



**Seven billion human beings, a thousand billion communities... and a library for each and every one
The library at the service of all communities**



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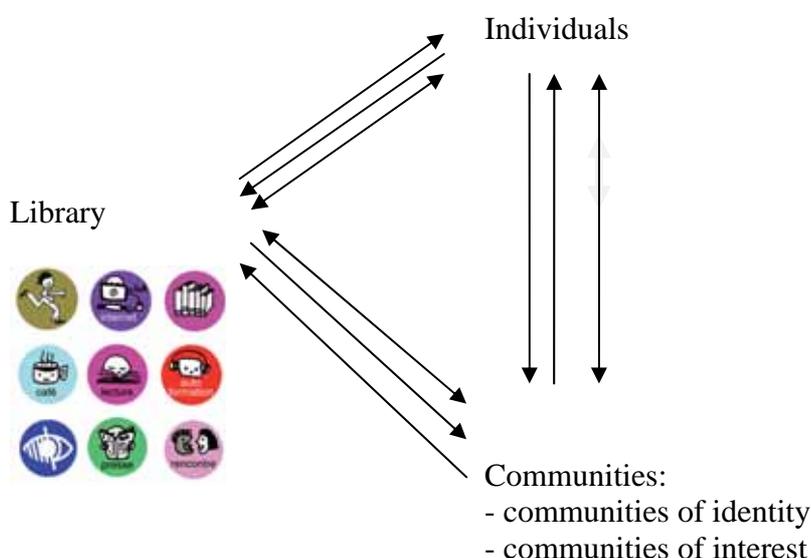
Abstract:

Being a library today, serving all individuals and all communities, means holding an essential, unique and original place within public space, in a way that could be defined by the following formula:

"2012 library" = a library for each and every one, that serves the community and its users + a place for sharing and exchange, where new communities emerge, defined by common interest and where social gathering is made possible by the library's initiative and users' contributions.

A library for “each and every one”

To clarify the object of my intervention, a diagram re-positioning the terms included within the title will briefly establish how my explanation will develop.



This diagram links three components: the library, individuals and communities. The latter component – “communities” – divides itself into two types of communities: those of identity and those of interest. One should focus on the arrows in this diagram, linking the triangle's three summits – relationships between the three components – and the directions of the arrows: one-way, one component acting upon another, or two-way, reflecting a movement of to and fro, a reciprocity of actions and a dynamic interaction.

My essay's most important point will be to emphasize how the "each and everyone" is essential and positions the library in a specific position, serving **both** individuals – in all of their diversity, staying attentive to their singular needs – and the communities and constituted groups, keeping in mind their specificities, characteristics and the particular *rapport* that each of these communities can hold with the library. It is the library's duty to be accessible to communities whom, otherwise, would stay excluded from its offer. This means **building a place for them** within the library, which matches their needs, so that using the library is made possible and easy to them. "A library for each and everyone" thus concerns the "seven billion individuals" as well as the "thousand billion communities". Are there many institutions that can nourish such an ambition, aim for such a goal? Or is **the defining characteristic of libraries today to answer to contemporary society on such an inclusive mode, positioning themselves as unique and original places: a third place open to all, individuals AND communities?** What is it that defines these very particular relations established with communities, as well as with each individual? How can the library work to develop these relations? How can the tension between individuals and communities exist in a productive and balanced manner at the heart of the place that is the library?

Before presenting some of the actions and welcoming structures put in place at the Bpi, Bibliothèque publique d'information – the library in which I work – to **serve and accompany individuals in their singularity, and communities in their diversity**, I should explain the context and environment which have enabled these changes to take place. The environment was one of constraints: constraints which became stimulating and didn't obstruct the evolution of the library's range of services, but contributed to structure the new offer we developed.

Communities within the library? You can not be serious!

Of all the specific constraints of this environment, there is one which is perhaps lesser known, as it seems to be less present in the environments you are familiar with. You are allowed to think in terms of "the communities", and the offers a library can develop for these. **You can reflect on how to serve the communities, and the systems to put in place for this purpose. Asking this question is, in France, very much frowned upon, as it is nearly seen as an illegitimate one.** Does this mean French librarians live in an exotic world? It is undoubtedly a world with its own constraints, and therefore its own set of answers devised to approach the question of communities within the library. Despite the weight of these constraints, it is essential not to neglect them, but to build upon them to develop links between the library and the communities.

How would one define this constraint?

Up until today, it is a difficult thing to reflect on the relation between, on the one hand, the institutions that make up and structure public space, and the communities on the other. In France, since the 1789 revolution, the public sphere is structured by **institutions which are aimed in priority, if not exclusively, at individuals.** It is a system that developed throughout the centuries, for the large part because of the dismembering of all kinds of communities which then existed (eg. linguistic communities built around regional dialects, or corporatism which structured the world of labour) to put forth the primacy of the Individual – free, equal and fraternal to others – in a public sphere where the laic imposed its limits on the religious. In this context, public space can exist only as composed by a multitude of individuals, gathered within a political system, the French Republic, built upon a universal motto: "Liberty, equality, fraternity".

This difficulty to conceive communities within public space impedes one's capacity to reflect upon, and put in place steps to empower communities within society.

This context seemed important to me to establish. As public opinion looks upon communities with suspicion, questioning their legitimacy within the public arena, reflection and action around these issues is rendered much more difficult. If one considers communities as illegitimate, or as a threat to the nation's unity, how could there be a need to reflect on "how to serve communities"? The authorised question remains, "Is it possible to envisage" developing a policy that takes communities into account? "Is it legitimate" to serve communities? Doesn't a reflection on "how to serve communities" equate to encouraging the communitarianism which the Republic has done its best to avoid, throughout its history? Wouldn't that be an attack to a form of harmonious living by encouraging the fragmentation of common space, the explosion of a unified public sphere into a mosaic of smaller, hermetic territories?

Despite the weight of history, a shift has started to occur: the dogma of the individual's supremacy within public space and the taboo of the place of communities have given way to a new outlook on the current situation, made more complex by globalisation and multiculturalism. Fear of communitarianism, far from being absent, continues to be brandished to question any action taken to accompany communities of interest into the public sphere. Yet one has to admit that communities cannot be ignored in today's society, and that thought has to be put into what place they should hold within it. **To invent today's *vivre ensemble*, one has to reflect on the place communities of identity should hold within public space - and the place that institutions such as libraries, which compose public space, can offer to communities.**

A library at the service of all communities

Due to the aforementioned cultural context, a French answer to the question of community empowerment will not be found in the systems that have been put in place in countries based on an anglo-saxon model.

If I thought this introduction was necessary, it is because this debate on whether or not to serve "communities of identity" occurs on a daily basis. Such a context impedes action, and develops an unstable equilibrium in which the library develops a variety of policies: some are aimed at the community of its users, others at communities of identity which exist in society and within the library, and a third type are directed at communities which do not already exist in society: communities of interest and reunion. In all three cases, the leading principle is to encourage harmonious cohabitation, beyond diversity and difference.

How can the library achieve in serving not only communities of identity, but all communities, that is, **all at the same time, in a given place, all three types of communities**: the Community of users, which the library serves at all times, the communities of identity, specific audiences which the library takes steps to cater for, and communities of interest, which the library contributes in creating by the instalment of platforms of meeting, exchange and collaboration?

To answer this question, I would like to present to you **three schemes** put in place by the library to **serve each of these three types of community**.

To serve the Community of readers	The library by all/for all: the Bpi
To serve communities of identity	A living book for migrant people
To serve communities of interest	The conversation workshops

The Library for all, a place for cohabitation, at the service of the Community of readers: the "second home"



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The library builds itself day after day, welcoming individuals and their personal projects. In doing so, beyond this obvious founding principle, it succeeds, thanks to its organisation, collections, services, principles and rules, in bringing its users and their projects together into a Community of users. They share the space, sometimes electing it over other libraries, to experience a certain kind of *vivre ensemble*.

Serving the Community of readers and answering individual demands and singular needs constitutes the *raison d'être* and the daily routine of any library. The Bibliothèque publique d'information, where I work, is specifically organised, since its creation, to achieve this goal.



A few words of presentation:

The Bpi, "Bibliothèque publique d'information" (Public reference library), often familiarly referred to as "Bob" or "Beaub", is the largest public reading library in France. It is located at the heart of Paris, in the Beaubourg area, within the Georges Pompidou Centre, sharing a building of strong architectural identity with the National centre for art and culture.



It is a very large library: 10,000m², mostly spread out over two spacious reading rooms spread across two separate floors. It offers an encyclopaedic collection of 350,000 documents in free access (books, periodicals, documentary films, music CDs, electronic resources, methods and software for self-learning, etc. - at the exclusion of a youth collection) as well as a programme of events and free Internet access.

The library is accessible to all, with no required subscription or administrative formality, and is visited by an average of 5,000 readers per day. All of its documents are available for reference only, and can be consulted on one of the 2,100 places provided for reading. It is open every day of the year, apart except on Tuesdays and the 1st May, until 10pm, thus including Sundays and bank holidays – a rare feat amongst French libraries.

Alongside this public space which allows for anonymity and autonomy – as a result of the free access to all collections and services – the library offers readers guidance, with a team of close to 200 librarians (all of whom devote a third of their work time to serving the public) spread across ten specialised information desks. Users thus have the choice to use the library freely and independently, or to seek help from librarians if they so wish, so that these mediators can accompany their research, answer their demands and needs and accommodate their usage of the library.

According to those who discover the library, the Bpi is a place where one feels at once very small and very big. Very small due to the vast, airy architectural space where so many resources are available, organised following the strange principles of library and information science. The library

becomes a place for interrogations. But it simultaneously provides a space where one can feel very big, empowered by the breath of the collections and their accessibility: the library as a place for answers.

The aforementioned characteristics, combined with its location at the centre of Paris, mean the library is very distinctive in the uses and social relations it allows or facilitates. The singular cohabitation which takes place at the Bpi is one that will surprise the first-time visitor. One could indeed say the Bpi is an important library, but also more than a library, as its users originate from a great variety of communities of identity. From a cultural and social point of view, as well as differences in age, projects and needs, **diversity is what defines the library's identity. Its community of readers, that which it serves day after day, is multicultural.**

A fair representation of France's social and cultural diversity, the Bpi's users take up their habits there for a few days or weeks, a season or a few years; enough time to carry out a piece of research, to accompany a project, years of study... up to a lifetime. Many studies emphasize this particularity, this element specific to the institution, this "difference". It is not a rare feat that daily exchanges with users bring up the term of a "second home". For certain students and "regulars", the library does indeed become a "second home" where they come to spend at least as much, if not more, or time than in their "first home". For some other regular users, in difficult and precarious situations - sometimes homeless -, it may be impossible to even speak of a "second home", but their attachment to the place is no less strong. Whether it be a constitutive element of one's day or succession of days, a refuge or a "library/home", the library is an essential place. Users state their feeling of belonging to the library, a belonging which constitutes their identity as readers: they refer to their feeling of affiliation to the Bpi's Community of readers. They thus become readers and users, but are not defined only by their individual projects which the library facilitates – **they form a Community**, by their affective attachment to the place and its daily sharing of a public space which they inhabit for many hours together. They elect this place of relative calm – a place designed to cater for their curiosity, to answer their need for concentration and to develop their life project – to spend a few hours or a lifetime there, amongst a great diversity of users and a material proximity which never turns to promiscuity (2,100 seats available at any given time, 5,000 readers per day), and with great mutual respect. All of the library's efforts are focused on their project, their needs and their individual usage, within the limits of the projects, needs and uses of their daily neighbours, so that everyone can benefit together from the library.

The Bpi serves its Community of readers by welcoming its visitors on the mode of a particular kind of cohabitation. This atmosphere of tolerance and respect, the peaceful collective use of public space, the sharing of resources and uses, this setting offered to the diverse projects that materialise within it, all these are the elements that constitute the Community.

Does that make it the only legitimate community within the Bpi – an institution of the Republic – or the only one that the “open to all” library can serve, without distinction?

Serving communities of identity: a range of open services – A living book for migrant people

The possibility for the Bpi to serve other communities, those of identity, which exist in society beyond the walls of the library, didn't so much come from changes in the increasingly globalised outside world, as from a need perceived within the library to redefine the paradigm of universal service to the Community of users, to maintain its force and validity. These communities could be defined by any shared nationality, generation or gender, or by political, social, religious or cultural views. To remain open to all, it was necessary for the library to adapt its relation to communities, thus **accepting to develop specific services** so as not to sideline any users that had, like anyone, elected the library as a space for them to thrive in. This is what made the unthinkable thinkable – and the impossible possible.

As of today, few schemes have been put in place, all of them very recent – a few years old at best. They all share the characteristic of **serving communities of identity in a certain way**. Their intention is to make what is available within the library accessible, taking into account the specificities which can impede each community's access to this, and **aiming to help the individual within the communities of identity, rather than the group**. The individual is not seen as defined by his community, but is offered a individual, personalised service. The systems put in place do not constrain individuals within the community they belong to, but allow for an exchange between the community and the environment. Within these initiatives, the tension between serving the individual and serving the community is constant: it is this tension which must create a balance to facilitate each and everyone's progression, regardless of their community.

This approach to serving communities of interest is embodied by a specific and emblematic example. In July 2010, a partnership was established with "France terre d'asile" (FTDA), one of the main French associations offering support to migrants. **This initiative was devised to serve a community of young migrants that frequented the library on a daily basis**. As this specific scheme was unfortunately not given any name, I will refer to it using one of the titles which has been regularly attached to it: **"A living book for migrant people"**, echoing similar schemes put in place most notably in Sweden. It is this initiative, its genesis, history and effects which I would like to present to you.



The story began when, in the space of only a few weeks, an entirely new audience arrived within the library: groups of young foreign migrants who exclusively used the free Internet service. The library's traditional welcoming structures, aimed at each and everyone, found themselves endangered as a result. This was not due to the behaviour of the young migrants who, every day, used up multiple Internet sessions. The difficulty lay in the **language barrier** which made the librarians unable to briefly present to them the rest of the services and collections available at the Bpi. This, in turn, would have allowed them to make their own decisions, and not see their uses constrained by a lack of knowledge of our offer. Yet no common language allowed us to establish communication with these users: they did not speak French, English or Spanish... The librarians' questioning and reflection around this issue was reinforced by the fact that this audience was not made of 'isolated' cases. They were present in mass, queuing for Internet tickets, and some within this group seemed particularly young (the library's regulations prohibit access to the Internet for minors under 16, unless accompanied by an adult).

Due to the breakdown in communication, the library's universal welcoming structure could not benefit these young migrants; yet librarians felt it was essential for the library to be able to further help these users.

This audience of approximately a hundred young migrants shared a common origin: Afghanistan.

They spoke in Dari (or Farsi) or in Pachtu. In a situation of great precarity, both social (homeless) and judiciary (no defined status), they frequented the library on a daily basis to use only one of its services: the free Internet access. After some thought was put into this issue, the library contacted the "France, terre d'asile" association (FTDA), one of the main associations in France to support people in a situation of migration - in particular, those that match the definitions of "refugees" or "stateless" (<http://beta.france-terre-asile.org/qui-sommes-nous/presentation>). The Bpi and FTDA agreed on a **partnership, by which the FTDA association would intervene within the library**. To validate the content of these interventions, and to define its modalities, a preliminary report had been drawn up by one of FTDA's collaborators.

Based on this report and keeping in mind the principles that structure the welcoming of users at the Bpi, **our efforts concentrated on two aspects**. First, **accessing their rights**: information on asylum rights, finding a place to live and the protection of isolated immigrant minors, as well as guidance on specialised structures that provide help for asylum seekers and refugees. Second, **accessing the library**: information, in their own language, on the library's services and collections, guided tours and practical demonstrations of a specific service, the self-learning area, where users can access freely one of the 120 booths to consult one of our 1500 language methods – the 300 methods of French as a foreign language being by far the most popular.

This initiative takes into account the singularity of each migrant by allowing him to express himself in his mother tongue: it is a multilingual service, the mediator being able to intervene in seven languages (French, English, Dari, Farsi, Pachtu, Urdu, Bengali). A true “living book”, the mediator allows one to access his rights whilst taking into account the **specificity of each personal situation**. He grants access to a knowledge which is already contained within the library's paper collections, bringing it to life with a personalised judicial accompaniment, effectively turning simple material availability into real accessibility of use. This mediation service often touches on extreme personalisation when the user shares with him his life story, explaining first and foremost his migratory journey and the reasons for his exile.

Since July 2010, **every Thursday and Friday afternoon**, this initiative contributes to making the library's services, collections and content more accessible, using resources external to the world of librarians. Not a single one of these sessions has left any doubt as to their relevance and necessity. Each week, young migrants, newly arrived in Paris or newcomers to the library, can benefit from this service.

I must underline here the one element which greatly contributes to this service's success. The library, as well as the young migrants benefiting from the service, are very grateful to the mediators, whose human and professional qualities are extraordinary. Week after week, for each session, they work multiple jobs all at once: social workers, jurists, interpreters, librarians. These mediators earn the trust of the young migrants that is necessary to deliver tailor-made answers to each individual situation.

To consolidate and prolong this specific scheme, other steps were taken and led by librarians. The initiative's notoriety was ensured amongst librarian colleagues using traditional internal means of communication, but also by hosting two conferences aimed at the entire personnel - one focusing on migrations in the 21st century, the other on foreigners' rights. For the public, multilingual posters and flyers contributed to spread the word beyond the walls of the library, and beyond the Afghan community, extending to people of diverse origins (Tibet, Iran, Mali, Tunisia, etc.). Groups of migrants were shown the self-learning area outside of the library's opening hours to facilitate their appropriation of the place. Persian-speaking temporary employees were recruited to help the librarian team overcome the language barrier and to facilitate the presentation of the self-learning area where the migrant public is increasingly present. Conversation workshops were put in place to further the self-learning experience, and create communities of interest around the language they are learning: French as a foreign language (two workshops, including one, recently instigated, aimed at Persian-speaking beginners), English, Spanish, German and Chinese.

methods (over 1500 in all, covering 230 languages, available for consulting in one of the 120 dedicated booths). The conversation workshops thus constitute **an offer perfectly adapted to the library, enriching it by prolonging what is already available**. “Real” oral conversations allow one to put into practice what he or she has learnt using the available language methods. It is an offer closely linked to the library's traditional offer, but which, in prolonging it, becomes something new. Conversation workshops are scheduled **once a week**, in the evenings, for **1h15min**. The language offered is English on Mondays, Spanish on Wednesdays, German on Thursdays, French (as a foreign language) on Fridays and Chinese on Saturdays. Each workshop is open to **10 to 15 people** and is led by a **native speaker of the given language**. **The workshops are not lessons**, with rules and regulations that would echo a classroom environment. No, the workshops are something other than a class. They are a moment of exchange during which the participants are invited to discuss, amongst themselves, a variety of topics, in a **relaxed and welcoming atmosphere**. These sessions are led not by a teacher, but by a native speaker of the target language. **The role of the native speaker is essential**. His or her fluency in the target language is not enough. Indeed, participants are eager to discover a range of “cultural” elements: “How does this take place in your country”. For English, Spanish, German and Chinese, the library calls upon students for whom one of these languages is their mother tongue. They are trained before leading their first workshop, and their progress is monitored by a librarian who coordinates this activity. The workshops of French as a foreign language are led directly by librarians who volunteer if they are interested in this type of initiative. **The necessary qualities for a workshop leader are linguistic fluency, motivation, enthusiasm and overall ease in dealing with groups**. There is no particular progression from one workshop to another, no obligation for participants to attend on a regular basis. The workshops are free to attend, accessible with no particular formality, without requiring from the participant to prove his identity. Here again are to be found the founding principles of the library's accessibility policy. No inscriptions are taken in advance: participants arrive 15 minutes prior to the start of the workshop on the day they wish to attend. **It is a kind of open-to-all “language café”**, as participants manage, with more or less fluency, to converse exclusively in the target language.

What do these workshops create? A great diversity of participants, who seemingly had nothing in common, share their taste for conversation in a foreign language. Their curiosity concerns the target language, of course, but also the experiences of others, their culture, their tastes and their backgrounds. The conversation workshops thus offer a sharing of language and, beyond that, of something much richer.

The workshops develop, between the walls of the library, a space for meeting and sharing between individuals who form real communities of interest during an hour and fifteen minutes. These are in part ephemeral, as newcomers modify, week after week, the community's geometry. Some participants are faithful to this weekly *rendez-vous*, thus constituting a link with the community which existed the previous week. These communities have a history and redefine themselves partly each week. The conversation workshops also offer a **particular group dynamic**, made of mutual respect, tolerance, curiosity, intensity, surprise, enthusiasm and personal investment within the group - although all participants are strangers to each other.

That day, the French workshop brings together fifteen people from fifteen different countries: Greece, Moldavia, Austria, China, Peru, Afghanistan, Hungary, Brazil, Spain, Libya, Japan, Ireland, Turkey, Mexico and Portugal. At the start of the session, each person presents themselves to the rest of the group, indicating their name and country of origin, and adding what they wish. Some mention their profession (a journalist, a criminologist, a business lawyer, a retiree, a publicist accompanied by a friend seeking a job, a dentist trainee who fled his country, etc.) or avoid speaking of their precarious situation. Some explain why they are in Paris (looking for work, perfecting their language skills, meeting up with their partner, etc.). Each of these presentations is accompanied by questions and answers, as each member may intervene to address one participant or another as he or she is introducing him or herself, and thus begin a conversation. It is an unlikely community which takes

form and stays distinctly animated as a summer topic, "holidays", gives way to each and everyone's tale of good and bad holiday anecdotes. One knows how the workshop starts. The initial round of presentations, accompanied by criss-crossed questions and answers to get the ball rolling and begin to know each other. One knows how it is meant to continue: a discussion around a theme selected by the workshop leader with or without supports to guide the conversation. Only this is assured. The rest is unforeseen and surprising, brought about by the group dynamic and the game of questions and answers. It is not a rare feat that the leader hasn't got time to put forth the subject he had prepared, as the conversation brings the group to discuss other matters.

The workshops offer a setting for a community of interest to exist: **a true Tower of Babel.**



Jakob Gautel *La Tour (Tour de Babel)*, 2006-2012
Collection de l'artiste © Jakob Gautel / DR

Within it reigns not cacophony or the incapacity to communicate and listen to each other, but the pleasure of sharing a conversation and all it carries with it, thanks to a language common to all and foreign to every one. Even to the workshop leader, whose native language it is that is being spoken, a session's debate can raise questions or aspects of the language and culture that seemed obvious/unproblematic. In this respect, the study of idiomatic expressions transposed from one language and culture to another makes for an excellent topic of conversation, and a very relevant tool for discussion.

One of the workshop's regular participants, Bernard, is an Austrian documentary filmmaker living in Paris for the last few years. Captivated by the atmosphere of the conversation workshops, its values and dynamic, he is planning to base his next film around them, and has already found the necessary funding to cover a six-month shooting period.

All of this to say that behind the bland aspect of a "conversation workshop" initiative, these sessions truly don't leave any of its participants indifferent.

As initiator, creator, compositor and agitator of real, palpable communities of interest, the library builds a particular relation with its users, offering them a setting, a framework to build projects together. For example, to experience social gatherings and exchanges around a language, developed with curiosity and enthusiasm.

Which interests should a library elect to build communities around? As well as the sharing of a language and its affiliated culture; reading constitutes a worthy candidate. The **Social Reading** initiative is a great example of this, and we are considering borrowing its model to adapt it to the Bpi. The list of possible interests is infinite; the library as a small fabric of communities of interest has bright days – and brighter projects – to look forward to by being bold and imaginative, whilst

conveying the library's core message of serving its users differently. As a counterpoint to the constantly expanding virtual world, here is a contemporary, library-specific manner of serving communities.

A book-shaped conclusion:

I would like to conclude with an image that would be the sum of the simplicity of the triangular diagram I began this presentation with, and the cartography representing the permanent proliferation and dynamic recomposition that characterises the Internet's universe of communities of interest.



It would like ton conclude with a book. Not to refer to the book's message or discourse, but because its form, its materiality as a book-object allows one to visualise, all at once, the great variety of users that make up a library, and the processes that the library must support, whereby communities of a new type emerge and develop: communities of interest.



Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* presents similar characteristics to the contemporary library: it is an animated, interactive book, composed of diverse elements linked in multiple different ways.

Published in 1961, Queneau's work is an interactive book, allowing one to compose, as his title indicated, a Hundred Thousand Billion Poems. Each page carries a poem and is cut into strips which each carry a verse of it. By combining strips from various pages, the reader recomposes this set of

poems to create his own. Verses become ingredients, recombined infinitely to build an extravagant amount of different poems.

The library is similar to this book, containing pages – communities of identity – divided into strips – individuals – each carrying a unique verse. These can be recomposed into a hundred billion poems and communities by, for and with the library. The library acts as a ‘little fabric of communities of interest’, composing new communities to better serve individuals and communities.

Today’s library must follow the example set by this timeless work. Through its propositions and initiative, it must allow its community of users, made of individuals belonging to communities of identity existing outside the library, to recompose into communities of interest within the library.

Today’s library must be inclusive and at the service of the communities that exist outside of it, so that every individual, carrying at once a singular project and a multiplicity of identities, can be served in his singularity.

The library must serve by making the available accessible and understandable. It is no longer enough for it to simply put in place its collections and services: it must imagine ways that will lead individuals, in all their diversity, to attain these collections and truly benefit from them.

It must create open initiatives to welcome individuals and communities and not close those in on themselves and on their specific identities. Instead of juxtaposing offers hermetic to each other, libraries must let each and everyone evolve in a place that will open them up to the library’s offer as well as to other individuals and communities. The aim is to create systems to serve individuals and communities as they evolve, so that libraries become sites of harmonious cohabitation, collaboration, experience, surprise and curiosity.

There is no one route to this goal. **A multitude of paths should be traced so every one can find that which suits his or her step.** Books of unique poems presented on each page must accept the multiplicity of poetic compositions, so that each and everyone can build a usage of the library that matches their project – so the library can serve each and everyone, individuals and communities in all their multiplicity, within the space it creates, inhabits and brings to life.