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#### **Library building projects in Estonia**

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Changes is the key word describing the development of librarianship in independent Estonia during the past decade.

After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, our society, nation and state underwent profound social, political and economic changes; libraries and librarians were no exception in this process. Our ideologically regulated and inflexible libraries started to form into open and user friendly information, recreation, educational and cultural centres. State-funded libraries began to develop into a proactive, innovative and creative library paradigm. Step by step our traditional library education was shaped into modern curriculum of library and information management, and deeply centralised decision making was replaced by setting each library decentralised responsibilities according to their profile and performance.

Already before the Estonian Republic re-established it's independence, Estonian library specialists started to design a concept of the development of Estonian libraries in the conditions of independent democratic state. A number of conflicts and obstacles were pointed out, having negative impact on library work and hampering future activities:

- politisation
- inadequate tangible property and economic resources

Year	Total number	Research and special libraries	Public libraries	School libraries
1995	1284	141	604	539
1996	1277	125	603	549
1997	1277	115	602	560
1998	1273	103	599	571
1999	1253	94	597	562
2000	1220	93	585	542
2001	1183	89	578	516
2002	1182	83	576	523
2003	1176	80	573	523
2004	1151	75	564	512

- conflict between publication activities and the corresponding needs
- administrative division of the library system
- restrictions on the use of book collections
- conflict between the growing quantity of documents and the quality of access
- unified and inflexible library work processes and methods.

The idea of a major programme of IFLA - “Universal access to publications (UAP)” - was set up as the goal of library activities in Estonia: maximum full availability of all publications for all potential users, no matter where and when these documents are needed.

At the beginning of the 1990s Estonian libraries were influenced on one hand by the economic pressure and on the other hand by fast reforms in administration, economy, education, etc. which started to endanger the further existence of several libraries. The Ministry of Culture who implemented library policy on the national level had to find the most optimum solutions for the reorganisation of library network, keeping in mind user needs for library services and the expanding cooperation and coordination between different types of libraries. The assignment of public libraries to the administration of local governments was among the most complicated processes which was undoubtedly supported by the Public Libraries Act (1992) and the corresponding secondary legislation.

I would hereby like to give you some background information on Estonian libraries, serving primarily our population of slightly over 1,4 million:

The network of public libraries was preserved almost intact due to the timely adoption of the Public Libraries Act and to the development of public libraries into centres of local cultural and educational life. Local administrations faced a serious challenge, having to decide whether they would value knowledge and information and thus invest in libraries, or pass unpopular decisions and close them. A number of decisions on closing down public libraries were annulled under the strong opposition of local population, sometimes creating a serious crisis in the relations between the local community and local government administration. The Ministry of Culture had an important role in these conflicts by executing legal supervision and conducting negotiations.

The history of the Estonian book and Estonian libraries dates back for centuries – the first public library was opened in 1860 and the first Public Libraries Act entered into force in 1925. Yet the primary problem of libraries in newly independent Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s was their tangible resources (buildings, equipment, lack of information and communication technology, etc). Development gap with Western-Europe was 30 years, if not more. Today the situation is totally different. In recent past, the key word for library development has been “library buildings”, especially where public libraries are concerned. Since 1991, the buildings of nearly four hundred Estonian libraries (mostly public libraries) are brand new constructions or have undergone profound renovation.

What was the reason for this notable change?

Maybe the first impulse was the opening of the National Library of Estonia which started to serve readers in its new building on 27 February 1993, being the largest library in the Baltic states with total floor space of over 43 000 square metres. Another impact may have been the fact that many libraries were operating in buildings subject to returning to their pre-war owners. This situation is familiar in all former socialist countries – hundreds of libraries located in buildings which before the nationalisation were owned by private persons, and were to be returned to their former owners, thus leaving libraries homeless.

So in 1993-1994 many Estonian libraries faced the same problem brought along by the process of returning property to legitimate owners or their legal heirs. Nearly 100 libraries faced the need to move out and settle in new premises, probably in many cases unsuitable and more cramped than the previous ones.

The first to face the difficult situation were central county libraries in towns. 10 county libraries out of 20 were located in buildings which were subject to returning to their previous owners. A large number of town, rural municipality and village libraries were in the same sad situation.

During 1992 to 1998 I worked in the Ministry of Culture as an adviser on libraries. I was convinced that not only was it necessary to find other premises for libraries but they also needed modern working conditions. This required money. It was possible to apply for certain resources from the privatisation fund but these sums were far from being sufficient. Thus I set an aim for myself to work out a financing scheme which would develop into a programme of constructing new library buildings, including not only libraries which were deprived of their buildings but ensuring up-to-date working

environment for all libraries. I also understood for carrying out this plan it was important to involve politicians as key persons who could use the positive image of opening new library buildings for raising their own political rating. In the summer of 1994, the post of the Minister of Culture and Education was assigned to Peeter Olesk, a man of great respect for books and libraries. He gave an overview to the Government of the problems related to library premises, and achieved the allocation of the first millions of Estonian kroons from the state budget for the programme of library buildings.

The political lesson here is also worth attention. Why did the programme succeed? From the Ministry's point of view – which is always political - it was a major and clearly visible contribution to something important: reading and the Estonian language. This is always an important issue in a newly independent country. In other words, it gave political profit. The Ministers were changing, but the programme was still attractive enough to get the support of all new Ministers, representing different political parties.

It was also very important to involve local governments in the funding. Therefore they were offered a deal: in the first years, the Ministry paid 50% of all costs, provided that the local governments paid the other half. During the last years of the 1990s the share of costs was changed: the local communities constructed the buildings and the Ministry paid for all that was inside the new libraries: library materials, information technology, etc. Here we can also observe the political element: a local politician gets credit by erecting a public building and thus providing work on local level. So the programme introduced the issue of political profit also at the local level. Thus was the financing scheme set up for constructing and renovating library buildings: state privatisation fund, state budget and financial support from local governments.

I nearly acquired the second profession during the next years, having to delve into the details of library constructing. I studied everything connected with library buildings and equipment in order to be able to make fair decisions on dividing the allocated resources between libraries. I travelled throughout the country, inspected the buildings offered to libraries for renovation, convinced county and rural municipality leaders to contribute to the renovation or new building, held discussions with architects and interior designers, etc. This work gave good results and the newly opened libraries created positive atmosphere both on the local and national level. Hundreds of libraries got new and better premises, and politicians raised their popularity among their electors.

There has even been occasional competition between local governments – who has the largest number of new or renovated beautiful library buildings. Politicians started to receive their guests on library premises – this had never happened before in Estonia although has been quite common practice in the Scandinavian countries, for example. Several libraries got new premises in the buildings of local governments, kindergartens or schools which greatly facilitated their co-operation with other local institutions. In many cases the newly opened building has transformed a traditional library into a local cultural and information centre where visitors not only use library services but communicate, study, use the Internet (today all Estonian public libraries have access to the Internet).

To sum up – in Estonia there has been successful co-operation both between the state and local governments as well as between library specialists and politicians. As a result of this co-operation nearly 400 libraries have got new or renovated premises. Today all county libraries are working in modern conditions, only a dozen small libraries are still waiting for a solution to the problem of their buildings. However, today we can forget the uncertainty of the first years of the programme and be absolutely confident that their dreams will come true.