

## Cities, Libraries, Universities: crashing the fences

**Antonella Agnoli**

We live in a time of walls, barriers, fences. By now we are more familiar with the barbed wire than with the zebra crossing. The ancients used to say: “the air of the city makes free”; today we look for freedom in the *gated communities*, in the streets defended by the army, in the shadow of monitoring cameras. What happened? This process of separation is visible also in the institutions: libraries where entrance is allowed only with a badge, universities with effectively segregated rooms, squares where the curfew blows out at 10 p.m.

My speech goes in the opposite direction: I would like to explain why university and city can live only opening up and merging into one another, looking for confrontation and diversity.

Bologna and Urbino are two examples of very old universities, but in the latest years they have developed in opposite directions: in Bologna the city has been loyal to a tradition of efficient services for the well-being of the citizens and of the students. Despite the hysteria about decay in downtown, many students come to Bologna because they find here a welcoming environment, a front-running library like Sala Borsa, a dynamic cultural life.

In Urbino, regrettably, the city is devoid of its citizens, cultural life does not offer much and the students, after 9 p.m., stroll through a desert town. The idea of a library in the ex stables of the Duke connecting both physically and symbolically the urban center with the university has never been accomplished.

Public libraries and universities are both old institutions and it is significant that today they are both threaten in their *raison d'être* by the new technologies. Who needs a library if one has a smart phone with Wikipedia access? Who needs the university if from home he can attend Harvard or Yale courses, for free? Obviously things are more complicated than that, but, sooner or later we should think about the fact that libraries are attended only by minorities of citizens and the universities have lost one quarter of their freshmen students in less more than ten years.

This process can be inverted only if we give to the citizens and to the students some good reasons for attending our services, if we provide something that they do not find elsewhere, if we make use of energies that actually exist in our society but that cannot find channels to express themselves. Libraries will survive only if they become squares, that is, places where many things are at stake. In squares we meet friends, we buy newspapers, we drink coffee, we chat and buy fruit, we judge the actions of administrators, we fix appointments to go the gym or to the English course, we control that our sons went to school (if they didn't, surely someone will tell us).

Universities will definitely need allies, in the coming years, especially the smallest and youngest ones: Pavia, Bologna and Padova will still be there when the memory of the present government will long be gone, but Como, Treviso and Catanzaro will need cities perceiving them as something useful, something that the citizens can use; even more: a fundamental value. To make them such is not easy at all, new ideas are needed and, mostly, new actions.

It has been long since we discuss about *Learning Cities*, of cities able to learn, but to go in this direction is not easy: we want to learn to better stay and live together, to better exercise our rights as citizens, not necessarily to produce and to consume more. A learning city can raise only if there are bottom up initiatives, participating citizens who create *social streets*, theatre groups, districts newsletters. Only under this condition the work of openness that institutions must do will give its fruits.