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edited by Ada Naval and Giulia Zanon

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Mind, Memory and Museum

Warburg Renaissance Project. An interview with Bill Sherman

Edited by Ada Naval and Giulia Zanon

The *Warburg Renaissance* will restore the Institute's original mixture of discovery, display and debate, and open its holdings and expertise to new audiences. The renovation will enhance the Institute's academic resources and teaching spaces and create new facilities for special collections, exhibitions, and events. Construction began in July 2022 and is scheduled to end in December 2023. We discussed with prof. Bill Sherman, the Warburg Institute Director about the past, the present and the future of Warburg Institute and its Library.

Warburg Renaissance Project, model for the Lecture Room, HaworthTompkins Architects.

Engramma | *We would like to know more about the process of developing of the Renaissance project: how did it come about? When did the institute begin to feel the need to expand?*

Bill Sherman | I think the Institute, like every other place that deals with books, has felt the need to expand from the moment it opened. The Institute had in the 1920s the need to create a new building that could turn Aby Warburg's own domestic collection into an institutional one. In the 1930s the Institute moved to London and through three different buildings, each time complaining that there wasn't enough room. In 1958, the building finally opened in Bloomsbury, Central Londoon, in one of the

buildings of the University of London, and since then we've been in one place with more or less enough room.

I guess the current project began in the 1990s when the director of the time, Nicholas Mann, had to make a number of decisions: one was about the re-design of the courtyard, the current building is quite strange, it forces us to go all the way around an empty courtyard. A new set of office spaces that open onto the courtyard was eventually built, including a new reading room for the Archive on the 4th floor.

Another big change in the 1990s concerned the lack fo space on two key floors: in the *Image* sesction on the 1st floor there was not enought space for books, so both ancient and contemporary books were moved to the basement. In the *Magic* and *Science* section, which used to be part of *Orientation* on the 3th floor was then moved up to the 4th floor as part of the *Action* section. This, of course, completely broke the scheme that Warburg had originally intended for the 4th floor of his Library, one that has always been the guiding structure for its organisation.

Now we jump to 2014. In 2014, the University of London reviewed all of the buildings in its entire estate and found that three buildings were in need of urgen repair; one of those was the Warburg Institute. The following year, 2015, the Warburg Institute was involved in a court case brought by the Warburg family on behalf of the Institute. The court eventually saw the University of London fully responsible of looking after the building hosting the Warburg Institute. For these two reasons, in 2016, a budget was created and architects were appointed. All of this happened before I started my job as director of the Warburg.

When I arrived, there was a budget and there were architects; there was already a project and I said let's pause for a moment and think a little bit more about this project. Maybe it's worth doing more than just repairing the building and returning it to what it should have been for the last sixty years, we can take the chance to think about what it could, and should, be for the future. That led to the creation of what I named the *Warburg Renaissance project* which was a capital transformation project, which required a fundraising in what we call a capital campaign.

Engramma | *On several occasions in the section of the Warburg Institute's website dedicated to the new project, there are references to Warburg's original vision, as: "the renovation will realize the original vision of its founder, Aby Warburg, for a space in which display, discovery and debate are closely connected". How has this been approached? How the instances of the Future meet those of a scholar, albeit a visionary, anchored in the cultural temperament of the early 20th century?*

BS | The vision I would say came out of two things. One is 'me' and one is 'Warburg'. The 'me' part is because I moved from the university sector to the museum sector about ten years ago and I was director of Collections and Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where I was very active in creating an institution where display and research, exhibitions and learning were hand in hand.

The other part which I think it's more important is about the Warburg Institute's history, and here I would point to the name of the project, *Warburg Renaissance*, which is, of course like the period that Warburg studied, looking in two directions: it looks to the past in order to create the future.

The beginning of the project, aside from thinking about what needed to be repaired or where to find more room for books, was about what was there in the original vision for the Institution. I would say there were a number of different things that came to mind but the most obvious one maybe because I had come from a museum, was the fact that the Warburg Institute is an Institution with a founder who was used to think visually and to show things, but the Warburg Institute has now lost that ability. The Institute that I inherited had no space for display; certainly not open to the public, like an exhibition, but also internally, in terms of our own workshop activity, we really had lost the ability to work visually. Even leaving aside the visual turn or the fact that we're in an image saturated culture or the fact that exhibitions are amongst the most popular ways of reaching out to people. It seems to me a founding mission of the *Warburg Institute* to have the ability to work visually and to organise exhibitions. And this is what I mean by this reintegration of display, discovery and debate.

Engramma | *Do you think that your experience as a museum director is rather more important than one of an academic? It's interesting to like have a Warburg Institute director which is of course an academic but comes from the experience of a museum.*

BS | I would actually say that both were needed because I think you can't have a museum director with no scholar profile coming in and directing the Warburg Institute. So, the fact that I did have twenty years or so of professorial life and that I had been a prolific scholar, particularly in the History of Libraries, was very useful.

Engramma | *In 1944, a decade after Warburg passed away and his Library moved from Hamburg to London, Saxl stated that "the overriding idea was that the books together —each containing its larger or smaller bit of information and being supplemented by its neighbours— should by their titles, guide the student to perceive the essential forces of the human mind and its history". For Warburg "books were more than instruments of research. Assembled and grouped, they expressed the thought of mankind in its constant and in its changing aspects". What do you think was the main instance, the main idea for creating a Library for Aby Warburg? And is this going to be part of the idea of the Renaissance project?*

BS | I was very happy that we were invited by James Bradburne to take part of *L'idea della biblioteca* in Milan, about the idea of the library —something that was more about Umberto Eco than Aby Warburg. I was then able to write a very short essay for the catalogue, called *Aby Warburg and the Idea of the Library*, which gave me the opportunity to think about how we might use Warburg as an introduction to this exhibition. As I wrote:

> The ultimate subject matter of such a collection was no less than cultural memory itself, cutting across the arts and sciences; and the ultimate goal for the institutions was the cultivation of what Warburg called *Denkraum* (thought-space). For this reason, Warburg saw to it that the Greek goddess Mnemosyne would be the genius loci: by inscribing her name above the door, everyone entering would be reminded not only of the goddess of memory, but also the mother of all nine muses. Warburg hoped that his

library would serve as a both a cultural watch-tower and a temple for the muses— "a rotating turret of observation and reflection".

The library is for Warburg mind, memory and museum. This is what the Library is for Warburg. He described his library with two other words that are pretty unusual in the history of libraries. He called it specifically a *problem Bibliothek*. So, it isn't just a library for neutral gathering of passive records, it's a tool for pursuing problems. That's the purpose of the Library. The problems may change, but the function of the Library is an active one and it's about problem solving. That's very important.

The other word he uses is *Laboratorium*. Now that's a strange word also for a library. If in the 16th century, the idea of library and laboratory were connected, in the 20th and 21th century this is unusual, but I think we're trying to restore that Renaissance idea of experimentation of art and science together.

Engramma | *This seems really interesting because it reminds us of what Salvatore Settis said in* Warburg continuatus *about the origins of the libraries as private collections. One important aspect of the project is to analyse its floor division. The new floor plan takes into account the 'keyword' distinction developed by Warburg:* Orientierung-Wort-Bild-Dromenon. *What are the new interpretative perspectives adopted by the Warburg Renaissance project of this hermeneutics of knowledge?*

BS | We've actually created new stacks in order to restore all four floors in their purity, so that all of *Word* is now in one place, all of *Image* in another place, all of *Orientation* in another, and so on. I think that's important. It's also been interesting —especially going back to Salvatore Settis and his great essay, where in the final section he basically tells the history of those four categories and he shows that the current structure only took place in this order in 1958 London— that in the earlier versions from Hamburg, and even earlier in London, those four keywords were in a different order. I think one of the things these four categories continue to interrogate is: do they form a hierarchy, a path? And if so, what kind of structure is it?

I think that's a crucial question for me when we think about Warburg in the digital age. And I often describe Warburg like a digital thinker. In fact, two things are fundamental to digital information structures.

One is about how one finds things. How do you search for something? And I think Warburg felt already that search structures, catalog, search engines have the bad habit of leading only to what you already know. He wanted to create a structure where you would find what you didn't know; and that's what research is. The problem with most search engines, whether they're Google or library catalogues, is that you must know the words already at the beginning. And this directs you to what is you're looking for. Warburg wanted you to find the book next to the one you were looking for. It's crucial to remember that many subjects cut across the categories and in fact, the problem of which we spoke earlier, whatever you're pursuing, necessarily takes you to more than one floor, more than one place. They're not meant to be specialised cells; they're meant to be an holistic structure. I think that's really crucial for how people today try to find the information they need and how they learn about how to create their own resources for the study of memory and image.

The other thing we need to remember is that Warburg's Library was famous for having the best technology for working with images. At the time he had the cutting-edge technology for capturing and projecting images, but today, the Warburg Institute does not. We are not a cutting-edge technology Institution and so, within limits of budget and of purpose, we've also been trying to think about what kind of technologies we need in order to do now what Warburg wanted in his Library in the 1920s.

There is one more aspect, to move beyond the keyword question: in our project we've also tried to revisit other original features, particularly of the Hamburg Library that Warburg designed and opened in 1926. Take the elliptical reading room, for instance, was the shape of this room important? Today we're working on a rectangular building, but we inherit an elliptical structure. So we have the new lecture room, the new event space in the courtyard, and the middle of it is an ellipse, just like in Hamburg.

Engramma | *The Warburg Institute is also, of course, the Warburg Archive and Photographic Collection, along with the Library. There is no doubt that the WIA and the PC, along with the Library, are the focus for Warburgian studies. What does the future hold for the Archive and the Photographic Collection? How have you approached the future of the archive in relation to the new challenges and the new perspectives offered by the field of the Digital Humanities?*

BS | The Archive and the Photo Collection are equally precious and in fact they are an integral part of the Warburg Institute. When I came to the Warburg Institute in 2017, these were three completely different departments with different budgets; no integration; no physical connection. Actually, I tried to reengineer the proximities, so that they're fundamentally interconnected: we decided to move the Archive from the 4th floor down into this new structure in the courtyard where there's a new reading room for all Archive, Photo collection and special collections. So that's one way in which they will be much closer to each other and much more integrated physically in the building.

Through technology, we are also working on projects that try to use the best of what Digital Humanities has to offer to make those materials in Photo collection and Archive better known and more usable. I would just use two examples right away —that are already happening— and then a third one that we're dreaming about.

First, we are just about to launch a new iconographic database. For twelve years we've had the same interface and now we've created a brand-new website, a brand-new interface that will make the digital part of our Photo collection much more accessible and much more powerful and much better to be integrated with other collections. This is what we call interoperable.

The second example is that we have a very valuable, but very little-known, collection within the Photo collection called *The Menil image of the Black and Western Art Collection*, which came to the Warburg Institute in the 1990s. When Dominique de Menil died, they sent this extraordinary photo archive to the Warburg Institute -along with a different version to Harvard- and now, finally, we are cataloging, conserving, digitizing and activating

the image of the Black in Western art. It's really the world's only complete archive of visual images of the representations of Black figures from ancient Egypt.

The dream is interesting. It is an ongoing conversation with the Warburg Institute archivists, Claudia Wedepohl and Eckhart Marshall. Eckhart has been pushing now for some time for a very large-scale project that would create a complete digital resource around Aby Warburg his so-called index card boxes: the beautiful boxes in the Archive that contain all of his notes, hundreds of thousands of pieces of paper. At the moment the only way to consult is to come to London and go through them physically, but to create a proper digital resource where we have a transcription, a translation and integration with anything that they refer to. If Warburg had the Internet that's what he would have done.

The last thing to say is that in the gallery, in the exhibition space, we are investing in a number of interactive screens where we will be able to show all the versions of the Bilderatlas with the help of an interactive touch screen.

Engramma | *What is the relationship between the curatorial studies that have been developed for years at the Warburg and the new Renaissance project and also in the light of the Warburgian method?*

BS | I think there are a couple of areas to point out. The first, of course, is that the Warburg Institute has an MA in curation, which we run with the National Gallery in London, so we have been training curators: this program is very popular, but we don't have anywhere at the Institute where we can actually 'curate'. What I'm trying to draw together is the fact that we have this history, we have this program of training, and now we will finally have the space needed to experiment with that.

We have what we call associate fellows and historically, those have been independent scholars who needed a place to work and an affiliation, but I've developed a kind of a different profile with that group and now we have James Bradburne, Martina Mazzotta, etc. We also have a very fantastic guy, Thomas Marks, who was the editor of Apollo Magazine for 10 years. We are surrounded by lot of people very experienced in the art world and

in professional curation who are helping us to think about this opportunity.

Also, artists and curators from outside the Warburg Institute have been interested in Warburg, sometimes in an obsessive and passionate way and yet have had no direct ability to access the Institute's collections or work with its staff, and I think part of what the *Warburg Renaissance* project is doing is physically and culturally opening up to those collaborations. It will allow, for instance, a program of artists in residence, which we've never had. This will allow us to have collaborations with artists or museums or other curators on exhibition programs. Enlarging the audiences is the ultimate goal because my job is to make sure the Warburg still exists, and that it matters to more people than it matters to now; and I'm finding that curation is a very good vehicle for trying to get people involved in the Warburg Institute.

The Warburg has an opportunity here, I think, to make something quite unique at the interface between a very unique Library and a tradition of curation. And I think that's what we're trying to really rethink, not just making another museum or another gallery.

Engramma | *Another important objective is the broadening of Warburg Institute's audience. If before it was like going towards just a scholar and academic leadership, now the educational mission of the Warburg seems much broader.*

BS | If you don't know what Warburg Institute is already, you won't go through the door. If you did go through the door, by chance, you would have to bring your library card and show it at the entrance. The Warburg is not an open building. My idea is that we should make it clear from the outside what is inside. People should be allowed in, encouraged in, they should be able go through the whole ground floor, except for the Library. The access to the Library is permitted only with a card, and everyone can apply for one. There's an architectural change in place, one that will basically allow more openness and spatial clarity.

Engramma | *What's the role of architecture?*

BS | I was lucky at the Warburg to be working in an institution where the people who founded the institution thought about the buildings, about how the design of a building matters, especially in terms of education and publicness. Warburg did, too. He built this Library in Hamburg himself, and he knew what he wanted. So, I'm not the one bringing architecture to the Warburg Institute: architecture was there from Warburg; it was there with Saxl, it was there with Bing. They were the ones who brought that to the foundation of the institution. We haven't really had the opportunity to revisit that vision until now. It's very exciting. I just hope it looks good when it opens: actually it's not closed, we're trying to remain open and operational while we're doing the building works and that's always a challenge. But a university building, the Warburg Institute, has to be always open.

Abstract

On the occasion of the development of the Warburg Renaissance project, in this contribution Bill Sherman, the Warburg Institute Director in charge responds to the reflections of Ada Naval and Giulia Zanon on the Institute's past, present and future with special attention towards the Warburg Library.

keywords | Warburg Library; Warburg Institute; Renaissance Project.

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