The Adventure of the ICMC/IKMZ Building of Cottbus University (Germany)

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Meeting:	**133. Library Buildings and Equipment**

Abstract:

The ICMC/IKMZ-Building is a really exciting adventure in its architectural design. On the other hand the building represents a very splendid example for a new type of library. You don't find the traditional features for library building as the central reading room or the typical stack rooms. Our library is a so called 'third place' for all the demands and needs for communication and information the scientists, teachers, students and citizens of the city and the region of Cottbus have. It's accessible, inspiring and surprising like the internet as the key of the new media world. From that the building is a very convincing symbol of what we call knowledge society.

The Building of the Information, Communication and Media Center / Informations-, Kommunikations- und Medienzentrum (ICMC/IKMZ) of the Brandenburg Technical University / Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus was designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron and finished, after a three year construction phase, in November 2004; it is a 32 meter high reinforced concrete construction covered by a double-shell, glass facade embossed with stylized graffiti. The ground plan of the building has a curved outline resembling a clover leaf which does not explicitly have front and back sides.

III. 1: The position of the ICMC building[1]

The amazing external architecture continues internally with a spiral staircase extending from the 1st to the 6th floor, and a striking color scheme (in vibrant yellow, green, magenta, red, and blue) for parts of the floor covering and walls. In addition a further characteristic of the building is that within the ground plan none of the floor plans are the same. With the exception of the management and business areas (7th floor) and the technical and pool areas (1st and 2nd underground level) there are only a few truly separate areas. This allows a flexible and open concept for the use of the building which consciously allows for many work and communication forms for single users or user groups. The work and reading areas are in coves related to each of the floors, while the open access stacks of the library - floor related - arranged according to subject areas are located in the core of the building.

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[1]   All rights to these and other illustrations and photographs are held by the IKMZ at the BTU. The photographs were taken by Ralf Schuster (IKMZ at the BTU Cottbus). Anyone with a greater interest in the photographs, including their further use or dissemination, should consult the IKMZ secretary's office by mail at the following address: sekretariat@ikmz.tu-cottbus.de, by post at Nordstrasse 14, 03044 Cottbus, or by fax under the following number 0049355/692277.
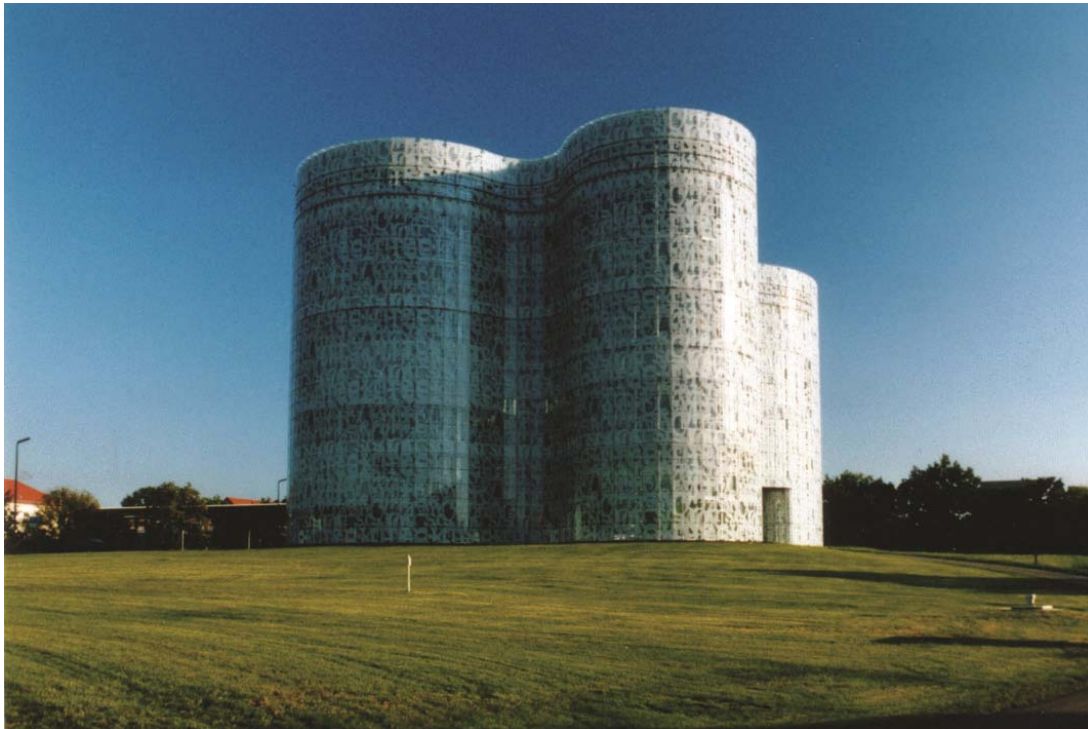
Ill. 2: The IKMZ building by Nordwestern

The fact many different people generally use libraries, even though Internet access is not subject to the constraints of time and place, is not generally related to the architecture of library buildings – for libraries continue to be indispensable as places of academic study. However, when a library becomes a tourist attraction, its architecture usually does have something to do with this development. Since the building of the ICMC/IKMZ of the Brandenburg Technical University Cottbus was opened in February 2005, it has been visited by approximately 20,000 tourists. In the tangible field of tension created by the design of an Alvar-Aalto vase and the impression of a 'Castel del Monte', the architectonic sculpture that is the ICMC/IKMZ building has become not only an architectural highlight, but also a symbol of the university, the town and the region[2].

The two following aspects probably play a decisive role here: Library buildings, like books, have their destinies. A library's ambience and location influences its architecture, which either follows traditional approaches to library design or represents a conscious endeavour to break with traditional paradigms. The former sports ground on which the IKMZ building stands does not, in principle, evoke any historical associations. This, combined with the fact the university town of Cottbus has a relatively young academic tradition[3], means that little consideration need be paid to the "past". This, in turn, makes it possible to create a future in an open-minded fashion. In other

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[2]   A description of the IKMZ building as well as its construction history can be found under: http://www.tu-cottbus.de/einrichtungen/de/ikmz/praesentationen/ikmz-gebaeude.html. Consequently, the present contribution does not contain a separate description of the building. The bibliographie can be found under: http://www.tu-cottbus.de/einrichtungen/de/ikmz/praesentationen/ikmz-gebaeude/bibliographie.html

[3]   Founded in 1991 the Brandenburg Technical University of Cottbus is the only technical university in the state of Brandenburg. The city of Cottbus is in the south-east of Brandenburg (ca. 120 km from Berlin).

words, the building's functions could be realised without always having to adopt tried-and-tested models, and executed as an architectural experiment, paying attention to the requirements of a library building. In this connection, the decisive question is whether the library building has both the components of a central reading room traditionally considered essential and a clearly identifiably stacks; for it is these two parameters that transform a building designed in accordance with traditional criteria into a library.

Ill. 3: The IKMZ building from the South

The ICMC/IKMZ building does not have a central reading room, nor do the areas set aside for shelves have such a clearly identifiable stack-room character that their use as stacking space is the only conceivable one, or crucial for the building's impact as a library. The ICMC/IKMZ also features three basic architectural co-elements that do not match the traditional paradigm: an open space which (except for the floor areas) extends from the first basement floor to the sixth upper floor and is not subdivided by any partition walls; its interior colour scheme; and a stair well designed as both an eye-catcher and as a link between the different floors. To put it differently, and somewhat pointedly: the IKMZ is exemplary as a structure that openly contradicts the traditional architectural language associated with libraries and library buildings.
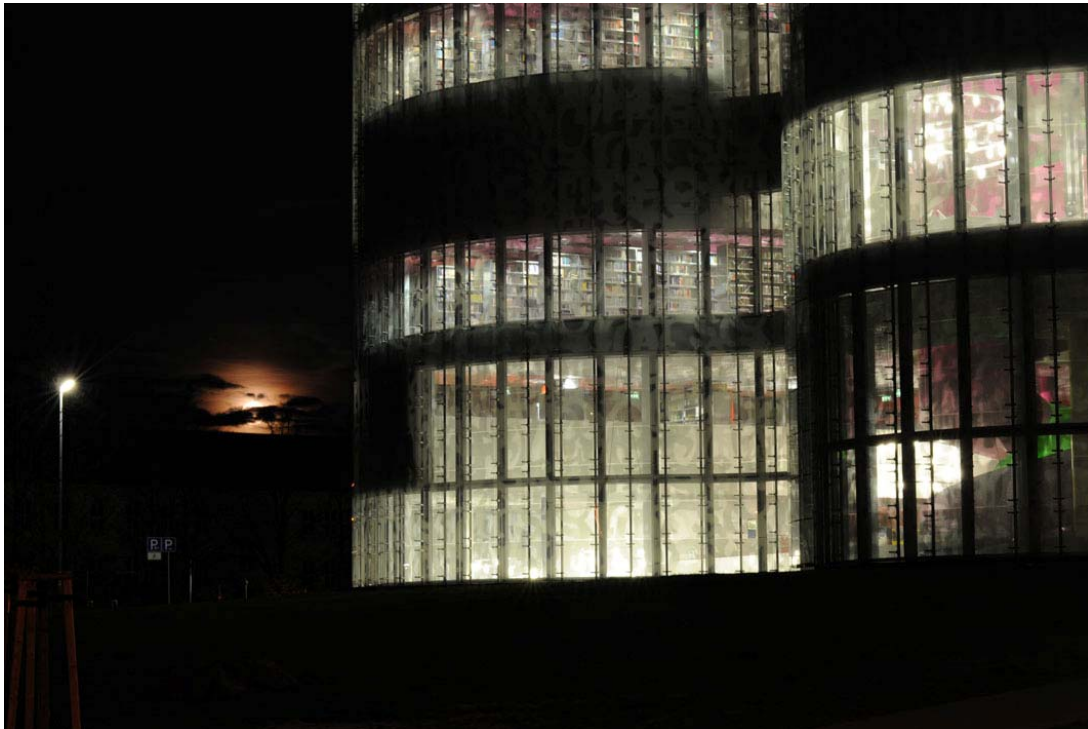
Ill. 4: The IKMZ building from the south-west

A remarkable feature of the description supplied by the architects Herzog & de Meuron[4] is the matter-of-course way in which it addresses the architectural implementation of the building's library function without, however, going into considerable detail. Priority has evidently been given to creating forms and structures that relate to the building and its urban setting. The architects focus on discussing the tensions between the round and angular forms, the flowing spatial continuum and orthogonal systems, as well as on movement, light and the material. As a result, the library functions seem to be more of a pretext than a reason for choosing this particular architectural design. The façade, which is printed in the lettering of diverse languages, is supposed to illuminate the building's function. In other words, it is the mystifying impact of the printed lettering, and not primarily the room concept, which articulates the library that constitutes the ICMC/IKMZ. At the same time, the façade, which enigmatically disguises the building during the day, brings "light into the darkness" by night. Furthermore, thanks to the powerful colours of the spectrum on the interior, it transforms the ICMC/IKMZ building itself into a medium, adding greater intensity to the library-construction experiment.

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[4] Cf. Herzog & de Meuron: IKMZ BTU COTTBUS, 1994, 1998-2004. – Basel 2005. I have quoted from this project description, which was mailed to me by Architekturbüro Herzog & de Meuron. If you have any other queries regarding any further use of this text, please contact the architect's office directly at the following address: Herzog & de Meuron, Rheinschanze 6, CH - 4056 Basel, Tel.: +41 61 385 5757, E-Mail: info@herzogdemeuron.com
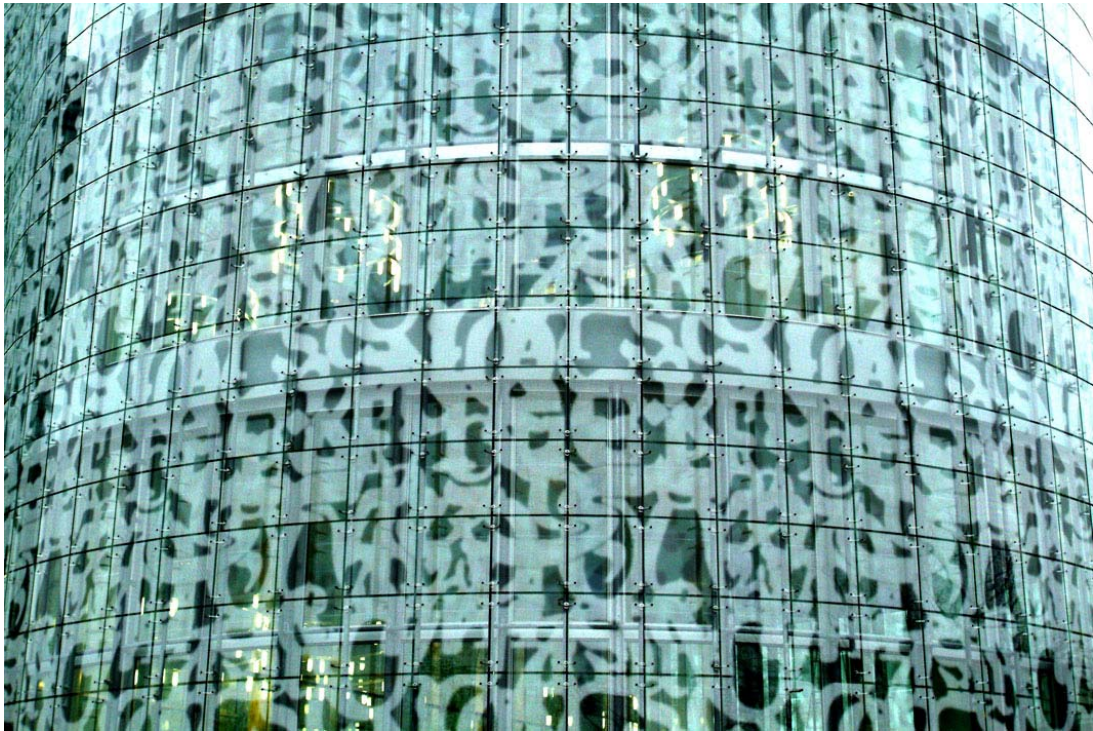
Ill. 5: Façade detail on the IKMZ building

In what other ways does the IKMZ structure build the "future"? The expansion of the Internet as a distribution channel for library-related content has transformed the architectural self-image of libraries forever. Libraries' function as stores for physical units of paper-bound media evokes the metaphor of the treasure chamber and the receptacle of knowledge. Decisive for the value of library stocks is their function as a memory and as a reservoir of handed-down human knowledge. The library's exclusiveness is legitimated in this model handed down from the past and justifies itself thereby as a "castle of the holy grail of knowledge". With some overstatement, one might say that the quasi-sacred tradition of the human memory is under lock and key and primarily available to the "community of the initiates", or those who endeavour to acquire and deepen their knowledge as scholars.

In complete contrast to this is conception of the library as a centre of information and communication. In this case, the library is viewed as a transitory place which, like the Internet, is progressively establishing itself as a key medium increasingly characterized by openness and accessibility. Libraries are thus no longer treasure vaults but public places which, alongside the workplace and the home, are mutating into a so-called "third place" which primarily satisfies a need for information and communication[5]. The library becomes a "non lieu' (non-place), which, under the conditions of academic study or "life-long learning", can be designated a centre of learning[6].

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[5]   See Kersting-Meulemann, Ann; Schmidt, Kerstin; Voigt, Rolf: "Der Dritte Ort". A report from the 8th Frankfurt Scientific Symposium. – in ABI-Technik 28 (Heft 4) 2008, pp. 230 – 246.

[6]   From Marc Augé: *Orte und Nicht-Orte, Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit.* Translated from the French by Michael Bischoff. - Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1994.
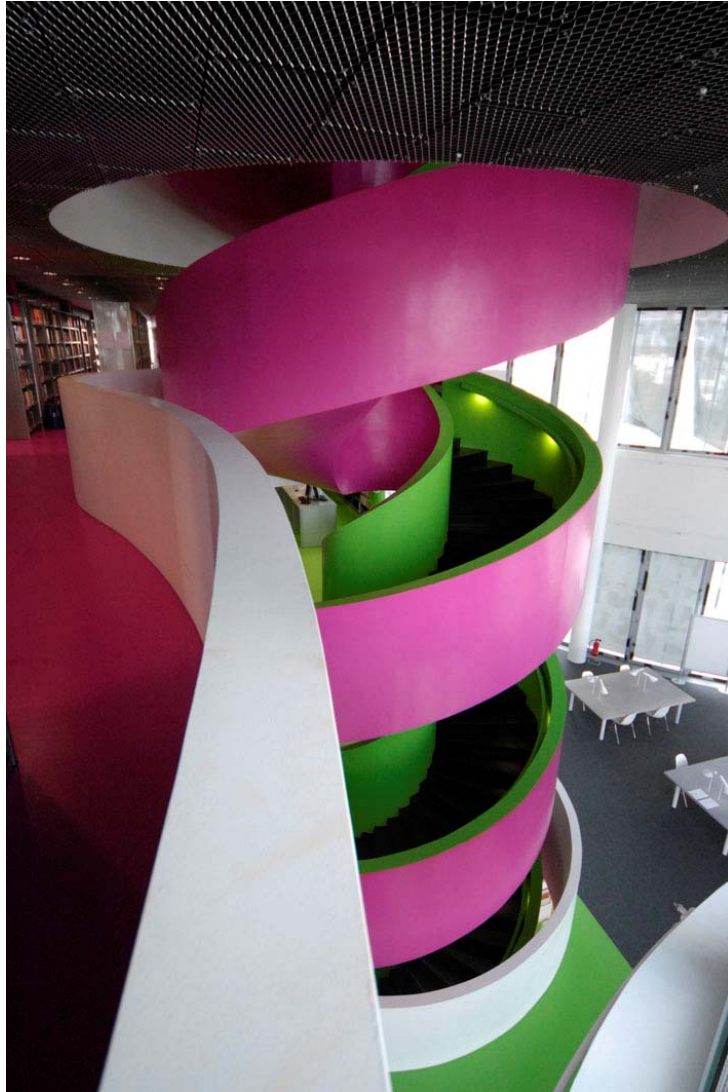
Ill. 6: The stairs presenting a view of the 2nd floor

These considerations show not only the complexity of a non lieu, but also its experimental character, which assumes the form of a use scenario in traditional libraries and has shaped the architectural concept of the IKMZ building. The openness and transparency of the building's structure create the preconditions for a "third place". The library's function, however, is cited by the enigmatic printing on the façade, in other words, by the Arcanum of lettering that characterises traditional libraries in terms of their wealth of printed stock and texts. The Arcanum is "literally" opened up as a metaphor, without thus being decoded and, in fact, defying all any attempt to decode it. Basically, the texture of human knowledge is cited as an enigma and refers to the library in the IKMZ building as a "third place". This raises the question as to how library buildings are used and perceived by their users.

Ill. 7: The stairs and the ground floor

Expressed more concretely, the question is: are libraries primarily places of concentration, and peace and quite, or are they first and foremost places of work and communication? This question forms the title of a dissertation by Michael Dufter,[7] which contains a comparative study on the impact of various architectural concepts – as exemplified by the Saxonian State and University Library / Sächsische Landesbibliothek - Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (SLUB) Dresden[8] and the ICMC/IKMZ of Cottbus University. To back up the results of the study statistically, users were questioned and their replies evaluated. Decisive here is the fact that the two library buildings' acceptance and assessment were assessed on the basis of functional and aesthetic criteria[9]. Dufter summarised the results as follows[10].

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[7]   Dufter, Michael (2009). Bibliothek als Ort der Ruhe und Konzentration – Bibliothek als Ort der Arbeit und Kommunikation. Technische Universität Dresden, Diplomarbeit, 2009. Kurzfassung u. d. T.: Dufter, M. & Richter, P. G.: Die Universitätsbibliothek im Medienzeitalter: „Ort der Konzentration" oder „Ort der Kommunikation"? www.architekturpsychologiedresden.de/ddarbeiten/dufter_bibliotheken.pdf.

[8]   See http://www.slub-dresden.de/en/

[9]   'T'he perspectives examined by Dufter are those of use and user-behaviour, architectural evaluation, activation, demands, work atmosphere, and personality, cf. Dufter (2009), pp. 112 – 126.

*In general, the survey sought to demonstrate the architecture's aesthetic and symbolic impact on its users. Above all, it examined the degree to which a specific architectural design might influence an established behaviour setting, and whether a design concept specified by construction experts was actually reflected in the judgement passed by lay-people. To this end, a quasi-experimental comparison was made – in the form of a field study – of two contemporary libraries. From the architects' design concept and the reviews in the trade press it was concluded that the Sächsische Landesbibliothek - Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (**SLUB**) was more of a "**place of concentration**", whereas the Informations-, Kommunikations- und Medienzentrum der BTU Cottbus (**IKMZ**) was more of a "**place of communication**".*

"On the whole, their users rated both libraries positively. The results of a direct comparison of general instrumental and qualitative criteria were significantly in favour of the SLUB – an indication of the fact that buildings which tend to be designed in a traditional canon of forms are also viewed more favourably by young adults (students). In other words, the library with the unconventional design faced greater difficulties in gaining recognition among its users…"

"… the questionnaire showed in detail that the design intentions of the planners ("place of concentration" versus "place of communication"), which find expression in a variety of architectural facets, are also reflected in the perception, experience and behaviour of the users. Hence, the room atmosphere in the SLUB, in contrast to that in the IKMZ, was found to be more traditional, concentrated, meditative, and introspective. Measurement of the mental strain showed that monotony and satiety played no role in a library context. However, there were noticeable differences in concentration and in mental fatigue. The readers who used the SLUB reported that they found greater intellectual stimulus there and were better able to concentrate. This, in turn, was associated with greater mental fatigue, but not in any way detrimental to health. IKMZ users, on the other hand, declared that they did not feel sufficiently challenged, although they felt more cheerful and refreshed. In general, concentration was better in the SLUB, whilst there was a greater feeling of well-being in the IKMZ…"

Users' assessments of functionality reveal a preference for the traditional paradigm embodied in the SLUB Dresden than for the "future as a constructed experiment" as represented by the ICMC/IKMZ. Hence, the traditional model is attested "best practice", a commendation which the "building experimenting with the future" has yet to earn. This certainly does not mean, however, that the experiment has failed: the ICMC/IKMZ building is obviously successful, too, as the user feedback acquired by Dufter shows. At the same time, there is much to suggest that the model of a "third place", as articulated by the ICMC/IKMZ building, will point the way for future developments in library architecture. For as the results of Dufter's analysis show, even without explicitly thematising the phenomenon of the "third place", the transitory function of library buildings has already left its mark on traditionally structured library buildings. The interpretation of "tradition in a modern guise" chosen here is not really

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[10]   Cf. Dufter (2009), pp. 232 – 233.

plausible because it is not so much a building's equipment that is at issue here than its basic building structures. As long as the impact of traditional structures remains the decisive issue, buildings will remain committed to tradition: the use of materials such as aluminium, glass and reinforced concrete will not change this in any way. But if a "third place" is characterised as a library by its façade, thereby dispensing with the central structural elements of a traditional library building, then a new and different quality will be in demand, one that is – as things now stand – more appropriately referred to as an "experience" or a "adventure" than as "best practice".
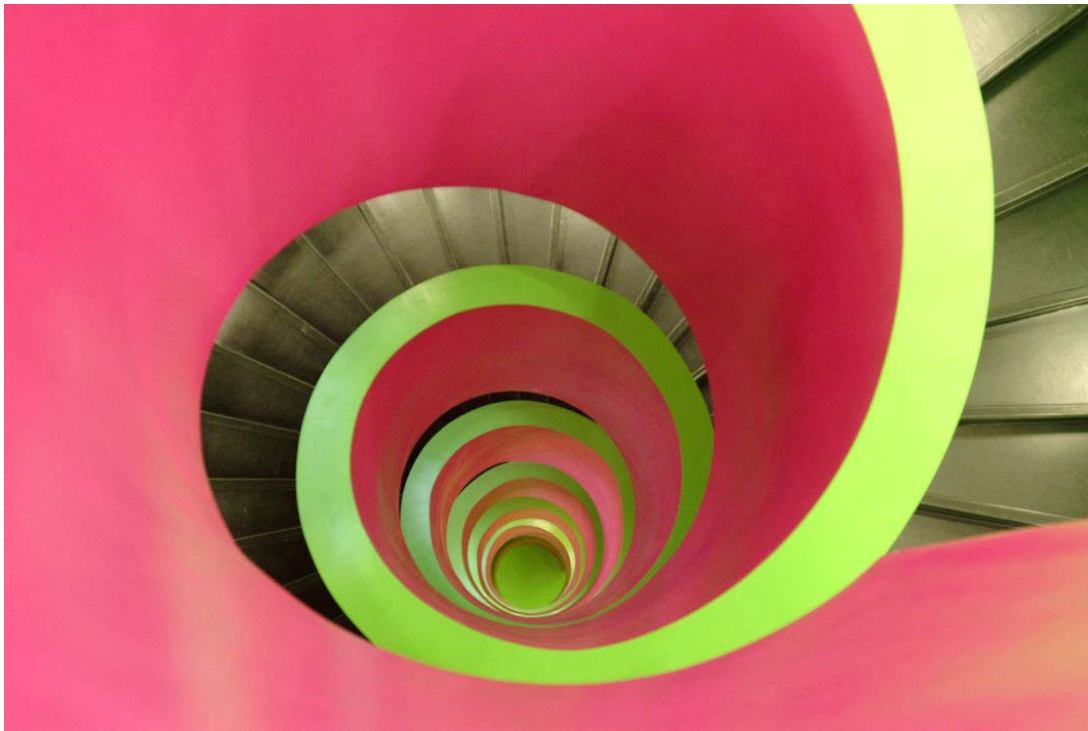
Ill. 8: The "spiral staircase" as seen from above

The ICMC/IKMZ (http://www.tu-cottbus.de/einrichtungen/de/ikmz/) was awarded the national library award 'library of the year 2006' of the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius and the national award 'Big Nike' of the Bund Deutscher Architekten.