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The “Giovanni Santini” Library, Padua Astronomical Observatory: The Adapting Library

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Abstract. This paper traces the history of the Padua Astronomical Observatory’s library from its inception in 1761 until the present day. The library has undergone significant changes throughout the years, and the evolution of its space has been an important part of its history. This paper will show how the space has evolved over the years to respond to the needs of its patrons and to accommodate the collection.

1. Introduction

Over the years, the astronomical libraries have had to adapt more than other libraries with respect to their functions, locations and services due to the profound changes of technology and the changing needs of their patrons. The Padua Astronomical Observatory’s “Giovanni Santini” Library has demonstrated this ability to adapt and transform (as well as physically) throughout successive changes and moves inside the Specola and the Carrarese Castle. Every library is the “expression of a context, of a cultural environment, of a circulation of knowledge...” (Solimine 1999). This certainly applies to our library, which has always been strongly characterised by its architectural setting.

2. The first 150 years

The Astronomical Observatory of Padova was founded in 1761 by a decree issued by the Senate of the Republic of Venice and was built in the high tower of the old medieval castle. The tower lasted from 1767 to 1777. The library dates back to more recent times. In 1873 Giovanni Santini (1787–1877), the third director of the Specola, left his private collection (about 1000 works and 66 miscellaneous volumes) to the Astronomical Observatory with the commitment that “the collection should never be moved from the Observatory and should be kept separate with its own catalog” (Santini 1873). This first book collection, together with other volumes, was located in three rooms on the fourth floor of a building next to the tower, called “Casa dell’Astronomo” in 1876 (Fig. 1, no. 1). These rooms housed the library for about one hundred years, even if other books were later placed in the astronomers’ offices as well. This stage fundamentally marked the transition from an almost exclusively “private” use of books by astronomers to the free access for other scientists and experts in the field.

3. From 1960 to 1980

Over the years the bibliographic collection notably grew and, due to lack of space, was placed on different floors (Fig. 1, no. 2). The old publications of the observatories, which were the main vehicle for disseminating scientific findings and were being superseded by journals, were left on the fourth floor. Periodical publications were placed on the third floor, and monographs in a room next to the Director's office. The original materials, along with the original Santini Collection were moved to the tower, in a room built on the large landing before the room once used for astronomical observations. Even though this solution did not meet specific requirements for the preservation and safekeeping of ancient materials, it did prevent the collection from being split up. With the establishment of the University Degree Course in Astronomy (1968), the library turned into a reference point for both students and teachers.

4. The first modern library

The premises of the modern library were built in the second half of the '80s. Monographs and journals were gathered on the second floor of the tower (Fig. 1, no. 3 below), where the workshop was previously located. A metal intermediate floor was built to support bookshelves, thus optimising the use of the tower's vertical space, while giving it a distinctive character. The original materials remained on the tower's fourth floor (Fig. 1, no. 3 above). For the first time, the library had a purposely designed space. The new library also re-established the symbiotic link between the Observatory and the ancient castle. The research institute drew attention and financing, which could help in preserving and enhancing the medieval architecture (Figs. 2 and 3).

5. The last phase

In 2000, the old "Casa del Munizioniere" (Fig. 4), next to the tower, became available and a new, large library was designed to finally bring the entire bibliographic heritage in one place. In 2004, the new library included a room for monographs and one for journals, both with an intermediate floor for a total area of about 280 square metres, which included a large office. There were now spaces created for study and consultation (Figs. 5 & 6). In 2010, the most ancient volumes were finally moved to an adequately protected and controlled area. With the establishment of the "Servizio Biblioteche e Archivi" (Library and Historical Archives Service) of INAF, the collaboration with other Institute's libraries grew stronger. Due to its available space, the "Santini" library was chosen as the location to preserve printed copies of the most important journals.

The bibliographic data, which had already been included in the database of the "Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale" (National Library Service) were ready to be integrated in the CUBI, the INAF Libraries Catalog.

Despite the uncertainty of the future, there has been an awareness of the progress made in the optimisation of space and in the search for the right balance of functionality and preservation. As suggested by Carol Mandel, dean of the New York University division of libraries: "intellectual productivity and successful learning are the engines of research and well-designed library spaces fuel that engine" (Mandel 2013).

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