



— 150 —
LIBRARIES

**YOU NEED
TO VISIT BEFORE
— YOU DIE —**

By Léa Teuscher

Back cover image George Peabody Library:
Jason Varney

Lannoo

*I have always imagined Paradise
will be a kind of library.*

— Jorge Luis Borges

Will you be reading this book in a library? I hope some of you will, or that it will inspire you to think about this marvellous concept, which encompasses both precious collections and the building they are housed in. From the International Space Station to Antarctica, they are pretty much everywhere – including in an old cupboard in someone’s front garden on a street near you. Whether you love them for containing all human knowledge, beautifully organised and classified, or because they offer the excitement of discovering a new favourite book – somewhere there is a library for you.

As sure as books pile up on the bedside tables of avid readers, new public libraries open to answer the ever-evolving needs of their times. In the following pages we visit opulent baroque monasteries in central Europe and conceptual spaces in Asia; we stop at contemporary hubs in the heart of communities from Peru to Sydney; and we look at innovative spaces made on a shoestring that spread the joy of reading among younger readers from South America to Africa.

Whether they are cathedrals of knowledge designed by leading architects, or simpler neighbourhood branches, libraries are the third spaces where individuals meet society, and cultural exchange blossoms. At the library, people from very different backgrounds meet up to attend events, use a 3D printer or learn essential skills. Despite – or because of – the digitalisation of our world, libraries are far from dusty relics, but interactive, innovative places that offer a world of possibilities.

As symbols of the power of learning, they can be the key to democracy, or become battlegrounds for culture wars, their books banned and sometimes burnt. Or, they might be safe and cosy spaces where public debate thrives and creative gatherings abound. Interestingly, the idea of borrowing and sharing, rather than buying, also offers a greener, less wasteful way of enjoying books (and, increasingly, other items such as tools, toys and musical instruments).

In honour of the great librarians who make these spaces come alive with their recommendations and exhibitions, here are my suggestions for further reading. For fiction, delve into Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and its maze-like Secretum library; for art, a monograph by photographer Andreas Gursky; for architecture, Campbell and Pryce’s *The Library*; and for history, der Weduwen and Pettegree’s *The Library: A Fragile History*. Last but not least is the children’s section, with Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, a gleeful celebration of the library as a place of refuge, and of the power of books.

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01 UTOPIA

Utopia 1, 9300 Aalst, Belgium

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

A highly sustainable building on a tricky urban site, this spacious minimalist library celebrates the beauty of local bricks.

Named after Thomas More's 1516 classic, *Utopia*, first printed by prominent Aalst citizen Dirk Martens, this sustainably built library was designed by KAAAN Architecten and opened in 2018. It's worth a visit to admire how the new building has been slotted into the urban fabric of the city centre, with the 8,000 sq m brick structure incorporating a 19th-century school and interacting with the surrounding buildings. Three new public squares surround the beautifully detailed library, where brickwork dialogues with light-grey concrete elements. There is a café, an auditorium and an atrium reading room with cantilevered floors and 11.5m-high bookcases that stretch towards the ceiling, some filled with books donated by the residents of Aalst. Although there are ballet and music lessons just above in the Academy for Performing Arts, it's a peaceful space that has become the city's living room. The 10,000 new patrons who have joined since its opening (10 times the normal rate) might even say that it is the ideal library.





09

LIBRARY OF BIRMINGHAM

Centenary Square, Broad Street, Birmingham B1 2ND, UK

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

Uniting the ‘written and the spoken word’, this library and theatre is an ode to the circle, wrapped in a delicate filigree façade inspired by the city’s crafts and industries.

This blue-and-gold library was built in 2013 at the heart of the UK’s second city, a fascinating melting pot of culture and architecture. Beautiful to look at from both the outside and inside, its intricate façade comprises over 5,000 interlocking metal circles. This geometric shape informs Mecanoo’s design of the entire building and references the city’s jewellery heritage, steel industry and perhaps even *The Lord of the Rings* (author J.R.R. Tolkien grew up nearby). Statement escalators link eight rotundas, including a golden case for the library’s Victorian Shakespeare Memorial Room perched on the roof. Linked to the refurbished 1960s REP Theatre, the new building cantilevers to create a canopy and garden ‘balcony’ with views of the square below. Instead of being hidden in the basement (home to the music and children’s library, with a large outdoor amphitheatre), the archives are proudly on display. Collection highlights include drawings by inventor James Watt, as well as a special music collection featuring local bands such as Black Sabbath, UB40, Duran Duran and The Streets.



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**METROPOLITAN
ERVIN SZABÓ LIBRARY**

Szabó Ervin tér 1, Budapest 1088, Hungary

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

Named after its first director, social scientist Ervin Szabó, this 'palace of books' features luxurious reading rooms in a 19th-century mansion.

Jutting forwards like the prow of a large ship at the junction of Budapest's Baross and Reviczky Streets is the prestigious Wenckheim Palace, a neo-baroque mansion once home to 11 halls, 48 rooms and 5 kitchens. Designed in the 1880s by Artúr Meinig, it has been home to the Hungarian capital's public library since 1931, when bespoke shelving and cabinets in the style of the original palace were added to the grand halls, and private apartments were converted into fireproof book storage areas. Despite sustaining heavy damage during the war, the original splendour of the building was perfectly restored in the 2000s, the great halls liberated from their furniture and the library extended into an adjoining historic house and a new eight-storey building. Head to the fourth floor to marvel at the carved figures, Rococo decorations and Venetian crystal chandeliers; the Wenckheim family dining room is now the art book reading room. There's also a café in the former carriage house off the beautiful, yellow covered courtyard.





14 TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY

Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin, College Green, Dublin 2, D02 PN40, Ireland

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

Located in the heart of Dublin, this magnificent library is known for its atmospheric Long Room and medieval illuminated manuscript, the Book of Kells.

A major tourist attraction, Trinity College Library uses digital projections and beautiful contemporary displays to highlight its historic treasures, including the lavishly illustrated Book of Kells. Visit an exhibition focusing on the monks who created the 9th-century gospel manuscript and the symbolism and artistry found in its 340 illuminated folios, then see the book itself. Two pages are rotated every 12 weeks, so you can marvel at the bold and expert script known as 'insular majuscule', written on vellum and accompanied by abstract decorations and images of plants and animals. Upstairs is the Long Room, home to 200,000 of the library's oldest books. Although the building was completed in 1732, the library that we see today, with its distinctive barrel vault ceiling, dates from 1856, when architects Deane and Woodward completely remodelled the space. It is now being restored as part of a huge conservation project, so to make up for its closure, there is a temporary digital exhibition pavilion where visitors can immerse themselves in the Secret Life of the Collections, the Book of Kells 360 and the Long Room Reimagined.





15

OODI

Töölönlahdenkatu 4, 00100 Helsinki, Finland

TO VISIT
BEFORE YOU DIE
BECAUSE

‘The flagship library for a nation of booklovers’, this lively meeting place opened in 2018 and offers innovative services right at the heart of the Finnish capital.

At Helsinki’s Oodi you can try virtual reality glasses, make music, digitise old photos, play chess or even paint northern lights on a fairy tale wall, all in a breathtaking building designed by ALA Architects. Named after the Finnish word for ‘ode’ (chosen from 1,600 suggestions from the public), it’s a fun space to explore, with a cinema, workshops with 3D printers and vinyl cutters, a games room with the newest video gaming consoles and a reading room where you can settle down with a coffee and one of the 70,000 books on offer, under a ceiling resembling clouds. It is also a symbol for equality located opposite the Finnish Parliament House. ‘Everyone is welcome at Oodi, and equality is the most important of the library’s values – together with freedom of expression,’ says its director Anna-Maria Soininvaara. ‘Oodi offers something for everyone that is worth leaving the house for – an opportunity to be inspired by new experiences every day.’ Oodi’s mission is also to trial new services; the most successful are then replicated across the country. The nearby 1840s National Library of Finland is also worth a visit.





