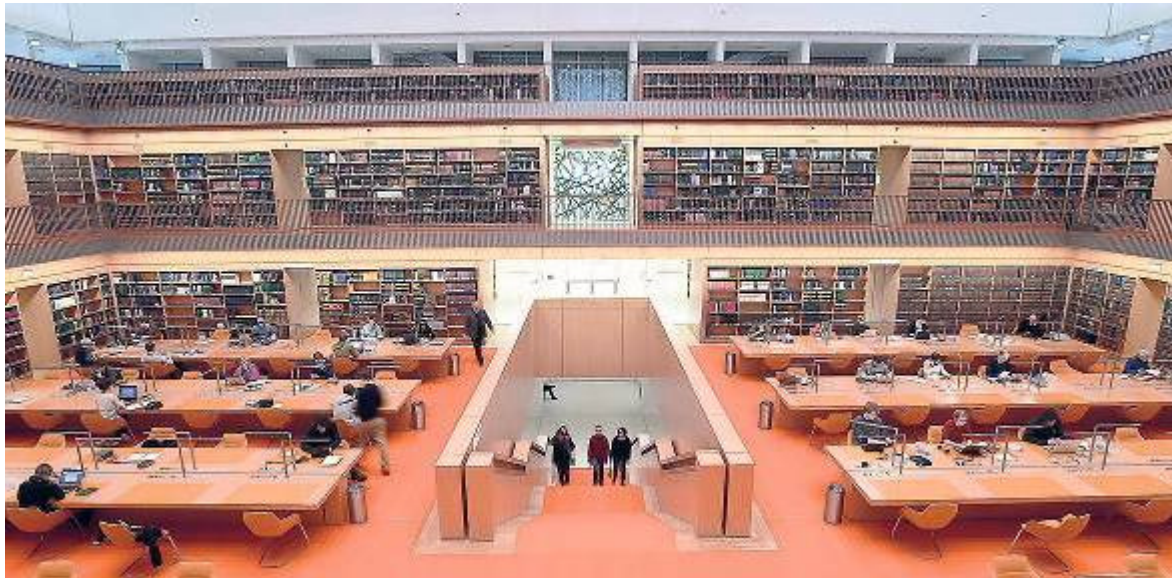


PHOTO: MIKE WOLFF

Free access. The open staircase leading up to the research reading room in the Berlin State Library Unter den Linden is impressive but also carries noise upwards.

Orange is on trend this season. And if you want to be happy in Berlin State Library's new reading room, you'd better make sure it's a colour you can live with permanently. With its orange carpet, seat covers, work surfaces and shelving in brownish-orange wood tones it looks like a giant orange crate. If you prefer the colours in your working environment to harmonise, then you'd better not turn up in a pink jumper. But, then again, isn't there a clichéd professor out and about in his brown cord jacket anyway?



On loan. The core business of an academic library already runs smoothly. - PHOTO: MIKE WOLFF

In any case, since opening on 21st March, the first users have taken possession of the reading room, marking out their territory with laptops, notebooks, copied articles and stacks of books. The individual workspaces are enormous, providing plenty of space to spread out. Rubberised surfaces have been recessed into all the wooden tables so that it almost feels as though you are sitting at your own private desk. Electrical sockets and laptop locks are now standard - and very easy to use here. If you have ever banged your head against the clunky lamps adorning tables at the competing State Library on Potsdamer Platz, you will certainly appreciate the addition of swivel-mounted lights, a lifesaving feature for reflective monitor screens. However, soft lighting it certainly is not.

But the real hit has to be the seating: softly upholstered cantilevered chairs - also perfect for an evening in front of the telly. But isn't the 50s look just a little bit retro? And your spine might have a thing or two to say on the matter. Never mind, comfort's the main thing!

The temperature in the hall is also pleasant. It's not draughty, hardly anybody's wrapped in the obligatory scarf so typical of many libraries. Fluffy carpeting keeps the feet warm. The level of noise is a matter of taste. After all, we are talking about a large hall stretching a good thirty metres in length with lofty heights and an open staircase to boot. Business at the room's information desk is conducted respectfully, but still audibly. And initially spectators keep on trickling into the hall, letting out an enthusiastic "Aaah!". Many of the first-time visitors wander around the room inquisitively, exploring the side corridors of this cube building designed by the architect HG Merz. 130,000 books stand to attention in the open stacks as though lined up with a ruler, not a speck of dust can be seen, a few labels on the front of the bookshelves are the only things missing. Up on the balustrade, a few whispered impressions are exchanged.

Overall, the atmosphere reigning over the new reading room is one of concentration. But for those who desire absolute silence, a spot in the State Library West - full of nooks and crannies - might well be a better bet.

Hmm, the other "Stabi" (as the State Libraries are commonly known)! Berlin's scientific community is divided: "The hall hasn't won my heart", says one man who has made a special journey to try out working in the library. Its square, cuboid appearance appears to him to be too monumental, "the angles too sharp" compared to the gently terraced construction of the Scharoun building in the Potsdamer Strasse. A female PhD student sees it differently: The staircase leading up to the reading room - "brings home that this is a state library", she says. Its elevated heights and airy feel appeal to her. And even nostalgic doubters have to admit one thing: The book scanners in the new building are state of the art.

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"No pens in the reading room" - the ban is undermined

Classic copy machines have broken the back of many a book, as a result many libraries have introduced scanners such as these over the years. The machines scan the open pages from above, automatically formatting them into a DIN A4 size and store them as PDF files onto USB sticks specifically brought along for the purpose. The scanners at the Philological Library of the Free University and at the Grimm Centre of Humboldt University have been in operation for a number of years already but in terms of technology and design they are not a patch on the new State Library models. Copying has never been as elegant as with these devices with their glass touchpads. Anybody can have their scans printed out in the in-house copyshop if they like but many a laptop already has its own small PDF library stored on its hard drive.

The smattering of notebooks and pens alongside the laptops provides evidence that digital archives cannot replace scientific handiwork. On using the chip card to pass through the security gate, the large information notice garners many an irritated glance: House rules state "no ballpoints, felt-tips or fountain pens and markers are permitted in the reading room" - to protect the valuable stocks, so they say. "Post-its and even scissors, glue and hand cream" are also prohibited. This makes it sound as though scientists are particularly prone to handicrafts. Casting an eye over the research fraternity reveals the group are confidently overriding the various bans. A pen is used to quickly jot down a flash of genius, here and there a post-it is used. The ban on drinking water in the reading room is soon to be officially lifted by the library management. Users had convinced them that a drinking ban is no longer in tune with the times, says General Director Barbara Schneider-Kempf.

The only thing really missing to truly make the city's research body feel at home is a cafeteria. But this isn't on the cards until 2016 when the general redevelopment of the State Library Unter den Linden has been completed. Until then, you'll have to pay 50 cents for a beaker of some hot caffeine-containing liquid at a vending machine located in the temporary foyer and take this to your table. The whole of the temporary entrance area is decked out in a garish light-green colour, the major construction site lies behind its thin walls.

Still, the academic library's core business has run smoothly right from the first few days. Book orders and loans run like clockwork and are usually accompanied by a friendly smile. "With the opening, we have switched from a minor key to a major key", says Schneider-Kempf.

However, the financial expense of having reading rooms designed by star architects, the enthusiastic opening with its attendant high-profile publicity, is an eloquent sign that the mere quantity of the book stock - here at least eleven million volumes - is nowadays only half the story. Libraries are the high altars of reading in this modern age, providing a stage for the scientific community, a place where learning and thinking can be generated and discussed, a place where analog and digital media can coalesce. A library must adapt itself to these needs, as well as being a place where you want to work, it must also be a place where you want to spend some time.

The reading room gradually calms down, the rush of curious onlookers slows down after a few days. The mix of quiet typing and scribbling creates a studious atmosphere. The congestion at the Grimm Centre just around the corner almost suggests evasive movements are going on but it again just demonstrates that each library has its own clientèle. True, anybody can acquire a pass to the State Library but there is still an automatic segregation going on. Go-getting bachelor students get together in the university libraries, whereas the State Library is home to the more bourgeois routine researcher - and those aspiring so to be.