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A comparative study of contemporary Polish and German library buildings through the lens of cultural dimensions

(Studium porównawcze współczesnych polskich i niemieckich budynków bibliotecznych w kontekście wymiarów kultury)

Słowa kluczowe: budynki biblioteczne, architektura biblioteczna, wymiary kultury, indywidualizm, dystans władzy, unikanie niepewności, biblioteki polskie, biblioteki niemieckie, wolny dostęp

Abstrakt: Artykuł ma na celu porównanie budynków wybranych polskich i niemieckich bibliotek akademickich pod kątem przewidywanych poziomów wymiarów kultury z modelu 6D Hofstedego, które wydają się najbardziej widoczne w organizacji przestrzennej bibliotek: Indywidualizmu, Dystansu Władzy i Unikania Niepewności. Opisano w nim próbę polskich bibliotek uwzględnionych w badaniu oraz omówiono niektóre z najbardziej wyróżniających się przykładów zastosowanych w nich rozwiązań. Teza o wysoce indywidualnym charakterze każdego budynku bibliotecznego została potwierdzona i przedyskutowana w artykule. Próbę polską i niemiecką porównano pod kątem przestrzegania standardów i najlepszych praktyk w organizacji przestrzennej bibliotek, przy czym wykazano, że biblioteki niemieckie bardziej konsekwentnie przestrzegają tych zasad. Uśrednione poziomy poszczególnych wymiarów kultury w każdej próbce zostały porównane i skontrastowane z poziomami wymiarów kultury przedstawionych przez Hofstedego. Na koniec wykazano, że wyniki badań wskazują na kluczowe znaczenie stosowania wolnego dostępu do zbiorów w organizacji przestrzennej bibliotek.

Keywords: library buildings, library architecture, cultural dimensions, individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, Polish libraries, German libraries, open stacks

Abstract: The article draws on the author's research and previous works published in *Library Management*, to compare the buildings of selected Polish and German academic libraries in terms of their projected levels of Hofstede's cultural dimensions that are deemed to be most evident in spatial organisation: Individualism, Power Distance, and Uncertainty Avoidance. The sample of Polish libraries included in the research is described and some of the most outstanding examples are elaborated on. The thesis about the highly individual character of every library building is confirmed and discussed. The Polish and German samples are compared in terms of adherence to industry standards and best practices, wherein it is shown that German libraries follow these norms more consistently. The averaged levels of individual dimensions of culture in each sample are compared and contrasted with the cultural dimension levels presented by Hofstede. Finally, it is shown that research results point to the central importance of open stacks in library building design.

Introduction

In my previous articles I have described the results of observational research, based on Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions [1; cf. 5] conducted in a number of German academic libraries [6; 7; 8]. The first of these described the research methodology and the results of observations of German libraries in terms of the cultural dimension of Individualism [6], while the other two described the results of the same observations for the cultural dimensions of Uncertainty Avoidance [8] and Power Distance [7].

Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been discussed at length in previous works, but briefly: Individualism (IDV) relates to the extent in which a person in a culture is seen as an individual, as opposed to a member of a group and, consequently, how much freedom they have to do what they want; Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) is a measure of how much a culture is willing to accept the inevitable uncertainty of the future and, consequently, how much focus there is on rules and control; Power Distance (PDI) is a measure of the culturally acceptable levels of inequality, which affects the relations of those in power to those without. These dimensions obviously have far more depth to them than can be described in one sentence [cf. 1] and affect all areas of life, including education and libraries [cf. 5; 6; 7; 8].

In a library these measures affect, among others, the relations between the institutions itself, the librarians and the patrons. The central premise of the presented research is that library space both shapes organisational culture and is developed under its influence [5; 6]. Analysis of subject literature suggests that the optimal library space should promote Individualism [6, p. 125-126], project low Power Distance [7, p. 141-143], and demonstrate weak Uncertainty Avoidance [8, p. 132-133]. This may be a result of these industry standards and best practices being mostly drawn from the experience of libraries in the USA, although there are also good practical reasons behind them. This discussion, however, is a subject far beyond the scope of this work [cf. 5].

The purpose of this article is to compare the aforementioned results of observations of German library buildings with those obtained from the observation of libraries in Poland, which were performed during the same time period with the use of the same study tool [cf. 4]. The aim of the comparison is to see whether national culture has any bearing on the way library space is organised in the two countries. The initial assumption is that in the spatial organisation of a single library building any cultural influences would be trumped by its individual characteristics, but there may be some trends visible in a larger sample.

The Polish sample

The Polish sample was slightly larger than the German one (described in detail in previous articles [6; 7; 8]) and included twelve academic libraries in Poznań, Gdańsk, Katowice, Białystok, Kraków, Olsztyn and Warsaw. Most of them were main university libraries, but there were also two faculty libraries and two academic libraries not affiliated with a teaching institution. The sample included the following libraries:

- AWF (Academy of Physical Education) Library in Poznań;
- Library of the Medical University in Poznań;
- Novum Philological Faculty Library of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań;
- Polish and Classical Philology Faculty Library of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań;
- Polish Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk;
- Gdańsk University Library;
- Silesian Library in Katowice;
- CINiBA (Scientific Information Centre and Academic Library) building in Katowice;
- Former building of the Jerzy Giedroyc University Library in Białystok [cf. 4];
- Library of the Pope John Paul II University in Kraków;
- University Library in Olsztyn;
- Warsaw University Library.

A few of these stand out from the sample. The Warsaw University Library and the CINiBA building in Katowice both rank lower on Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) than not only most other libraries included in the study, but even the idealised theoretical model. They also rank very high on Individualism. This results from very deliberate use of open stacks, open planning, glass walls, etc. However, the Warsaw University Library, unlike the CINiBA building, projects a fairly high Power Distance (PDI), compared to other libraries in the sample, mostly because of its monumental size and style. The Gdańsk University Library compares interestingly to the Warsaw University Library, as it is built on a very similar plan, but ranks much lower on IDV and higher on UAI (cf. Graph 4).

On the other end of the spectrum, the AWF Library in Poznań, the Silesian Library, the Polish and Classical Philology Library in Poznań, and (to a lesser extent) the former University Library in Białystok all project lower IDV and higher UAI and PDI. This is not only due to closed stacks, but also efforts to separate internal spaces and project power. While in most of these libraries this can be at least partly ascribed to the limitations of the building site (especially in the case of the Polish and Classical Philology Library in Poznań), in the Silesian Library there were no such limitations and the building's character is the result of deliberate design decisions. Many of these decisions were dictated by an out-dated vision of modernity, probably related to the fact that while the building was completed in 1998, it was designed in 1989. Others, however, like the narrow, dark underground corridors with forbidding doors, which appear to form much of the space available to patrons, seem inexplicable. Furthermore, the Warsaw University Library, designed in 1993 and completed in 1999 is almost its polar opposite.

Image 1. Readers' area in the Silesian Library

As far as power projection is concerned the undisputed frontrunner is, somewhat surprisingly, one of the smallest buildings in the sample – the AWF Library in Poznań. It makes up for its diminutive size with closed stacks, limiting access, and the church-like, impressive main hall dominated by a downright intimidating information desk, with a tiny open stacks area (closed to non-students) hiding behind it.

Image 2. Main hall of the AWF Library in Poznań

One of the more interesting observations during the research was that of the Medical University Library in Poznań, which at the time had just moved to its new premises. The new building is very modern and one of the more open spaces in the whole sample, rivalling the likes of CINiBA and the Warsaw University Library. The openness definitely seemed to have been welcomed by the students, who were clearly enjoying it. The staff on the other hand, seemed rather intimidated; the library was filled with ad hoc notices of bans and orders and I found it impossible to obtain permission to take photos, despite going all the way up the chain of command to the director[1]. In other words, the organisational culture of the library seemed to stand in direct opposition to its building. More detailed results of the observations of all the studied buildings in terms of specific cultural dimensions are presented below in Graphs 1-3.

Image 3. Notice board obstructing access to the main staircase of the Medical University Library building



Source: author's collection.

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[1] In the seemingly much less open AWF Library this permission was easily granted by phone.

Graph 1. The relative Power Distance suggested by the spatial organization of the analysed libraries. The number of elements suggesting high PDI is shown above the axis, and the number of elements suggesting low PDI is shown below the axis[2]
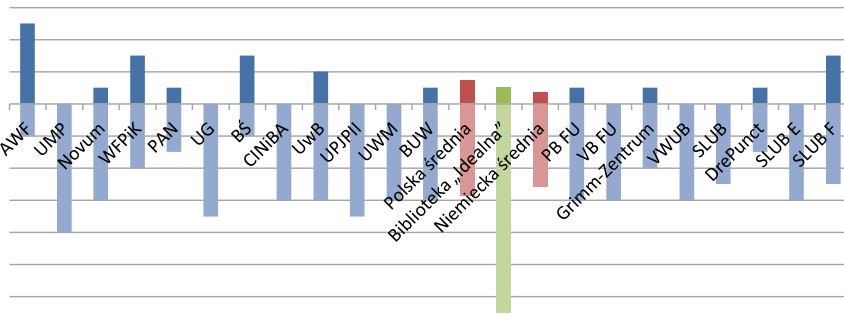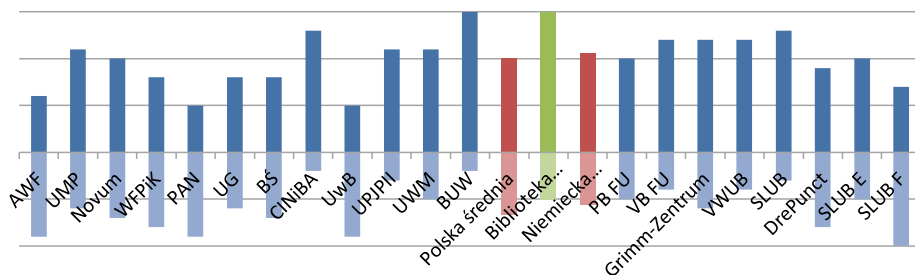

Source: author's research.

Graph 2. The relative Uncertainty Avoidance suggested by the spatial organization of the analysed libraries. The number of elements suggesting high UAI is shown above the axis, and the number of elements suggesting low UAI is shown below the axis
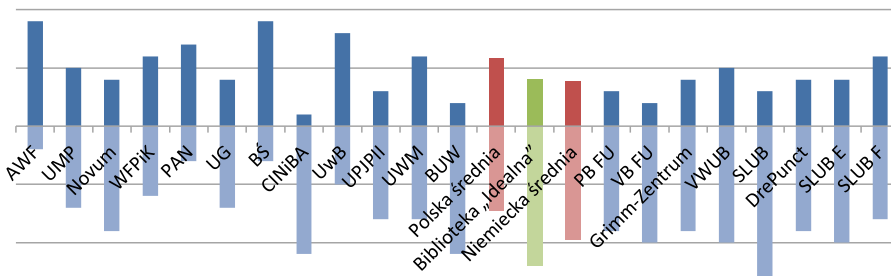
Source: author's research.

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2   AWF – AWF library in Poznań, UMP – Library of the Medical University in Poznań, Novum – Novum Philological Library in Poznań, WFPiK – Polish and Classical Philology Library of the Adam Mickiewicz University, PAN – Polish Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk, UG – Gdańsk University Library, BŚ – Silesian Library in Katowice, CINiBA – Scientific Information Centre and Academic Library in Katowice, UwB – University of Białystok Library, UPJPII – Library of the Pope John Paul II University in Kraków, UWM – University Library in Olsztyn, BUW – Warsaw University Library, Polska średnia – the average result for all analysed Polish libraries, Biblioteka „Idealna" – idealised theoretical model of library space based on literature and best practices, Niemiecka średnia – the average result for all analysed German libraries, PB FU – Philologische Bibliothek der Freien Universität, VB FU – Veterinärmedizinische Bibliothek der Freien Universität, Grimm-Zentrum – Jacob-und-Wilhelm-Grimm-Zentrum, VWUB Volkswagen Universitätsbibliothek, SLUB – Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden, DrePunct – Bereichsbibliothek DrePunct, SLUB E – Zweigbibliothek Erziehungswissenschaften, SLUB F – Zweigbibliothek Forstwesen.

Graph 3. The relative Individualism suggested by the spatial organization of the analysed libraries. The number of elements suggesting high IDV is shown above the axis, and the number of elements suggesting low IDV is shown below the axis

Source: author's research.

Each Library Building is Different

Observations of libraries in Poland and Germany allowed me to draw some general conclusions about the spatial organisation of libraries in both countries, which in turn may lead to deductions about cultural differences between them, although such extrapolations must be made tentatively, due to the limited size of the study sample. Firstly, observations largely confirmed the preliminary thesis about the highly individual character of most library buildings. Despite the clear similarities between some of them, a description of a single library requires a careful analysis of the nuances of its spatial organization, to avoid hasty generalisations.

Often, determining how the library implements particular organisational rules or solutions requires detailed explanations. For example, many library buildings that follow the principle of flexibility from a technical point of view have specific limitations, which reduce its impact on the overall functioning or perception of the building. For instance, the university libraries in Białystok and Olsztyn both follow the technical specifications for a flexible library buildings, but also impose limitations on how the space can be rearranged. The latter building is divided into four smaller parts which are only internally flexible, while the former is locked into putting certain areas on specific floors by factors such as the cargo lift not reaching the ground floor.

Even buildings that are based on a similar plan or concept, may differ significantly because of less obvious aspects of spatial organization. This is, for instance, the case in the Library of the University of Warsaw and the Main Library of the University of Gdańsk, or the NOVUM library and the Library of the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, both at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. In both pairs the two libraries are built around a similar concept and on a very similar floor plan. The latter two even belong to the same university. And yet, in both cases the libraries are very dissimilar in terms of the cultural dimension levels their buildings suggest. The Warsaw University Library presents the most open space of all the buildings included in the research, while the Gdańsk

University Library ranks much lower on associated dimensions of individualism and uncertainty avoidance associated with open planning, despite being a very close facsimile of the Warsaw University Library building in terms of the overall concept and plan.

Graph 4. Relative position of Warsaw University Library (blue) and Gdańsk University Library (red) buildings on a map of the three cultural dimensions selected for the purposes of this research and analysis. The latter ranks noticeably higher on Uncertainty Avoidance and lower on Individualism
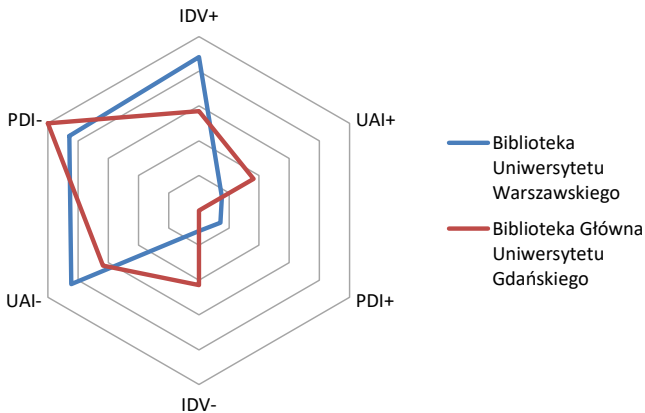
Source: author's research.

## Following industry standards in Poland and Germany

Nevertheless, a comparison of the observation results for all the studied libraries reveals some interesting general conclusions. One of the preliminary theses of the study was that cultural differences between countries and regions should not be visible in the research results, because the norms and principles of building and organising libraries have a greater influence on the design of library buildings. Rather, individual library buildings should be more exemplary of their organisational culture, as it both influences library design and is influenced by it. As noted above, this thesis is confirmed when one looks at the libraries separately – individual differences between them are stronger than the differences between the two analysed countries or between different cities. Nevertheless, analysis of the results for the entire sample reveals some clear trends.

Firstly, the variety among libraries in Poland is much greater than in Germany. It is difficult to ascribe this effect to differences in sample selection. In the Polish sample there is no greater diversity than in the German one with regards to neither the size of the studied libraries nor their character, because either sample included both large university libraries and smaller departmental ones. Neither is the Polish sample different from the German one with regard to the age of the libraries: in Germany they were opened in the period 1997--2009, and in Poland – 1998-2012. Both countries have also gone through a similar history of systemic transformation – the study sample was deliberately selected to include only libraries from former East Germany. The Polish sample is geographically more diverse, but

even if it were to be limited to the two or three cities with more than one library selected for the study (Poznań, Gdańsk, Katowice), greater diversity among the subjects would remain visible. The two libraries in Katowice alone differ more from each other than any two libraries in the German sample.

This seems to confirm the common stereotype that Germans are more committed to following rules, especially since most of the German libraries are similar not only to each other but also to the theoretical model, while some of the Polish libraries diverge from it significantly. Graph 5 presents, on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the purposes of this analysis, the position of the libraries of the AWF in Poznań (red) and Zweigbibliothek Forstwesen in Tharandt near Dresden (green), which, in their respective national samples, both deviate the furthest from the theoretical model (blue) based on the rules and best practice examples presented in subject literature. It is quite clear that while both of them diverge from the idealised model, the one in Poland is further from it. It should also be added that the library in Tharandt is an exception in the German sample, while in the Polish sample there were more libraries with a position similar to that of the AWF library in Poznań: The Silesian Library in Katowice and (to a slightly lesser extent) the Polish Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk and the Jerzy Giedroyc University Library in Białystok. At the same time, the Warsaw University Library and the CINiBA building in Katowice both seem to diverge from the model in the opposite direction.

Graph 5. Position of the AWF library in Poznań (red) and Zweigbibliothek Forstwesen (green) on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the purposes of this analysis, compared to the theoretical model (blue)
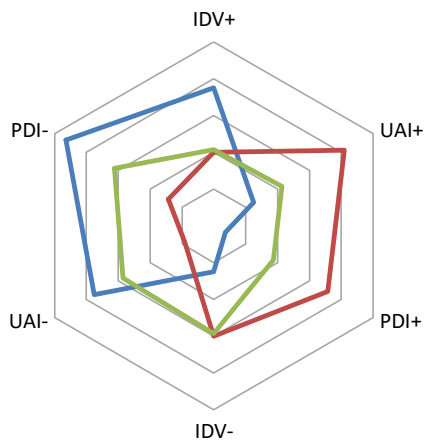
Source: author's research.

Graph 6. Position of the AWF library in Poznań (red), the Silesian Library (blue), the National Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk (green), and the University Library in Białystok (purple) on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for this analysis
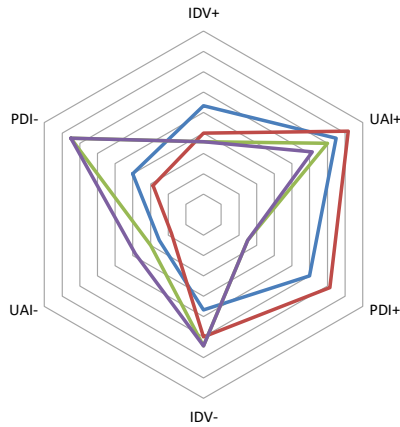
Source: author's research.

Comparing Averages

Secondly, comparing the average levels of the three dimensions of culture in the Polish and German samples reveals two conclusions. On the one hand, the thesis that librarianship "industry culture" is stronger than the national culture seems to be confirmed, because the averaged results for both countries on every cultural dimension are much closer to each other than to the results presented by Hofstede [cf. 1, p. 95-96, 141, 192-193]. At the same time, however, Hofstede repeatedly emphasizes that the differences between individual cultures are the really important and permanent features; more so than the numerical values of dimensions [cf. 2]. Comparison of the results in both countries reveals a surprising convergence between these differences and the differences in the levels of cultural dimensions quoted by Hofstede. In both sets of result:

1. Both countries have a very similar level of Individualism (slightly higher for Germany). Hofstede quotes an IDV level of 60 for Poland and 67 for Germany[3].
2. Polish culture is characterized by higher Uncertainty Avoidance (93 for Poland and 65 for Germany in Hofstede's results[4]). In this case, the difference in the results of the observations of libraries is smaller than that quoted by Hofstede, but still visible.
3. In Poland Power Distance is markedly higher than in Germany (68 for Poland and 35 for Germany in Hofstede's results[5]). In this case, the difference in the results of library observations is also smaller than in the results provided by Hofstede. However, there are a number of libraries in the Polish sample that rank much higher

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3 Source: The Hofstede Centre http://geert-hofstede.com/.
4 Source: The Hofstede Centre http://geert-hofstede.com/.
5 Source: The Hofstede Centre http://geert-hofstede.com/.

on PDI than the theoretical model (4 out of 12: primarily the AWF Library in Poznań, but also the Polish and Classical Philology Library in Poznań, the Silesian Library, and to a lesser extent the University Library in Białystok), while there is only one such library (out of 8) in the German sample.

These two observations suggest that despite common norms and the highly individual character of particular libraries, on a national level, cultural differences have a specific, noticeable influence on trends in library construction in the studied countries. This conclusion is not only interesting, but also potentially important in the context of planning, building, and organising library buildings, especially if these processes are to be based on the experiences of other libraries in the country and abroad.

It should be emphasized that these phenomena are not obvious from a cursory observation of library buildings. Each of the German libraries presented in the study has its own, individual, unique character, yet a careful analysis of specific aspects of their spatial organization shows that they converge on a very similar levels of cultural dimensions, suggesting that they are designed (consciously or not) based on a set of coherent and consistently applied values. Polish libraries on the other hand, while for the most part strive to adhere to industry standards, do not seem to consistently follow such a coherent set of principles. This is not only an interesting finding, but also an argument for the use of specific criteria when evaluating library buildings, especially if the goal is to use their examples in the construction of a new library.

Graph 7. A comparison of the dimensions of culture selected for the research in Hofstede's results (left; Poland – blue, Germany – red) and in the image that emerges from the spatial organization of studied libraries (right; Polish average – blue, German average – red)
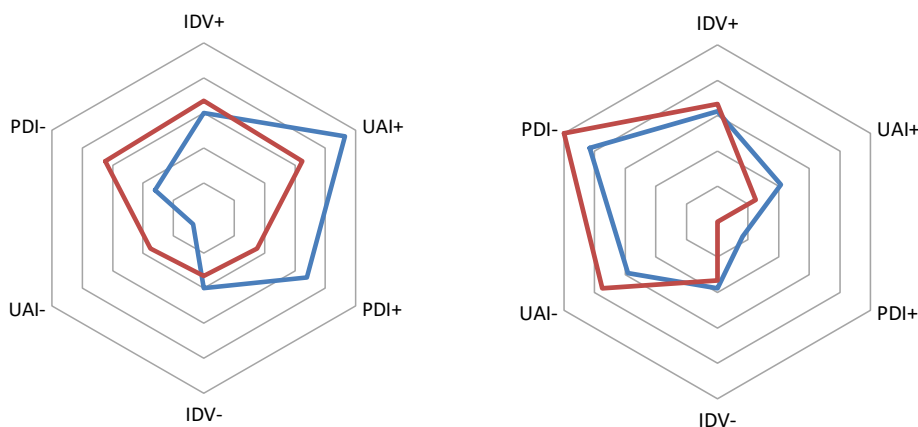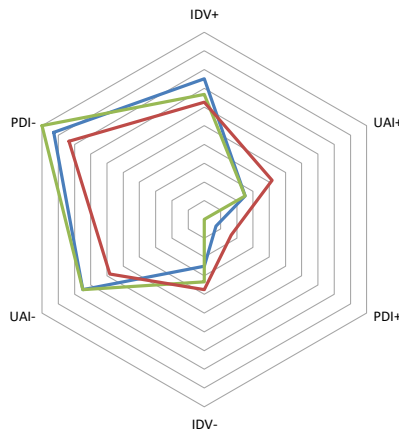

Source: author's research.

Finally, it is worth comparing the averaged results of the observations of the studied libraries to the theoretical model of an idealised library building. As can be seen in Graph 8,

the averaged results for libraries in both countries are very close to the theoretical model, even if (a few) individual libraries deviate from it to some extent. The studied German libraries adhere to the theoretical recommendations slightly better than libraries in Poland, but the difference is not significant. This indicates that contemporary standards and recommendations concerning library architecture and spatial organisation have penetrated the consciousness of the majority of the librarian community and are applied in the planning, construction, and organisation of contemporary library buildings, albeit not consistently across all contemporary libraries, especially in Poland.

Graph 8. Position of the averaged results of observations in Polish (red) and German (blue) libraries on a map of the cultural dimensions selected for the purposes of the study, compared to an idealised theoretical model (blue)
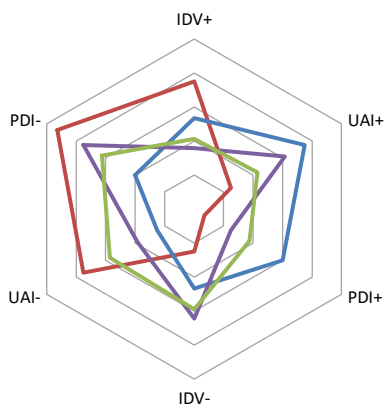

Source: author's research.

The Importance of Open Stacks

Another important outcome of the research would be to determine which of the organisational solutions used in libraries have the most significant impact on the extent to which a given building complies with the recommendations of experts and subject literature in terms of spatial organisation. It should be noted that the users' perception of a library's space is determined by a number of factors, which makes it impossible to propose a single solution that would automatically result in the creation of a perfect library space. At the same time, however, the results of the observations indicate that the way access to the collections is organised is a key element. On all dimensions, libraries with a closed stacks system deviate further from the theoretical model than libraries with open stacks.

Graph 9 presents the location of three of the five libraries with a closed stacks system included in the research on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the study, compared to the theoretical model. The chart does not include the AWF Library in Poznań, whose position is very similar to the Silesian Library, and the Polish Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk, whose position is almost identical to that of the University Library in

Białystok (cf. Graph 6). As can be seen, each of these libraries diverges from the theoretical model on all three dimensions; quite significantly on at least two of them. It should be noted that the greatest divergence is associated with different dimensions for different libraries, so the specific solutions applied in them mitigate this distance for some of the dimensions. The question remains whether such an effect could be achieved for all three dimensions at once. In other words, could a library with a closed stacks system be made to adhere more closely to the theoretical model through the application of minor organisational changes? This would be especially useful if opening the stacks is not possible.

Graph 9. Position of the Silesian Library (blue), the University Library in Białystok (purple), and Zweigbibliothek Forstwesen (green) on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the study, compared to the theoretical model (red)
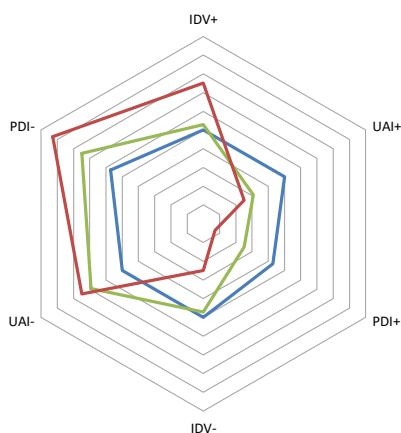

Source: author's research.

Graph 10. Averaged results for all libraries with open (blue) and closed (green) stacks systems overlaid on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the study and compared to the idealised model (red)
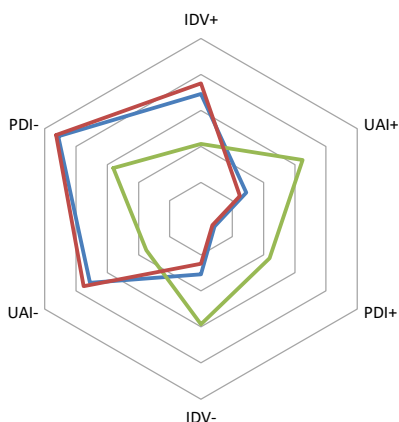
Source: author's research.

Graph 10 presents the averaged results for all studied libraries with open and closed stacks systems overlaid on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the study. The plot for libraries with open stacks is almost perfectly in line with that of the theoretical model, while the plot for libraries with closed stacks systems deviates significantly from it. Of course, in a specific library individual conditions can alter the situation. In the Polish sample this is most apparent in the case of the Polish and Classical Philology Library of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and in the German sample – the Bereichsbibliothek DrePunct in Dresden. As can be seen in Graph 11, despite the use of open stacks, both libraries visibly diverge from the theoretical model. However, this difference is much smaller than in the case of libraries with closed stacks systems. For most libraries with open stacks, the differences in comparison to the theoretical model are minor. These results, combined with the fact that only one point was ascribed in the study to the open vs. closed stacks factor itself, lead to the conclusion that the use of open or closed stacks in a library gives rise to other organizational solutions, thus making it a key feature of the spatial organization of a library. It seems impossible to build a modern library that complies with industry standards and recommendations, while sticking to a closed stacks system. This conclusion confirms the opinions on the use of open stacks presented in literature on the subject [cf. 3].

Graph 11. The position of selected libraries (Polish and Classical Philology Library in Poznań – blue; Bereichsbibliothek DrePunct in Dresden – green) with open stacks on a map of the three dimensions of culture selected for the study, compared to the theoretical model (red)

Source: author's research.

Conclusions

Despite the limited sample size, the research results seem to match the predictions of the cultural dimensions theory, which is somewhat surprising, as one would expect the effects of national culture to be swamped by the individual qualities of the library buildings. This is indeed the case in some instances, but overall trends are still visible. The most obvious of those is the much greater uniformity of the German library buildings, which all have

certain common features leading to similar outcomes. Polish libraries, on the other hand, are incredibly varied in virtually all respects. Furthermore, most of the studied German libraries tend to adhere quite closely to industry standards in terms of the projected levels of cultural dimensions, while Polish libraries often do not, although their variety means that the Polish averages are very similar to German ones. Nevertheless, it would seem reasonable to suggest that Polish librarianship might need more detailed and uniform standards that could be used by librarians and architects to help guide library design. Finally, the research results strongly suggest that the key feature of library spatial organisation is the use of open stacks, as libraries with open stacks systems adhere much better to industry standards.

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