

READING ROOMS

THE MOST STUNNING LIBRARIES
AROUND THE WORLD ARE SHRINES
TO THE PRINTED WORD AND MORE.

BY CHRISTINA
BOHNSTENGEL

At a time when libraries face threats from digitization and a shrinking public attention span, there are some forward-thinking architects, designers, and creative minds who are disrupting the traditional ideas of what a library can be. And while a new wave of these futuristic information centers wow with incredibly pleasing aesthetics and inventive functionality, the centuries-old institutions still hold a cherished place in the hearts of bookworms everywhere. Here's a roundup of some of the must-see libraries from across the globe, including both classics that transport us back to a simpler time, as well as new establishments for the modern age.



BIBLIOTECA VASCONCELOS, MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

North of Mexico City in its Buenavista district sits what appears to be an unassuming building, at first glance. Stroll a little closer to discover a lush botanical garden enveloping Mexico's mega-library. It's more than 400,000 square feet of steel, glass, and concrete that stops visitors in their tracks upon initial entry. Alberto Kalach's modernist architectural gem, completed in 2007, is visually stunning with floating stacks of open, scaffold-like shelving over translucent floors. This hangs above a massive atrium, which is home to a sculpture of a white whale skeleton covered in graphite rings by artist Gabriel Orozco—part of the library's permanent art collection.

Biblioteca Vasconcelos is actually the architectural and design melding of five libraries into one, with each section put together by a different creative team and dedicated to some of Mexico's greatest thinkers. The intentional mismatched result, with transparent walls and intricate networks of balconies, allows visitors to physically get lost in a world of books.



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TIANJIN BINHAI LIBRARY, TIANJIN, CHINA

One glance at the bright white, futuristic Binhai Library in the Chinese coastal city of Tianjin, it's easy to see why it instantly captivated a devoted following, both live and all over social media. Quickly dubbed The Eye and described with such superlatives as "the hottest new tourist attraction" and "the most beautiful library in China," this break from library architecture tradition is a booklover's dream come true. The initial atrium impression is that of never-ending curving shelves stacked full of colorful books. The angled shelves that ascend toward the ceiling also work as stairs, creating climbable shelving that has been described as hiking a book mountain.



"The angles and curves are meant to stimulate different uses of the space, such as reading, walking, meeting, and discussing. Together they form the eye of the building; to see and be seen," said Dutch architect firm MVRDV. "The eye-shaped atrium space of the library is designed to be a 'new urban living room.'" It was also intentionally designed to look like a 3-D eyeball, which also serves as an auditorium upon entering.



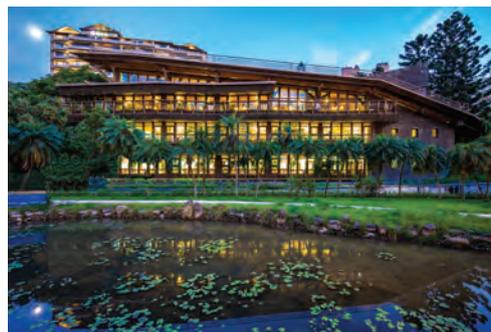
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BEITOU LIBRARY, TAIPEI CITY, TAIWAN

Apart from being famous for its volcanic hot springs, Beitou is also home to Taiwan's first official Green Library. Located in the lush green tropics of the Beitou Hot Spring Park, this tri-level, triangular-shaped statement speaks not only to library architecture, but also to eco-friendly design. It all started with laying the foundation in a way that not a single tree had to be cut down from the existing lot. That means lots of leafy, shrubby, woody shade to take advantage of, which doubles for the effect of feeling like you're reading in a whimsical tree house. The roof, supported by sustainable steel columns and wood beams, is outfitted with solar panels for 16kW of electrical power. It was also designed with a slope to capture rainwater in a drainage system that recycles it to water plants and flush the toilets. Providing more shade in order to eliminate the use of the air conditioning system, the wooden balcony was designed vertically, preventing the sun's hot rays from

heating up the interiors. Rooftop gardens, a windowless west wall, and interior brick walls created from ceramic industrial waste help keep the building relatively cool in a subtropical setting. Natural light from huge French windows on the east side of the building, ventilation, and wood-scented shelves and furniture give the interiors a serene outdoor feel. The bookshelves are low enough to allow an outside view, or you can read outside on balconies overlooking a gurgling stream.





SEATTLE CENTRAL PUBLIC LIBRARY, SEATTLE, USA

Intentionally designed to challenge the notion of libraries as dark and stuffy, Pritzker Prize-winning Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas, and American designer Joshua Prince-Ramus of OMA introduced the world to the Seattle Central Public Library in 2004, at a cost of \$166 million. It was the first new library model of the 21st century, with an avant-garde design to mark the new era. Sleek, modern, and sophisticated with 9,994 pieces of exterior glass combined with 4,644 tons of steel, the innovative architecture and design attracted more than more than two million tourists

the first year it opened; by 2014, that number had risen to over seven million. At the time, *New Yorker* magazine called it, "... the most important new library to be built in a generation, and the most exhilarating..." The Seattle building is thrilling from top to bottom." Starting at the top of the 11-story building is the roof terrace; but what really has visitors staring in awe is the Instagram-famous enormous slanted glass wall of the Reading Room on the 10th floor, overlooking Elliott Bay. Below that is the Books Spiral, a four-floor sloping ramp of the entire nonfiction collection on a continuous series of shelves. The Seattle Central Public Library was voted onto the American Institute of Architects 150 favorite structures in the United States.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

For any bibliophile obsessed with the smell of old books, a visit to the baroque library of the Clementinum is an absolute must. Situated next to the Charles Bridge in Old Town, the historical center of Prague, the Clementinum library building—which, today, is the home of the National Library—has been called the most beautiful library in the world. Originally part of a Jesuit university circa 1722, today it boasts a collection of more than 6.5 million volumes, with books from the Jesuit time marked with white spines and red marks. The ornate woodwork, heavy golden accents, and elaborate ceiling frescoes by Jan Hiebl set the tone for a classical library experience, accentuated by the collection of large, intricately detailed globes, both geographical and astronomical, along with a series of Jan Klein clocks.

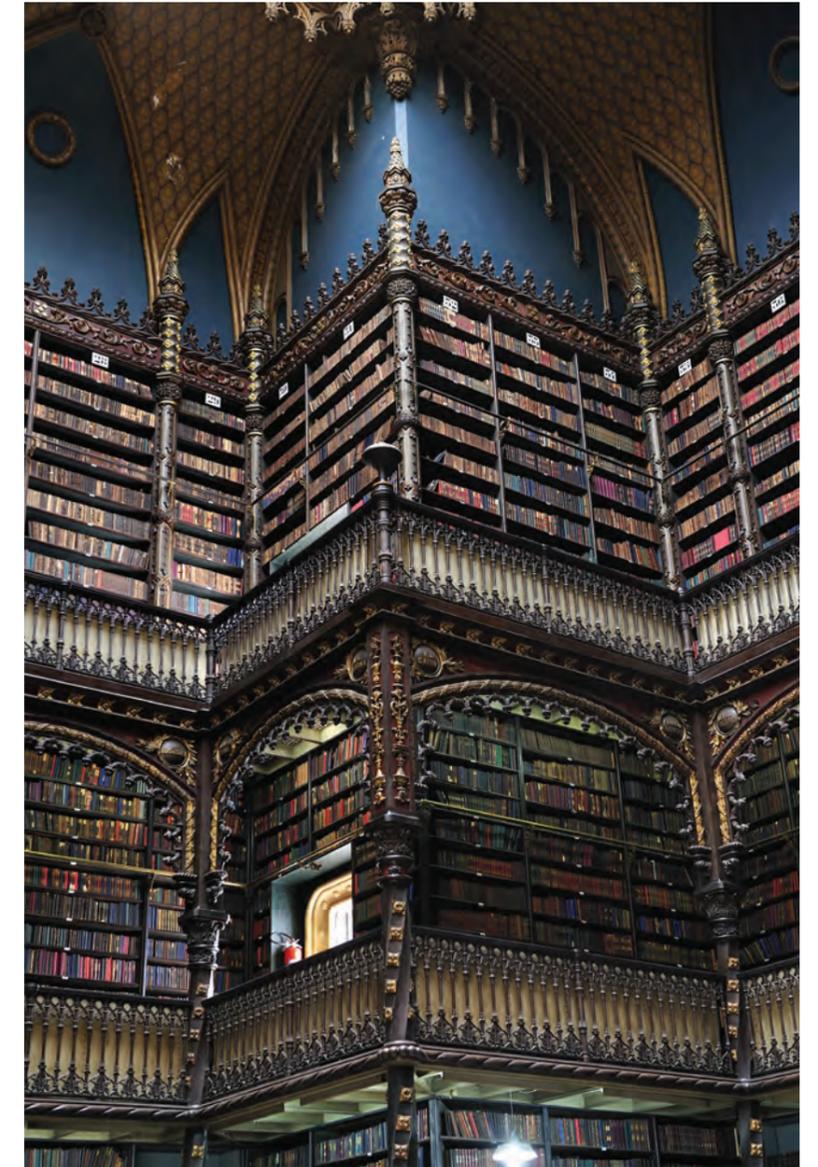
From its religious beginnings, to its declaration as a public and university library, and then its status as the National Library, today the reading room at the Clementinum complex is available to everybody over the age of 15, provides services to more than one million users every year, and lends out around one million books per year.



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ROYAL PORTUGUESE READING ROOM, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Like a library out of Hogwart's, this Gothic-Renaissance library in Rio unleashes the imagination with shelves of books ascending three stories, lining the walls painted in deep, rich hues. Ornate gold and wood accents, spiraling pillars, elaborate stained-glass windows, a wrought-iron chandelier, and breathtaking skylight complete the effect of portaling to a fantastical library world. From the white facade carved out of limestone in Lisbon and transported to Rio, to the ornamental doors and decorative arches, every inch of the Royal Portuguese Reading Room is a truly an aesthetic treat. Not to mention it houses the largest and most valuable collection of Portuguese works outside of Portugal, with more than 350,000 volumes, receiving around 6,000 new titles each year, including rare manuscripts, singular literary works, and unique proofs. Also look for statues and busts of Portuguese explorers, along with valuable paintings and works of art.





**STUTTGART CITY LIBRARY,
STUTTGART, GERMANY**

A stark, cubic design that stands out among green trees and red-roofed houses, Stuttgart City Library in Germany, at its core, follows the structure of the ancient Roman Pantheon. Conceived by Korean-born, Germany-based architect, Eun Young Yi, the library features a cube-shaped room in the middle of the building, illuminated by natural light from the translucent roof and centered with a fountain, which Yi envisioned serving as a meditative area. The interior circulation is arranged in a spiral among the reading gallery areas, designed to be flowing promenades flooded with natural light. The sparse use of furniture and art accentuates stark white walls and creates a library space where the only color in the building comes from the books themselves. Head to the top of the nine-story library to experience the rooftop garden, where the outdoors impress just as much with 360-degree views of the city.