

# The National Library of Latvia: A New Beginning

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## ABSTRACT

In 2014, the National Library of Latvia (NLL) relocated to a new building, the Castle of Light / *Gaismas pils*, which brought together five former sites. The long-awaited new building significantly improved both the conditions for preservation of the collections and the reader services. The Castle provides spacious and cosy reading rooms as well as many individual and group work carrels and training spaces. Furthermore, the building features conference and concert facilities, exhibition rooms and other event spaces, providing a performance platform for the events of the Library and other institutions. The Castle of Light has become an icon of the city and encompasses many current trends of contemporary philosophy of library buildings: it is open, lucid, technologically abundant, multifunctional, flexible and extraordinary. Meanwhile the NLL explores the strategies of balancing traditional library services and event management.

**Keywords:** new library buildings, library strategy, National Library of Latvia, Castle of Light

## OVERVIEW

The National Library of Latvia (NLL)<sup>1</sup> is a state-financed institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia. The NLL is Latvia's legal deposit library and is responsible for the national bibliographic control. It is also the state's ISBN, ISMN, and ISSN agency. The NLL serves the nation of 2 million people (including 61% ethnic Latvians and 26% Russians).

The NLL's mission is to promote a free and inventive use of Latvia's national cultural and scientific heritage; however, the library not only ensures the preservation of national publications but also maintains a notable collection of foreign literature (mostly in English, Russian and German) with the focus on humanities, social sciences and interdisciplinarity, thus

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<sup>1</sup> The National Library of Latvia [www.lnb.lv](http://www.lnb.lv).

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complementing the academic resources of university libraries (see Smith and Vilks, 2001; Vilks, 2009).

The NLL shares an ALEPH-based union catalogue with ten other academic libraries in Latvia, while public libraries jointly use a locally developed information system, ALISE. All Latvian libraries are connected via the State Unified Library Information Network (known as 'Network of Light' or 'Lightnet'<sup>2</sup>) which, among other things, provides access to the full-text content of the National Digital Library of Latvia, Letonica.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of 2013, the library's physical collections comprised about 4.2 million items, including books, periodicals, maps, sheet music, photographs and drawings, small prints, audio-visual media, manuscripts, microforms, etc. Since 1999 NLL has digitized about 5 million pages (or circa 350,000 documents), most notably periodicals, but also books, images and sound.

The NLL's Library Development Institute coordinates the nation-wide library projects and is a competence centre for the Latvian library system, providing consultations and further education courses for library professionals.

The NLL is a member of IFLA, CENL, CDNL, CERL, EBLIDA, ELAG, LIBER, IAML, IBBY, Bibliotheca Baltica and other local and international library institutions. In recent years it has been active in several projects of Europeana: Europeana Newspapers, Europeana Awareness, Europeana Inside and Europeana Sounds.

In 2014, the NLL moved the collections and services from five buildings to a newly built central building – the Castle of Light (*Gaismas pils*); consequently the NLL now retains one main building that provides in-house reader services and holds the largest part of the collections, and a repository building.

In 2013, while preparing for the move to the new building, the NLL served 913,300 visitors.

## THE YEAR THE DREAM CAME TRUE

Until June 2014, the Library occupied six buildings. Although these buildings are valuable and beautiful from the architectural point of view, they were never sufficiently adapted for the Library's needs and proved to be unsatisfactory both for providing reader services and maintaining collections. The constant lack of funding prevented any major renovation plans; however, more importantly, these buildings were always perceived as

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<sup>2</sup> The Lightnet was made possible by the project 'Father's Third Son'. For more information see: <http://www.3td.lv/index.php/en/par/apraksts/> (visited 20.9.14).

<sup>3</sup> In September 2014 available at <http://www.lnb.lv/lv/digitala-biblioteka/kolekcijas/> or as individual collections at <http://gramatas.lndb.lv/> (books); <http://periodika.lndb.lv/p> (periodicals); <http://kartes.lnb.lv/> (maps); <http://www.zudusilatvija.lv/> (images); <http://audio.lndb.lv/lv/> (audio). A new federated search engine that currently is being tested will aggregate all NLL's digital collections and catalogues in one interface.

temporary solutions. Since 1928 the future of the Library has been envisaged as a new, purpose-built library.

At least three times in the twentieth century the resources for architectural projects were allocated, although these projects were never pursued. In 1988, after an unsuccessful local project competition, an American architect of Latvian origin, Gunnar Birkerts, was asked to design the new state library. This time the historical context and the mood of the society were entirely different: in the light of national awakening<sup>4</sup> the National Library was seen as a symbol and 'DNA' of the re-emerging nation.

Now, twenty-five years later, the nearly impossible has happened. On 29 August 2014, the new building of the NLL – 'The Castle of Light' – was officially inaugurated. The moving of the collections and installing of equipment continued from May until September 2014 while some of the reading rooms opened in June and visitors were invited to explore the building through guided tours.

The inauguration ceremony completed a sequence of opening events: the 'Chain of Book Lovers'<sup>5</sup> (18 January), opening events of the NLL's floors and reading rooms 'Cascades' (12–15 June), the physical and digital 'Ribbon cutting' series,<sup>6</sup> and the final opening week with the Regional days and official receptions for sponsors and partners (25–29 August).

During the planning of the opening events, it immediately became clear that:

- In order to reach all stakeholders, several opening events had to be organized;
- The spotlight had to be used to inform the people of Latvia about the collections, services and facilities that would be available in the new building.

A major obstacle for planning was the fact that the building was finished several months later than expected. The construction works of the Castle of Light started in 2008 and was due to be completed in May 2011. Later the date was postponed to November 2012, then to November 2013. The construction eventually ended in December 2013. Some major events were planned for February 2014; unfortunately, not only had the furniture and equipment not been installed at that time, but the building itself was not readily available for public events. Consequently, the initial opening plans had to be discarded and the opening days in June were launched just a few days after the premises were officially passed on to the Library.

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<sup>4</sup> The Republic of Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1990.

<sup>5</sup> For more information see: <http://www.lnb.lv/en/foto-gallery/campaign-chain-book-lovers-path-light> (visited 20.9.14).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lsm.lv/en/article/societ/society/digital-scissors-log-a-thousand-national-library-ribbon-cutters.a95815/> (visited 20.9.14).

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Nevertheless, in the summer of 2014 the Castle of Light was ready to host several major events, among them, the LIBER 2014 conference (2–5 July), the exhibition ‘1514. The Book. 2014’, the exhibition ‘Visionary Structures. From Ioganson to Johansons’, and numerous other exhibitions, performances, concerts and lectures. This summer the cultural life in Riga has been particularly dynamic as Riga is one of the European Capitals of Culture 2014.

In September 2014, when all reading rooms were finally open and the academic year had begun, the ‘ecosystem’ of the Castle of Light entered a new phase and the Library began learning how to balance and adjust the flows of visitors. It is no longer only a matter of showing the library to people and bringing spectators to events: large crowds of curious onlookers can disturb the readers while occasional odours from the conference catering may seem puzzling to visitors.

From November 2014 to July 2015 the Castle of Light once more will have to test its agility and flexibility: the National Library of Latvia will be the meeting place for the Council of the European Union when Latvia holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2015. Reading rooms and offices from two lower floors will be moved to upper levels and Library visitors will use a different entrance. The NLL will also organize an international conference and accompanying exhibitions.

## VISIONS AND STRATEGIES

Both the spirit of the time when the Castle of Light was conceived and the expressive style of the architect Gunnar Birkerts determined that the library will be not just a ‘common’ library building: it is a striking landmark and a true icon, filled with symbols and references. The shape itself encompasses two figures: a glass mountain and a castle.<sup>7</sup> Many more references to traditional Latvian culture and national treasures can be found in the interior design: for instance, the floor in the entrance hall bears a traditional textile pattern and the colours of the former national currency are encoded in the colours of the soft furniture and carpets.

For Gunnar Birkerts, the metaphor or symbol is never just a fancy shape or ornament (Birkerts, 2009; Wright, 2014). The shape has to be functional at all times; in other words, the form must reflect the function. Birkerts is renowned for the quote: ‘In three identical boxes we can put apples, toma-

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<sup>7</sup> For the figure of the glass mountain see: Rainis, J. *The Golden Horse: A Solstice Fairy Tale in Five Acts*. Marfa, Texas: Inde/Jacobs Publishing, 2012. For the symbol of the castle see: Pumpurs, A. *Bearslayer*. A free translation from the unrhymed Latvian into English heroic verse by Arthur Cropley. Adelaide: Arthur Cropley, 2007 (can also be found in archive.org and Project Gutenberg). The famous chorus song *Castle of Light/Gaismas pils* (Lyrics by Auseklis, Music by Vītols, J.) can be found in numerous sound recordings and also on YouTube.

toes and potatoes. We put a label on each box so we know what it contains. And then look, there's someone walking down the street with a violin case. We clearly know what is in THAT "box". Its form "underlines" its contents – a violin.<sup>8</sup>

At first Birkert's project was very well received by Latvian society but in the 2000s, partly due to strong associations with national sentiments of 1990s, some felt that this kind of symbolism had become redundant and feared that, considering that the project was already more than ten years old, it could also be technically outdated. Now, when the building is finished, public perception is changing again, especially after seeing the library from the inside.

Even if the symbolism was ancient, the project itself was changing constantly; the programmes for the building were adjusted several times. The general concept and the symbolic mountain-like silhouette of the building had been designed in 1989, although the first version, which was much larger than the final project, was abandoned in 1995 and replaced by a smaller and less expensive option: the total floor area of 77,000 m<sup>2</sup> was reduced to 44,354 m<sup>2</sup> (main building 42,733 m<sup>2</sup> plus separate technical building 1,621 m<sup>2</sup>).

The changes in the programmes had only little effect on the size of reading rooms and conference and exhibition spaces while office space was reduced by half, and the area of closed stacks was significantly decreased – from 19,719 m<sup>2</sup> in the first programme to 5,005 m<sup>2</sup> in the Castle of Light. The latter was possible for two reasons: firstly, the regular shelves in the storage areas were replaced with compact shelving systems and, secondly, the NLL acquired a Repository building outside Riga.<sup>9</sup>

The initial versions of the building envisaged the facility of a mass paper restoration centre which, unfortunately, currently is not installed in the Castle of Light.

The resizing of depositories reflected a shift in thinking about library collections: in 1999, the first NLL's digitization project was launched. In 2000, the NLL together with its consortium partners proposed a Conception of State's Unified Library Information System which later was partially implemented with the help of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (a project called 'Father's Third Son').

The future vision of Latvian libraries as connected in a network that allows the sharing of data and resources freely and swiftly at that time seemed naturally linked to the idea of building a new, technologically outstandingly equipped central library. In 2002, the Parliament of Latvia passed the Law on the Implementation of the Project of NLL which states that the Project encompasses the construction of the new building, the creation of

<sup>8</sup> See *Gaismas pils* (2002).

<sup>9</sup> The Repository is located in a former military facility that was reconstructed in two stages in 1998 and 2006. Its current capacity is 1 million volumes.

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infrastructure for providing information services in the new building, the furnishing of the building, and the creation of the state's unified library information system. Eventually these goals were not pursued as a single project; nevertheless, the Law demonstrates that the construction of a new building for the National Library and the *digital* development of all libraries were seen as closely related.

The Law also states that the National Library of Latvia has to develop as a centre for information, education, science, culture, and communication. This promise became topical and was filled with a new energy at the time when the strategic planning for the service and event content of the Castle of Light was in progress. The vision of the Castle of Light as a multifunctional centre where people can meet and cultural and educational events take place on a daily basis is still current.

About 23% of the Castle's total floor area is designated as a 'public zone', namely as spaces that can be used for various events without entering the Library's reading zone. The reading rooms occupy 27% of the space, the closed stacks 12%, and offices 18%. Twenty conference, exhibition and learning spaces (about 5,300 m<sup>2</sup>) are available for rent.

This distribution of space follows the current trend that stresses the role of libraries as attractive *physical* spaces for education, recreation and performance. In addition, it complies with the NLL's mission – to promote a free and inventive usage of Latvia's national cultural and scientific heritage; the exhibition and learning spaces should be used to educate people about Latvia's heritage.

In 2013, NLL concluded the work on NLL's Strategy 2014–2018. On the one hand, the tasks that were relevant for the adapting services in the new building's environment and necessity to develop NLL's event organizing capacity greatly shaped the strategy; on the other hand, the NLL was challenged to find a new focus. Before, many of library's developmental goals were assembled under the unifying idea of the building. All lines of work starting from the development of in-house services and collection preservation to event organizing had to improve after moving to the Castle of Light. Even the capacity of the National Digital Library depended on the new building because the purchase of additional servers was included in the technology procurement for the new building. Once the building existed, the Library administration realized it had too many ideas and was at risk of setting too many goals.

Consequently, in the NLL's Strategy 2014–2018, three priorities were identified:

- to ensure a positive experience of the visit to the new building of the Library;
- to expand and improve the quality of the digital services of the NLL; and
- to enhance the competences of the NLL and to transfer these competences to the libraries and cultural and institutions of Latvia.

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A positive visit experience depends on many factors; however, it was recognized that it is crucially important to ensure that the personnel in the new NLL are kind and informative and that well prepared visitor information is available. Furthermore, events had to be smoothly organized, exhibitions had to be skilfully arranged, and technical appliances had to function, and so on. The Strategy 2014–2018 particularly stresses the importance of creating high quality Library events and providing a welcoming platform for the events of other institutions; this line of work had to be developed almost from the ground up.

The second and third priorities relate to digital development. The NLL intends to continue the development of the National Digital Library of Latvia both by enlarging collections and by offering more advanced services for researchers in digital humanities. Another opportunity that is being pursued is the adaptation of the Digital Library's resources for interactive teaching aids for secondary education and promoting the use of Digital Library materials in classroom teaching in general.

The goal of enhancing NLL's competences reflects to the ambition to broaden the scope of NLL's Library Development Institute's competences: the NLL has to strengthen its own competences in digitization, digital research and curation and to disseminate accumulated knowledge and experience to other cultural and memory institutions in Latvia.

Following a reorganization in 2013, the Department of Communication and Marketing was created and the Department of Services underwent structural changes. In total the number of employees increased by 9%, significantly strengthening NLL's capacity in IT, public relations and event organizing sectors. In 2014, more specialists – such as light and sound engineers, technical coordinators of events and other support specialists – were hired. Together with cleaning and security personnel (these services are being outsourced), almost 400 employees now work in the Castle of Light and Repository; about 150 of them provide reader services.

### INSIDE THE CASTLE

The Castle of Light is situated on the bank of the Daugava River, next to the waterline (Figure 1). The mountain-like asymmetric structure now defines the silhouette of the left bank; however, the building's appearance changes strikingly depending on the viewpoint and the weather and light conditions. Just across the bridge is the old town and city centre. This siting of the Library had been suggested as long ago as 1968. It is strategic in terms of city planning, for this side of the river has always been comparatively underdeveloped. We can already see how the Library has changed this environment and it will definitely encourage further infrastructure developments in the future. The campus and faculty of Physics and Mathematics of the University of Latvia is currently being built nearby.

The Castle complex includes two buildings – the main building and a



Figure 1: The Castle of Light

four-storey technical facility which contains cooling systems for the Castle of Light, server rooms and some offices.

The Castle of Light has fourteen storeys (including the basement) and is sixty-eight metres high. It is a monolithic reinforced concrete structure, covered with green-tinted opaque glass panels and stainless steel sheets (Figure 2). The floor at ground level is of grey and black stone. After entering the building, visitors find themselves in the atrium, which extends up to the eighth floor. The atrium and central staircase form the central axis of the building's strict and simple inner composition (Figures 3 and 4).

The reading rooms (Figure 5) are placed along the main façade that faces the river, allowing readers to enjoy the vastness of the landscape, which at first seems even too spectacular to focus on studying. The employees' offices are along the opposite side of the building, providing a more ambient atmosphere. The closed stacks are positioned between the reader and employee zones throughout Levels 2 to 9, in the core of the building. As most depositories are situated alongside corresponding reading rooms, materials are retrieved very quickly. The total capacity of closed stacks in the Castle of Light is 6 million volumes but 350,000 books and other media are available on open access.

Most of the Library's event spaces are in the basement and on the ground floor, as well as on two upper levels. In the basement is a conference centre with one transformable main auditorium and several workshop spaces with





Figure 2: Detail of the façade



Figure 3: Atrium

a total capacity of 400 seats. The highlight of the Castle of Light is the concert and conference hall with 462 seats, which is situated on the ground floor. The hall is furnished with translators' carrels, acoustic panels and film screening equipment. The Museum of Latvian Book history, three other exhibition spaces, a souvenir and book shop, and a restaurant are located on the ground level.

The reading rooms are set from Level M (the first level above the ground)

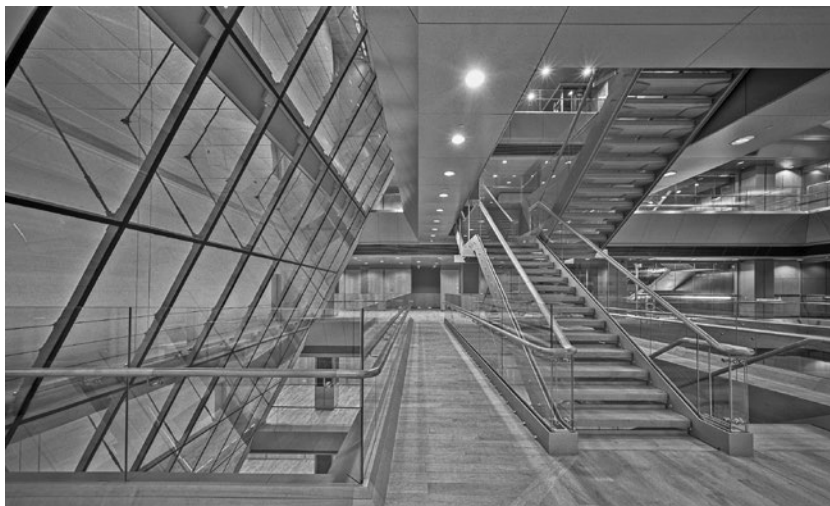


Figure 4: Central staircase



Figure 5: Detail of a reading room

to Level 8. The Castle of Light provides 1,000 reader seats, including approximately thirty individual and group work carrels and classrooms. The flooring for the upper levels and on the stairs is made of the light-coloured wood of sugar maple that beautifully matches the pale tone of birch veneer in the furniture and wall panels. Aside from unobtrusive pale and grey tones of wood, glass and steel, there are few other colours in the interior. However,

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each storey has its own distinctive additional colour which is displayed in the soft furniture groups, carpets, and nameplates; the colour of the storey is featured also in the spine labels with call numbers.

The lower floors include a reference and information centre and various branch reading rooms (Humanities and Social Sciences, Law and Economics, Natural Sciences and Technologies, the collection of East Asian studies (ASIARES), as well as Periodicals), while special collections (such as musical records, films, sheet music, maps, photographs, posters, small prints, rare books, manuscripts, and the Letonica collection) are located on upper levels that gradually diminish in size with each level.

Besides collections, the Castle of Light holds such treasures as the ‘Nation’s Book Shelf’, which is a five-storey high construction that accommodates a very special collection of the nation’s favourite books. On the fifth floor is the Cabinet of Songs: the national ‘treasure chest’ that contains c.250,000 paper slips with folksongs that were collected by Krišjānis Barons at the end of the nineteenth century.

### NLL’S BUDGET AND CASTLE OF LIGHT PROJECT’S COSTS

Budgetary means allocated for NLL’s operation are assigned by the Ministry of Culture according to the annual law on state budget; other sources of funding, such as resources of EU funds and private foundations, are being used for particular projects and activities. Depending on the economic situation in the country and NLL’s involvement in the projects, the budget of the Library in the last ten years has greatly varied.

In 2013, the Library’s total budget was €6.03 million: 13% of the amount constituted external funding for various projects, 1.2% was acquired via donations, and 0.6% were the Library’s own revenues. The estimated total budget for 2014 is €8.48 million. It is expected that the total budget of the library from 2015 to 2018 will reach €13 million whilst the revenue from renting the Library’s spaces and providing related services will increase the share of the Library’s own revenue, reaching 2% of the total budget.

In the past, the support of private foundations has been instrumental for the development of the library system in Latvia. Three American private foundations have been particularly important: in the 1990s, the George Soros Foundation and Open Society Institute supported the automation of public libraries and the professional development of librarians; the union catalogue for NLL and other academic libraries was introduced with the help of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, computers and broadband internet connections were brought to all public libraries in Latvia.

The National Digital Library of Latvia, Letonica, was developed with the financial support of the European Regional Development Fund (1999–2013). Recently the NLL has been active in European Commission’s Competitiveness and Innovation Framework and Lifelong Learning programmes.

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The most important patron of NLL in Latvia is The Latvian National Library Foundation<sup>10</sup> – a public non-profit organization that was created for promoting the NLL's building project and raising funds in Latvia and abroad. Since 1998, it has raised approximately €1.5 for the cause of NLL and has been instrumental for developing relationships with donors and acquiring political support.

Another important local partner of the NLL is the State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF) which is responsible for the distribution of the state's funding for cultural and art projects. The SCCF supports NLL's reading promotion programmes, conferences, exhibitions and various events that are related to art, literature and traditional culture.

The construction of the building of the Castle of Light was fully funded by the state. Following the Law on the Implementation of the Project of NLL, the initial funding was allocated from the revenue from the privatization of the Latvian Shipping Company. In addition, the state budget revenue from payments for the use of state capital and from payments by the Bank of Latvia to the state budget were assigned for the implementation of the project.

The total costs of the project (2001–2014) reached €268 million, including €8.8 million spent on land acquisition and compensation; €198 million – construction of the Castle of Light (with supervision); €1.2 million – reconstruction of the Repository building; €21 million – furniture and equipment of the Castle; €1.43 million – relocation of collections and systems.

The Castle of Light was built jointly by three major Latvian construction companies – the National Association of Builders. The costs of the construction have always been perceived by the public as excessively high; however, the building is structurally one of the most complicated projects in the history of the building industry in Latvia and it is equipped with cutting-edge building management systems. The project was supervised by an international construction consulting company, Hill International, which increased the cost but provided the guarantee that the building will meet necessary standards.

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<sup>10</sup> The Latvian National Library Foundation [www.gaisma.lv](http://www.gaisma.lv).

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