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OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Strengths and Innovations of Serbian Libraries in the Protection and Fostering of Cultural Heritage

Abstract

It is often the case that we find it difficult to recognize the things that we do well, as they are simply part of what we do, while it is easier to identify our problems, as they impede our success. However, many things which are hidden to us are obvious to those who view us with fresh eyes and different experience. This paper examines the strengths and innovations of Serbian libraries in the fields of cultural heritage protection and the fostering of cultural heritage from the perspective of international librarians who have visited Serbia and have witnessed these strengths and innovations first hand. Based on the observations of one library educator with experience of libraries in both the United Kingdom and the United States, and the discoveries of over 60 American library science students over a six-year period, the paper will highlight the library practices in Serbia that are different from those in the United States and Britain, but which provide support for the development of cultural understanding and which promote cultural heritage. These include the idea of the library as a cultural institution, rather than as an educational or merely entertaining one, the creation of legacy collections and their differentiation from straightforward special collections, innovations in programming and engagement with the community of both library patrons and the broader general public, as well as the whole concept of the celebration of cultural heritage and its relevance to our everyday existence. Additional examples will be used to discuss the impact of innovative Serbian library practices on the professional development of American librarians.

Keywords: international librarianship, professional education, library innovation, heritage preservation

INTRODUCTION

It is often the case that we find it difficult to recognize the things that we do well, as they are simply part of our everyday work, while it is easier to identify our problems, as they impede our success. However, many things which are hidden to us are obvious to those who view us with fresh eyes and different experience. This paper will examine the strengths and innovations of Serbian libraries in the fields of cultural heritage protection and the fostering of cultural heritage from the perspective of international librarians who have visited Serbia and have witnessed these strengths and innovations first hand. Based on the observations of one library educator with experience of libraries in both the United Kingdom and the United States, and the discoveries of over 70 American library science students over a seven-year period, the paper will highlight the library practices in Serbia that are different from those in the United States and Britain, but which provide support for the development of cultural understanding and which promote cultural heritage.

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University was founded in Kansas in 1902, almost 40 years after the founding of the university itself. As the oldest school of library science west of the Mississippi River, the school has long been recognized for its high quality programs and innovation in the preparation of librarians and information specialists. Among its many achievements has been the development of a model of distance education created before distance education became synonymous with online learning, and which has now developed into a model of blended and fully online instruction. Required core courses are taught in a blended format (face-to-face instruction provided in two intensive weekend sessions with the remainder of the course delivered online over the regular sixteen-week semester), while elective courses are all delivered in fully online format. SLIM currently offers blended coursework to cohorts of students at six centers in five states: Kansas (2 locations), Colorado, Oregon, South Dakota, and Utah.¹

INTERNATIONAL LEARNING

SLIM has had a long history of international learning and fostering global partnerships. In the past twenty five years, this has most often taken the form of taking students to visit libraries and archives in other countries and learning from in-

1 "School of Library and Information Management: History", Emporia State University, accessed December 1, 2017, <https://www.emporia.edu/slim/about/history.html>.

teractions with professional librarians from different backgrounds and cultures. Early experiences involved attendance at international conferences in Bulgaria, co-sponsored with the library science faculty of “St. Kliment Ohridski” at the University of Sofia. Later, this developed into what were termed service learning initiatives in countries such as Mexico, Paraguay, and Romania. However, as SLIM’s experience with international learning matured, it became obvious that there were some severe limitations to the concept of service learning, particularly in SLIM’s case. The fact that a large proportion of the student body held full-time jobs and could only travel abroad for short periods (usually ten days to two weeks) did not support the requirements of service learning, particularly in places where considerable language and professional skills were necessary to accomplish the appointed tasks. Accordingly, when the current author joined the faculty in 2010, he was tasked with the idea of expanding the availability of and participation in international learning with the emphasis on cultural exchange and experiential learning, rather than assisting with particular library projects. Global Experience programs to Croatia and Ukraine led into a more regular offering of Global Experiences in Serbia, Scotland, Bulgaria, England, and South Africa. During the past 7 years over 220 students have taken part in a Global Experience, with 79 of those students visiting Serbia.²

THE SERBIAN CONNECTION

The SLIM connection with Serbia has been in existence for over 15 years with collaboration originally between library science faculty members at the University of Belgrade and at Emporia State. In September 2011 the first group of students visited Belgrade as part of a semester-long course, hosted by the University of Belgrade, touring libraries and archives and meeting library professionals. Student groups have returned a further seven times, visiting not only Belgrade but other cities in Serbia and enjoying excellent professional hospitality from Serbian librarians, archivists and from library science students in Belgrade. The experiential learning model has allowed students to learn from a range of experienced Serbian librarians, who not only conduct tours of their facilities, but also take time to recount their libraries’ successes and problems, to explain their administrative structure and operations, describe their current programming and to share their aspirations for the future of the library in their own community. They are also eager to learn from the students and to hear of the developments in U.S. libraries, but are often surprised to learn of the difficulties faced there and to discover American librarians struggling with many of the same problems they themselves face.

2 “About: International Trips”, School of Library and Information Management, accessed December 1, 2017, <https://www.emporia.edu/slim/about/internationaltrips.html>.

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

An essential component of the learning from the Global Experience class is a debriefing process, and students and their professor engage in extensive journaling and discussion, both during and after the field trip to Serbia. As a consequence, various themes have emerged repeatedly over the years, as students have compared their understanding of Serbian libraries and librarianship with what they are familiar with from their experience of American libraries. The emphasis in the debriefing process is not to assign relative worth to one practice over another, but to see where particular practices lead to beneficial outcomes for users and to view the universal library values and ethics that librarians worldwide share through a different lens. This different lens in turn allows the students to make discoveries about their own libraries and practice as librarians in the U.S. that would have been much harder to recognize if they did not have this new perspective. This process only begins during their stay in Serbia and although there are some differences that are immediately apparent upon the students' return to the U.S., there are many more that only appear gradually, as the students move back in to their daily work while continuing the reflective process.

The observations presented here are necessarily limited, based on short term views of only a representational selection of libraries in Serbia. Although they do not offer a comprehensive view, they do provide insights into the developing role of Serbian librarianship in the twenty-first century. As such, they can be seen as indicators of the developments described by Gordana Stokić Simončić and Željko Vučković,³ but perhaps also as the beginnings of the required developments they suggest are necessary for the continued growth and flourishing of libraries in Serbia.

LIBRARY AS CULTURAL INSTITUTION

The idea of the library as a cultural institution, rather than as only an educational or merely entertaining one, is strange to the students from the United States. Indeed, in many smaller communities in the U.S., libraries are trying to position themselves as community centers in an effort to establish or maintain their relevance to the community. The notion of the library as the primary educational institution within the community, freely available to all regardless of age and position, has been lost in many cases. Efforts are now underway to reclaim this vital role that establishes the central role of the library in the community, as evidenced by the Libraries = Education campaign currently being championed by Valerie Gross.⁴ However, while U.S. libraries struggle to reclaim a central position in the

3 Gordana Stokić Simončić and Željko Vučković, "Searching for a Lost Identity: Serbian Librarianship at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century", *Library Trends* 63, No. 2, (2014): 284–298.

4 Valerie Gross, "Libraries = Education: A Game-Changing Vision", *Institute of Museum and Library Services, UpNext Blog*, January 14 2015, <https://www.ims.gov/news-events/up-next-blog/2015/01/libraries-education-game-changing-vision>.

educational establishment of their community, they are still not well established as cultural institutions in the sense of the library preserving and promoting culture. While there are plenty of libraries that host cultural events, such as concerts and literary events, these are often seen as ways to increase the gate count to justify the library's existence, rather than integral parts of a program to celebrate local history or promote understanding of a rich cultural history.

A slightly different emphasis may be seen in the U.K. in the search for "relevance", with public libraries and library spaces often becoming social service centers, with a variety of social service functions available to patrons. While there may be many benefits to this arrangement, not least the idea of a "one-stop-shop" for information, the placement of government offices within the library and vice versa can create difficulties first of all for the effect on the library's traditional independence and belief in both freedom of information and privacy of the individual, and secondly with the professional librarians either taking over responsibility for non-librarian jobs in very different fields or for staff from other offices or departments assuming responsibility for library services. Another problem in the U.K., especially in England, is simply the decline in the number of public libraries and the significant erosion of the professional workforce over the past few years, with 25% fewer professional positions, as revealed in a BBC investigation.⁵ Against this backdrop, the performance of Serbian libraries as acknowledged cultural institutions with a wide variety of programming encouraging exploration and celebration of Serbia's rich heritage is an inspiration to students accustomed to being asked in disbelief why they would become a member of the extinct profession of the librarian.

LEGACY AND MEMORIAL COLLECTIONS

The concept of the legacy or memorial collections is something that students have commented on every year, after visits to the National Library of Serbia and the Special Collections at the University of Belgrade "Svetozar Marković" library. The practice of preserving not just the books or papers of the donor, but other possessions, including furniture and personal objects, helps the visitor experience a much closer connection with the subject of the collection, and gives everything more context than is possible where only the written materials are preserved, or where the collection is split across different departments or even different institutions. The students are often struck by the idea that it is the collection itself that is important as a whole, and that that the types of materials within it should not define or restrict its use, with books and written materials placed with other books, other media stored with similar items, and personal objects up to and including furniture placed elsewhere or in storage, which is often the American reaction when confronted with a collection of varied materials.

⁵ BBC, "Libraries Lose a Quarter of Staff as Hundreds Close", News, England, 29 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-35707956>.

Another aspect of the legacy collection is the use of space to create a physical setting for the collection that allows the totality of the collection to be brought together and experienced as a whole. This understanding and appreciation of context provides a much richer learning experience for the user of such collections and brings the learner closer to the subject of study. The legacy rooms at the National Library of Serbia, with the dividing glass panels featuring reproductions of the authors' manuscripts complete with edits and annotations, is one excellent example. Here a very simple idea is used to powerful effect, made all the more impressive to the library students by the fact this is often the first time they have encountered such a presentation of a collection.

ARCHIVES

This valuing of history has much to teach the American students. While it is easy to identify differences simply in the age of the respective countries, with modern American history representing a fraction of the history of Serbia, it is again in the historical perspective that the greatest impact is made on the students. The valuing of history not as all things past and irrelevant, but as a continuum that leads directly to the present and beyond, provides a major impetus for the study and understanding of history and its effect on the national consciousness and culture. Students have been impressed by the provision of archive materials and the use of those archives for social justice. One example would be the work of the archivists in the Novi Sad Archives to assist citizens in the preparation of claims for restitution of property nationalized after the Second World War. While this may not be seen as a glamorous or ground-breaking piece of archival work, it is of major significance in righting old wrongs and promoting the social justice that libraries frequently discuss. Apart from any historical perspective, the sheer number of people seeking assistance from the Novi Sad Archives⁶ is both a surprise and delight to the American archives studies students, who are used to working with archives that see many fewer patrons. The archives are not a place of storage or the resting place of the old and obsolete, but genuine information repositories staffed with information professionals who provide a valuable service to people in the present time.

IMMEDIACY AND CONNECTION

Students are always struck by the freedom of access that is possible in Serbian libraries, and the way in which patrons are brought close to their heritage and culture by being able to observe closely and touch and use materials and objects in ways that are not familiar to them in the American library. Serbia has a rich

6 Petar Djurdjev, Personal communication with author, September 29, 2017.

history and libraries appear to do a good job of connecting people with that history. The Roman Hall at the main branch of the Belgrade Public Library is a case in point. Recently renovated, the room still maintains sections of Roman walls and an aqueduct as an integral part of the space and enables people who attend to concerts, book talks, or other events to experience the modern against the backdrop of remains of Singidunum. (The opening of the modern shopping mall next to the library in 2017, and the preservation of a section of Roman pavement under a glass floor near the entrance, shows that this incorporation of preservation into everyday life is not confined to the libraries.) That the Roman walls were not removed to a museum or covered with glass or otherwise removed from the immediate presence of the library users suggests an understanding of the deep connections that are formed when people are allowed to experience the past within the immediacy of the present, rather than removed from everyday life and accessed only at a distance or through a mediated encounter. The fact that the library is comfortable in trusting their patrons to join them in preserving this part of their heritage without the need to place barriers between the patrons and artefacts, also indicates an attitude that promotes learning and discovery as well as appreciation for the long and varied cultural history of the country and region.

INNOVATION AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Although Gordana Stokić Simončić and Željko Vucković suggest that too much of the recent developments in Serbian libraries, particularly in the digital realm, are fragmented and lack a cohesive plan,⁷ this is a pattern that is also seen to a great extent in both American and British libraries. Despite large scale initiatives in digitization and the provision of electronic materials, there still exist wide differences in availability particularly in the areas of local history and cultural heritage resources within both these countries. However, this is not to discount the valuable work that is being done in Serbia, for example, through the creation of the digital library in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade, as described by Aleksandra Vraneš, Ljiljana Marković, and Milica Jelić Mariokov.⁸ This project goes beyond the straightforward digitization of materials already held by the various libraries and reading rooms within the Faculty to include collaborations with digital libraries in other countries that thereby provide easy access to significant collections of materials essential for postgraduate study within the Faculty. Bogdan Trifunović shows another side to innovation with his description of a public-private partnership to digitize audio-visual materials from multiple formats.⁹ These problems are again common in both the U.K. and the U.S. and it is

7 Simončić and Vučković, "Searching for a Lost Identity".

8 Aleksandra Vraneš, Ljiljana Marković, and Milica Jelić Mariokov, "Libraries of the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade - Responding to the Challenges of Our Time", *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries (QQML)* 5, (2016): 495-504.

9 Bogdan Trifunović, "The Public-Private Partnership Case Study in Digitization of Audiovisual Heritage", *OCLC Systems & Services: International Digital Library Perspectives*, 29 No. 1, (2013): 30-36.

important for the Emporia students to see problem-solving at work and with positive results. One example that they found especially interesting was the “Magic Box” at the University Library “Svetozar Marković”, a display case for, in this instance, a rare book, which the viewer can see in the display case, while at the same time interacting with a digitized version of the book projected on to the front glass of the display case. This wonderful compromise of preservation and simultaneous access is an ingenious solution to a common problem in archives and special libraries, but immediately brings the users closer to the historical objects.

COLLABORATION

From our perspective, Serbian libraries appear very outward looking and keen to collaborate. While this difference may again be a function of the different countries’ histories and relative size, the Serbian model of collaboration that embraces other libraries and archives, other cultural institutions, and other countries and cultures provides the opportunity to be inclusive and to encourage a coming together to share knowledge and seek solutions to common problems. The wide variety of collaborations and cooperative partners mentioned during our discussions is a source of wonder to the Emporia students. While public libraries especially in the larger cities in the U.S. have been seeking collaborations and opportunities to work beyond the confines of the library building, the medium and smaller sized libraries have been slower to take advantage of the full range of opportunities such cooperation presents. Although both staffing levels and budgets can be a barrier to cooperation, often it is the attitudes of librarians that provide the bigger obstacle. Again it may not be even a conscious bias against collaboration or innovation, but rather a lack of vision that precludes the library’s involvement in more collaborative projects within and without the library building itself. The student visitors to Serbia have been fortunate to see some excellent models of cooperation and working outside the confines of what are often very small library spaces, two excellent examples in Novi Sad springing to mind: the American Corner, already a collaboration between the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade and the Cultural Center of Novi Sad and the Novi Sad City Library’s European Corner. Both of these libraries provide numerous examples of what can be achieved through cooperation and a willingness to look for new solutions to old problems, and are regularly cited in student journals as major sources of inspiration.

COMMON PROBLEMS AND COOPERATIVE SOLUTIONS

A final theme that is constantly raised by the American students is that of the common problems they share with their Serbian counterparts. Although the image of

American libraries is skewed by the large, modern, successful, and well-funded institutions, the reality for many libraries is often quite different. Problems shared include the difficulties of legacy buildings – from simple weatherproofing to environmental control, to space and access (both physical and technological); lack of funding or other support; declining library use and a lack of understanding of what a library is and the work a librarian performs; low levels of information and digital literacy; and poor technological infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. We are also constantly being told in America of the death of books, that “everything is available on the internet”, and that we should simply digitize everything in our collections, with no idea of the effort and costs involved, nor the fact that digitization is not a once-and-for-all solution to access and preservation, but a format with multiple challenges that requires constant upkeep and monetary support. The parallel problem is that of non-digital invisibility where our non digital resources are ignored or dismissed regardless of their intrinsic worth, often by a public that values instant access over quality, relevance, and worth. Reports such as the American Library Association’s State of American Libraries 2017¹⁰ and the Institute of Museum and Library Services Public Library Survey¹¹ highlight many positive indicators of library use and development, but also contain data on worrying trends such as the decline in the number of academic librarian positions, challenges to access and materials, and the issue of maintaining net neutrality.

The solutions to our problems, as we have learned from experience, will come from our cooperation and willingness to learn from each other. Innovative solutions often evolve from the ability to see problems from a different perspective, which is just one valuable aspect of international exchange. Seeing situations not through our own eyes, but through a professional colleague’s allows us to ask fresh questions and embrace new ideas. Even as we all struggle through a difficult period for libraries, our strength comes from our foundational ideals of librarianship: our desire to seek innovation, our ability to be the leaders of change – however small, our determination to be enthusiastic, not discouraged, and our joy in celebrating together the great achievements of libraries in fostering a better world through education, the promotion of multiple literacies, the strengthening of communities through opportunity and the promotion of social justice.

CONCLUSION

Serbian librarianship provides many inspirational examples of the valuable work that libraries do to both protect and foster cultural heritage. The international

10 “The State of America’s Libraries 2017: A Report from the American Library Association”, American Library Association, edited by Kathy S. Rosa, 2016, www.ala.org/news/state-american-libraries-report-2017.

11 “Public Libraries in the United States Survey: Fiscal Year 2014”, Institute of Museum and Library Services, August, 2017, <https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/plsfy2014.pdf>.

learning program of the School of Library and Information Management of Emporia State University allows students to benefit from exposure not only to a different perspective on libraries and library services, but to professional exchange of ideas and collaborative learning. Students return to the United States with a greater appreciation for the shared foundational beliefs of librarians worldwide, together with numerous ideas and strategies to provide better services to patrons and connect them more deeply with their own culture and heritage.

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Summary

Outside Looking In

Strengths and Innovations of Serbian Libraries in the Protection and Fostering of Cultural Heritage

This paper discussed the program of international education of the School of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University and shared some of the discoveries of the Emporia students from the viewpoint of Serbian libraries' role in the protection and fostering of cultural heritage. Students benefit greatly from seeing librarianship through a different cultural lens and are inspired from observing what can be achieved through determination and collaboration, despite lack of funds or other resources. Serbian librarians provide many useful ideas for the students to take back with them to the United States as well as reaffirming the students' desire to be the most effective librarians they can be.

Keywords: international librarianship, professional education, library innovation, heritage preservation

