

# *Theological Library as a Place of Learning, Contemplation, and Encounter*

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**T**heological libraries have traditionally been integral to institutions devoted to the study of theology, philosophy, and related humanistic disciplines. From antiquity onward, books and written materials have been central to theological and philosophical communities, serving as the foundations for reading, interpretation, and scholarly dialogue. Today, many theological libraries remain part of larger institutions, such as seminaries and universities, serving as centers for study and research, and providing access to primary sources, scholarly journals, and the latest works in theology.

Although these resources continue to be beneficial for all users, libraries are facing challenges as their physical spaces are no longer the primary study areas for many. Library reading rooms that once buzzed with academic activity are now empty spaces with little-used collections, a stark contrast to their former selves. Challenges include declining visitor numbers, reduced acquisition of print resources,

financial constraints, and the rapid shift to digital formats. Digital resources, including databases, repositories, and online libraries, are increasingly replacing visits to physical libraries, reshaping how theological research is conducted.

Faced with these changes, the central question emerges: how can theological libraries remain relevant as spaces for research and formation in the digital age? This chapter proposes that a paradigm shift is necessary—one that reimagines the theological library not merely as a repository of books but as a dynamic space of learning, contemplation, and encounter. By creating environments that are attractive, interactive, and engaging, libraries can once again become vital centers within the academic and theological community, appreciated for their space. The purpose of this essay is to explore practical strategies for transforming theological libraries into spaces that foster intellectual growth, spiritual reflection, and meaningful academic engagement.

## *The Challenge of the Library Space*

Upon entering a library, one is immediately surrounded by shelves of carefully organized book collections, desks, and classification systems reflected in both the arrangement of volumes and their call numbers. Many libraries also contain offices, circulation desks, reading lamps, bookstands, chairs and other seating, as well as conference rooms and other areas for library activities. Such spaces are designed to facilitate research and learning. As Bennett (2013) observes, “[t]he physical space is still a place where intellectual attention is refocused and formalized so that the distinct disciplinary context of a shallow and broad search is almost physically manifest or disciplined in the physical library space” (175). The library’s physical space intends to shape a user’s focus on research and investigation.

Even in our increasingly digital, individualized, and privatized world, libraries can offer structure, spaces for concentrated privacy, and areas for group work—features conditioned by the physical space itself (Bennett 2013). However, these days, physical libraries are faced with the question of legitimacy. As Elmborg (2011) notices, the current dominant narrative believes the digital world will replace libraries, forcing them to adapt to market pressures. Corporations like Google claim the information landscape, while bookstores and

coffee shops have become attractive, comfortable physical spaces that create competition for libraries. Libraries often need to find ways to revive their spaces and enhance interaction with their current and future users.

Library spaces are governed by their own internal rules and policies. Every aspect of library operations is designed and directed toward serving the community and its needs and interests. Entering a library means stepping into an environment that is intentionally ordered, in contrast to the often fragmented and disjointed digital world. In a culture of constant change, especially digital change, libraries must consider whether they are willing to adapt to social and cultural shifts and what such adaptation entails. Too often, change is resisted or ignored, rather than being redeemed and reimagined. As Elmborg (2011) continues, “Like cathedrals, temples, and other culturally symbolic spaces, libraries evolved to fill one sociocultural function, and they are so filled with the essence of their identities that they tend to resist appropriation or reinvention” (345). To attract physical visitors and remain relevant, theological libraries must embrace change and discover a pathway to a paradigm shift while continuing their mission. This approach requires creative thinking to adapt the design and atmosphere of available library space in ways that are both contextually relevant and visually appealing.

### *Library Space as a “Heterotopic Place” and “Third Place”*

The library can be defined as a heterotopic place. In Foucault’s (1986) thought, heterotopias are “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). These spaces exist in relation to all other spaces.

The library is such a place with defined rules and spaces for specific use, connected to the outside world and other places and experiences. Nevertheless, it remains a place in its own right. Asserts Foucault (1986), outside relations are defined in written form or through the exchange of knowledge and information:

[T]here are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example, museums and libraries. Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit... the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to Western culture of the nineteenth century. (26)

In this sense, the library continues to play a vital role in society. However, in today's context, it might lose its appeal and function due to appearing strict and rigid—both in physical design and sometimes austere atmosphere (cf. Elmborg 2011, 347). And even though, in the twenty-first century, through digitization and electronic formats, we can build an online archive with more information and materials than any library building can contain, the physical library provides a sense of welcome, community, and enthusiasm for research. For users who haven't had much experience spending time in a physical library, these attributes can be great complements.

Theological libraries, in particular, can become dynamic places of learning, contemplation, and encounter with others, extending beyond their traditional storage function. This perspective requires space to be transformed as areas for open conversation, forums for intellectual exchange and interaction with fellow patrons, and spaces that welcome “positive noise” and engagement. Theological libraries are repositories of knowledge in written form; by utilizing these resources, they can also become spaces where spirituality is cultivated, for example, through practices such as reading scripture aloud, group prayer, or meditating on texts. This way, the library becomes an extension of chapel life and theology classes. Interaction with art, music, and the performing arts, as well as many innovative ideas, could further enrich the space, allowing imagination to play a role in shaping theological education and raising the library's status.

The library, in this way, becomes a “Third Place,” the environment beyond home and work for gathering, connecting, and building community (Elmborg 2011, 348). In interactions with other forms of experiences, the theological library becomes a place of encounter,

combining learning and contemplation, which impacts spiritual formation, intellectual growth, and community building.

## *The Library of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia*

The Library of the Evangelical Theological Seminary represents a unique example of transformation. The seminary was founded fifty-five years ago in the context of Southeast Europe. The library holds around 105,000 volumes and 15,000 journals. For many years, however, a decline in student enrollment meant the library was used primarily by professors and visiting researchers. Despite its ample space for sitting and writing, it remained a sterile space with desks and shelves and was rarely visited by students.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the library and administrative staff recognized the need for change. The large reading room was emptied, and the space was redesigned with a warmer, more welcoming aesthetic. Classical furniture, reading lamps, antique chairs and tables, a wooden desk, carpets, and an exhibition wall were added. In 2023, Romanian evangelical artist Liviu Mocan donated a monumental sculpture, *Altars of Revelation*, measuring nearly four meters in width and five meters in height. Such changes attracted attention.

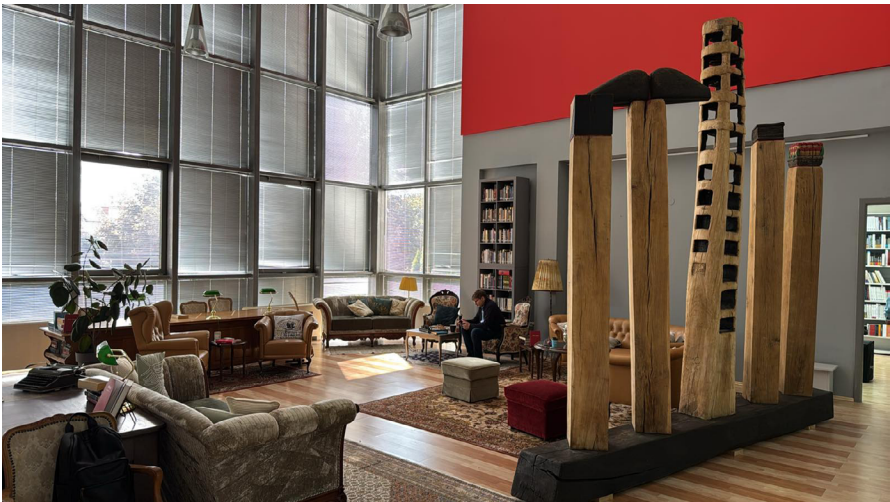


Fig. 1. "The Living Room" of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek

The library's open space was renamed The Living Room. Since then, the library has become the central place of the seminary. Each morning begins with worship, Bible reading, and prayer. After that, it becomes a place for coffee after classes and a gathering place to encounter others. The library hosts exhibitions every few months—book promotions, public lectures, and concerts. What was once an empty and silent room has become a vibrant, multifunctional space, visited by professors, students, administrative staff, and external users.

One professor described this transformation by comparing the library to J. R. R. Tolkien's Hall of Fire in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

Frodo found himself walking with Gandalf. 'This is the Hall of Fire,' said the wizard. 'Here you will hear many songs and tales—if you can keep awake. But except on high days, it usually stands empty and quiet, and people come here who wish for peace and thought. There is always a fire here, all the year round, but there is little other light' (Tolkien 2008, 300).

Similarly, The Living Room offers both quiet contemplation and vibrant communal life, embodying the theological library as a place of learning, encounter, and spiritual formation.

## *Conclusion*

Like Tolkien's Hall of Fire, theological libraries can become lively places of interaction, full of songs and tales, but also places of quietness and meditation. The library can be intentionally designed as a space connected to other areas and human experiences. The community of the theological library can be shaped through various imaginative ideas of learning, contemplation, and encounter with others. In the challenges of the digital era, libraries have the opportunity to engage their users by transforming into community hubs, open spaces, and interactive places where people can share and reflect on their experiences.

The full potential of the library can be realized in today's context by embracing the challenge of change, even if it means a paradigm shift. While every library is different, theological seminaries and their libraries can discover their own approach by observing their

environment, listening to their users, and creatively rethinking how their spaces might invite connection. In doing so, they can reclaim the theological library as more than just a repository of books, but as a vibrant space where intellectual inquiry, spiritual growth, and communal life intersect.

## References

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