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JAKUB ŚWIERZAWSKI
ORCID: 0000-0003-3878-0500
Academy of Silesia, Poland

# ATMOSPHERE AND SYMBOLISM OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY ARCHITECTURE. CASE STUDIES FROM TÜBINGEN, VANCOUVER AND AMSTERDAM

# ATMOSFERA I SYMBOLIKA ARCHITEKTURY BIBLIOTEK AKADEMICKICH. STUDIA PRZYPADKÓW W TYBINDZE, VANCOUVER I AMSTERDAMIE

Abstract

This paper examines academic libraries created through extension or adaptive reuse projects, focusing on how relationships between historic architectural fabric, contemporary forms, and transformed functions influence users' perception of space. Architectural perception extends beyond the sensory reception of form. It engages memory and knowledge in the interpretation of architectural symbolism and encompasses the emotionally perceived atmosphere of a place. Different strategies of architectural transformation and user experience are discussed through three case studies:
– the University Library in Tübingen, developed through successive extensions between 1912 and 2011;
– the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, created through the transformation of a 1925 building and completed in 2008;
– the University of Amsterdam Library, established within a former hospital complex dating from 1900 and 1914 and opened in 2025.

Keywords: *academic libraries, academic library architecture, adaptive-reuse, contemporary architecture, perception of architectural space*

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje architekturę bibliotek akademickich, które powstały poprzez rozbudowę lub adaptacje i w których relacje między historyczną tkanką architektoniczną, współczesną formą i zmienioną funkcją wpływają na sposób percepcji przestrzeni przez użytkownika. Percepcja architektury nie ogranicza się do odbioru formy zmysłami. Angażuje pamięć i wiedzę użytkownika w odczytaniu symboliki budynku i obejmuje również odbieraną emocjonalnie atmosferę miejsca. Różne strategie przekształcania zabudowy oraz kształtowania doświadczenia użytkownika przedstawiono na przykładzie trzech realizacji:
– Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej w Tybindze, rozwijanej etapami w latach 1912–2011,
– Irving K. Barber Learning Centre na University of British Columbia w Vancouver, powstałego w 2008 roku z przekształcenia budynku z 1925 roku,
– Biblioteki Uniwersytetu w Amsterdamie, zrealizowanej w dawnym kompleksie szpitalnym z lat 1900 i 1914, otwartej w 2025 roku.

Słowa kluczowe: *adaptive-reuse, architektura bibliotek akademickich, architektura współczesna, biblioteki akademickie, percepcja architektury*

## 1. SYMBOLISM AND ATMOSPHERE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Academic libraries are evolving from traditional repositories of knowledge into multifunctional spaces for learning, collaboration and social life. This shift is linked to digital technologies, changing educational models and the expectations of students and academic staff. Functional change is accompanied by architectural and urban transformations that shape both user experience and the library's relationship with the campus and the city[1]. At the same time, the significance of academic library architecture extends beyond purely functional value[2]. In studies of library space, academic libraries are often described as the symbolic "heart of the university" – a recognisable landmark of the campus, associated with intellectual development and student life. This perception is reflected not only in research involving librarians but also in institutional disputes, where student marches and protests have taken place in library-related spaces, as seen at Columbia in 2025[3]. The atmosphere of reading rooms and the overall character of a library also shape the reading experience. Research has shown that monumental architecture associated with the "temple of knowledge" evokes positive emotions and associations with wisdom and learning[4]. The conditions created by architecture can either support or hinder library activities. Reading, contemplation, conversation, meetings and learning engage the senses, while differently designed spaces foster different forms of experience. As the neuroscientist Michael Arbib argues, the experience of architecture extends beyond sensory perception to engage memory and emotion, and is closely linked to symbolism and atmosphere[5]. Symbolism refers to a system of meanings and symbols understood within a community capable of interpreting them. Atmosphere, by contrast, is experienced subjectively as an emotional response to architectural form and environmental conditions[6].

## 2. METHODS AND SCOPE

Drawing on the practice of reusing written material, Rodolfo Machado (1976) describes architectural adaptation as a "palimpsest" in which successive layers of history, form and

[1] J. Świerzawski et al., *Academic Libraries and Urban Revitalization: Four Academic Libraries in Wrocław*, "Teka Komisji Urbanistyki i Architektury Oddziału Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Krakowie" 2025, no. 53, pp. 160–161, https://doi.org/10.24425/tkuia.2025.157373 (access: 21.10.2026).

[2] J. Świerzawski, *Academic Libraries: Contemporary Architecture and User Experience. Case Studies from the Czech Republic*, [in:] D. Winnicka-Jasłowska, S. Widzisz-Pronobis (eds.), *Space – Technologies – Society. Directions of Scientific Research in Contemporary Architecture and Urban Planning*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2026, p. 204.

[3] D. Leorke, D. McNeill, D. Rogers, *Campus, Collections, and the Student: A Spatial Ontology of the University Library*, "Studies in Higher Education" 2026, pp. 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2026.2618484 (access: 21.10.2026).

[4] H.L. Jackson, T.B. Hahn, *Serving Higher Education's Highest Goals: Assessment of the Academic Library as Place*, "College & Research Libraries" 2011, no. 72(5), pp. 428–442, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl-123 (access: 21.10.2026).

[5] M.A. Arbib, *When Brains Meet Buildings: A Conversation between Neuroscience and Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, pp. 362–364.

[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 366–371.

meaning overlap and coexist, creating new spatial value[7]. For this reason, the role of symbolism and atmosphere in academic libraries created through extension or adaptive reuse is examined through three case studies:

- the University Library in Tübingen, developed between 1912 and 2011;
- the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, created in 2008 through the transformation of a 1925 building;
- the University of Amsterdam Library, established within a former hospital complex dating from 1900 and 1914 and opened in 2025.

The buildings were analysed through a review of the literature, supplemented by in situ research conducted by the author in Vancouver in 2024 and Tübingen in 2026 as part of ongoing research on academic library architecture. This research focused on spatial organisation, materials, lighting, perceived acoustic conditions and the atmosphere of interiors, which are difficult to assess from published sources.

## 3. THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IN TÜBINGEN

The University of Tübingen was founded in 1477, and the first records of its library date from 1499. Today, the University Library comprises four buildings: the *Bonatzbau* (1912) and the *Main Building* (1963) on Wilhelmstraße, as well as the *Ammerbau* (2002) and the *Old Laundry* (1931) on the opposite side of the River Ammer. The buildings are linked by steel-and-glass connectors, and moving between them reveals successive stages in the library's development. Each retains its own character and atmosphere, shaped by both its period of construction and its original function. Within a single complex, users encounter a range of spatial settings, from a historic reading room and contemporary learning spaces to interiors of an industrial character[8].

The historic *Bonatzbau* (designed by P. Bonatz) is rich in symbolism. Its stone neoclassical façade, featuring a portal, the coat of arms of Württemberg, and reliefs of scholars and writers, including Leibniz and Plato, gives the building a representative character. Its most significant interior is the historic reading room, preserved largely in its original form. The room features an ornate stucco ceiling, a wooden gallery running along the walls, and a niche framed by two travertine columns. Above the niche is a mural by Karl Schmoll von Eisenwerth depicting Odysseus offering a sacrifice to the dead in Book XI of the Odyssey, at the entrance to the underworld[9].

The *Main Building*, designed by Universitätsbauamt Tübingen, was completed in 1963. Its modernist form and glass façade contrast with the historic Bonatzbau. A large reading room with a mezzanine echoed the layout of Bonatz's reading room. In 2010–2011, the building was refurbished to a design by Bloss + Keinath Architekten, converting the former reading room into the main lending area and introducing a new circulation core with a lift. The building serves as the library's principal circulation hub, linking the remaining buildings via a bridge

[7] B. Plevoets, K. van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline*, Routledge, London–New York 2019, pp. 15.

[8] *In situ* research by Jakub Świrzawski, March 2026.

[9] Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, *Der Bonatzbau der Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen: Informationsbroschüre* [information brochure], Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, January 2024.

spanning the River Ammer. A partially visible automated book transport system operates between the buildings.

Built between 1999 and 2002, the *Ammerbau* extended the University Library across the Ammer Canal. Its comb-shaped plan accommodates contemporary library spaces with open-access collections as well as areas for individual and group study. The red-brick façade is articulated by loggias and horizontal window bands, while the interiors are distinguished by large fields of colour. Unlike the historic parts of the complex, the *Ammerbau* has a distinctly contemporary character shaped by the needs of today's academic environment[10].



Ill. 1. The *Bonatzbau* reading room. Photo: J. Świerzawski, 2026

In the 1990s, the former *Old Laundry*, a service building dating from 1931, was adapted for library use and linked to the *Ammerbau* by a connector in 2005. The former laundry hall now houses journal collections and quiet study areas. A steel structure inserted into the interior creates an additional level for shelving and users while preserving the space's industrial character. Exposed building services, ventilation ducts and large windows give the interior a raw, austere atmosphere[11].

[10] *Ammerbau*, "TUEpedia", https://www.tuepedia.de/wiki/Ammerbau (access: 16.03.2026).

[11] *Alte Waschhalle*, "Universität Tübingen", https://uni-tuebingen.de/einrichtungen/universitaetsbibliothek/ueber-uns/profil-mission/gebaeude-und-kunstwerke/alte-waschhalle/ (access: 16.03.2026); *In situ* research by Jakub Świerzawski, March 2026.

## 4. IRVING K. BARBER LEARNING CENTRE

The Irving K. Barber Learning Centre extends the 1925 Main Library and occupies a central position on the University of British Columbia campus. Its contemporary volume wraps around a preserved section of the original building, creating a dialogue between historic and modern architecture. Despite extensive redevelopment, the site's historic identity remains clearly legible[12].



Ill. 2. Irving K. Barber Learning Centre. Photo: J. Świerzawski, 2024

The campus is located outside central Vancouver, on a site to which thousands of students marched in 1922, demanding the construction of a full university campus. The Main Library was one of the first three buildings erected there. Designed in the Late Tudor Revival style, it features two façade reliefs referencing the debate over the teaching of evolution: a figure labelled "funda" and a monkey labelled "evol"[13]. The main reading hall was designed for individual study, as were smaller, richly decorated reading rooms surrounded by book stacks and storage areas.

In 2002, a donation from Irving K. Barber enabled a major redevelopment of the library, transforming it into a Learning Centre. While the central part of the historic building was

[12] *In situ* research by Jakub Świerzawski, February 2024.

[13] *Building History and Highlights*, "The University of British Columbia", 3.09.2025, https://ikblc.ubc.ca/spaces/building-history-and-highlights/ (access: 13.06.2026).

preserved, most wings and interiors were extensively altered. The result is a space combining library, educational and social functions. Bright, open interiors and integrated artworks contribute to a calm atmosphere for learning. Alongside areas for quiet study, the building provides spaces for group work, events, a café and informal gathering, balancing focused study with the more social character of contemporary learning environments. The building's most distinctive interior is the Chapman Learning Commons, housed within the historic reading hall. This monumental space recalls the great university reading rooms of the past. Its character is defined by exposed oak roof trusses, stained-glass crests of Canadian and British universities, and restored windows[14]. Today, the former reading hall provides space for individual and group study, blending the atmosphere of a historic library with the functions of a contemporary learning environment.

## 5. THE UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM LIBRARY

The building complex that now houses the University of Amsterdam Library originated as part of the Binnengasthuis medical complex in the city centre. The former Second Surgical Clinic and Nurses' Home were built in 1900 and 1914 respectively and remained in medical use until the 1980s. Archaeological investigations in the courtyard also uncovered the remains of a sixteenth-century plague hospital. The original plan called for the demolition of the existing buildings and the construction of a new facility. Instead, the project adopted a strategy of adapting the historic structures and complementing them with contemporary architecture. Opened in 2025, the library now serves as a meeting place for students, staff and researchers in the heart of the city[15].

Designed by MVSA, the project combines adapted historic buildings with new structures unified by a roof spanning the former courtyard. Differences in the height of the existing buildings shaped the form of the canopy, conceived as a freestanding steel structure inspired by the geometry of a leaf. The resulting atrium serves as a multifunctional space for study, meetings, events and exhibitions. The library's remaining functions are arranged around it, while selected historic interiors have been retained, including a former operating theatre adapted for new use. At the centre of the atrium stands a sculptural staircase known as the *Tree of Wisdom*. Bridges and circulation routes extend from the atrium, linking the various parts of the complex. The contrast between the historic façades and contemporary interior elements is among the building's most distinctive features[16].

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[14] S. Neame, C. Lomas, *University of British Columbia: Irving K. Barber Learning Centre*, [in:] D. Oblinger (ed.), *Learning Spaces*, "EDUCAUSE", Boulder 2006, pp. 38.1–38.8, https://www.educause.edu/research-and-publications/books/learning-spaces (access: 22.06.2026); *Building History...*, *op. cit*.

[15] C. Higa, *The University of Amsterdam's New Library Brings Heritage Architecture to New Generations*, "Frame", 3.09.2025, https://frameweb.com/article/institutions/the-university-of-amsterdams-new-library-brings-heritage-architecture-to-new-generations (access: 22.06.2026); MVSA Architects, *Amsterdam University Library*, "MVSA", 11.11.2025, https://mvsa-architects.com/en/projects/amsterdam-university-library/ (access: 22.06.2026).

[16] H.A. Jahn, *Neue Universitätsbibliothek in Amsterdam: Lesen, wo früher Pestkranke lagen*, "nextroom", https://www.nextroom.at/actor.php?id=99049 (access: 30.04.2026); C. Higa, *op. cit.*; MVSA Architects, *op. cit.*




Ill. 3. The University of Amsterdam Library. Photo: Milliped, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=180895233 edited by J. Świerzawski

The façade of the new wing takes the form of an openwork screen composed of three-dimensional letters. Together, they spell out a quotation from Martinus Nijhoff's poem "Awater": "But do read, it doesn't say what it says". The text appears in 24 languages and six writing systems, reflecting the languages taught by the University of Amsterdam's Faculty of Humanities. The façade was developed through a collaboration between the architects and the typographer Erik van Blokland[17].

[17] Universiteit van Amsterdam, *Facadescreen University Library*, "University of Amsterdam", 17.07.2025, https://www.uva.nl/en/news-events/news/features/facadescreen-university-library.html (access: 22.06.2026); MVSA Architects, *op. cit.*

## 6. CONCLUSION

The concepts of symbolism and atmosphere shape the experience of architecture and are closely associated with academic libraries. Symbolism relates to the library's social and institutional role as the "heart of the university", while atmosphere concerns the individual experience of space during study, reading and other forms of intellectual work. In the examples discussed, both were shaped through design decisions and conveyed through architectural form, functional organisation and the relationship between historic and contemporary layers of architecture. Movement through the building also influences the sequence in which users encounter spaces and their associated meanings.

Adaptive reuse does not necessarily diminish the symbolic dimension of architecture. In Tübingen, symbolism is expressed through the mural and representations of scholars; in Vancouver, through reliefs referring to debates about science and the preserved historic reading hall; and in Amsterdam, through the *Tree of Wisdom* and the façade. At the same time, historic reading rooms, contemporary learning spaces, and adapted industrial or hospital interiors create distinct atmospheres of use. The relationship between historic and contemporary architectural layers can contribute to the atmosphere of a place and shape how users experience and interpret it.

These observations do not exhaust the subject. Rather, they point towards further research on the role of symbolism and atmosphere in academic library architecture and their influence on user perception and experience.

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[2] *Ammerbau*, "TUEpedia", https://www.tuepedia.de/wiki/Ammerbau (access: 16.03.2026).

[3] Arbib M.A., *When Brains Meet Buildings: A Conversation between Neuroscience and Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021.

[4] *Building History and Highlights*, "The University of British Columbia", 3.09.2025, https://ikblc.ubc.ca/spaces/building-history-and-highlights/ (access: 13.06.2026).

[5] Higa C., *The University of Amsterdam's New Library Brings Heritage Architecture to New Generations*, "Frame", 3.09.2025, https://frameweb.com/article/institutions/the-university-of-amsterdams-new-library-brings-heritage-architecture-to-new-generations (access: 22.06.2026).

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[7] Jahn H.A., N*eue Universitätsbibliothek in Amsterdam: Lesen, wo früher Pestkranke lagen*, "nextroom.at", https://www.nextroom.at/actor.php?id=99049 (access: 30.04.2026).

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[14] Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, *Der Bonatzbau der Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen: Informationsbroschüre*, Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, January 2024.
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Author's Note

**Jakub Świerzawski, PhD, Architect**

A researcher and dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Applied Arts at the Academy of Silesia (Katowice, Poland). His research focuses on contemporary architectural theory, with particular interests in academic library architecture, adaptive reuse, and sustainable built environments. He is a co-founder of the Zero-Emission Built Environments and Heritage Research Alliance (ZEBRA), an international research network linking scholars from Poland and the United States. Together with Nina Juzwa, he co-authored *Thoughts, Dreams, Places: Polish Architecture in Contemporary Innovation* (NIAiU, 2021; Routledge, 2024), which received the 2022 Vitruvius Prize of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Ministerial Award for outstanding architectural publications. His doctoral dissertation on *Curvilinearity in Architecture*, received an award from the Polish Ministry of Investment and Development in 2019.

jakub.swierzawski@akademiaslaska.pl