



INVITATION

Essen, 25.03.2026

From Libraries to Data Centres

An (Architectural) History of Information Storage

Tuesday, 14 April 2026, 18:30 (CET)

Online (Zoom) & Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen (KWI)

Gartensaal, Goethestraße 31, 45128 Essen

For a long time, there was no question as to where information would be stored: libraries, which emerged as a distinct building structure and central institution of western modernity in the mid-19th century, were the physical sites where information was collected, organized, and made increasingly available. The industrial age had brought radical changes in publishing and, with them, lower production costs for books, requiring efficient techniques and procedures to ensure compact storage and rapid availability. In course of this development, libraries grew from cultural monuments to functional institutions, whose role and architectural character largely derived from the fact that they stored and lent books.

With the advent of the digital age in the mid-1990s, all of this was called into question. Libraries were declared obsolete, as information could be conveniently accessed from elsewhere. In the wake of these developments, library budgets were cut, branches closed, and staff reduced. At the same time, the 2000s also saw a boom of new iconic libraries, often designed by starchitects, aiming to redefine their function, architecture, and practices. However, the ultimate aim behind modern libraries – to create a universal and eternal archive – has not died out. Rather, it has shifted to a new architecture, arising from the requirements of data processing and storage resulting from widespread internet use since the 1990s: the data centre.

Whereas libraries today are tasked with proliferating social and technical demands in order to compensate for what the internet *cannot* provide, data centres constitute the physical infrastructure enabling our digital lives. The lecture takes a comparative look at the library as modernity's central site of information storage and management and the data centre as the information hub of the digital age. This comparison reveals surprising similarities and allows reflections on possible futures for the ever-growing number of insatiably energy-hungry data centres around the globe.

PRESS CONTACT

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SPEAKER

Alina Wandelt, PostDoc at the ERC Synergy Grant project "[CryoCultures. Infrastructures, Politics and Futures of Artificial Cooling](#)"

MODERATION

Stefan Höhne, Principal Investigator in the ERC Synergy Grant project CryoCultures

PARTICIPATION ON SITE

Participation is free of charge. There is no registration necessary.

PARTICIPATION VIA ZOOM

For online participation via Zoom, please use the following [link](#) at the given time.

ORGANIZATION

Organized by the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen (KWI).

FURTHER INFORMATION

[Event on the KWI website](#)

We would appreciate the circulation of this press release.

About the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen (KWI):

Part of the University Alliance Ruhr, KWI is an interdisciplinary research centre for the humanities and cultural sciences, in the tradition of international Institutes for Advanced Study. Current research fields at KWI are: aesthetic practices, constellations of historical impact, dialogues between the cultural and social sciences, science studies, and visual literacy. Within the Ruhr area, KWI is a place to share the results of ambitious humanities research with interested parties from the region, and to convene discussions on the politics of scholarship.

www.kulturwissenschaften.de

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