



A highly gifted pioneer

Text Florian Meyer Photo Florian Bachmann

He's a pioneer – and he's new at ETH. Before he became a librarian, he was a biologist. "As a PhD student, I looked at the history of the scientific ideas surrounding photosynthesis. I was blown away by how intricate the procedures in libraries and archives are – and that really spurred my interest in libraries," explains Rafael Ball. Since April, he has been the director of the ETH Library. Before this, he managed the libraries at the Jülich research centre and the University of Regensburg.

It was the ETH Library's demand for excellence that brought him to Zurich. "The same applies for the ETH Library as for researchers – we want to lead, not follow," explains Ball, and judging from his use of "we", it is very clear that he has settled in quickly. The working culture at ETH Zurich really appeals to him – he finds it incredibly inspiring.

"At ETH, I can sense the entrepreneurial spirit that prevails here," he says. He recently returned from Davos, full of enthusiasm, after participating in a retreat there for managers and professors. "The Executive Board conveyed this spirit really well." What he really likes about ETH is

that, to quote Lino Guzzella, "Galileic thinking" is cultivated. That is to say that people don't accept things as given – instead they challenge ideas to try and make a difference. Ball believes that the ETH Library can do just that: "I am so impressed by my colleagues' willingness to support changes. Here, everybody at every level always performs to the very best of their ability and acts on their own initiative, as they have a lot of creative leeway." In terms of "management" style, Ball believes that "if you expect performance, you must allow freedom".

According to Ball, the ETH Library will continue to develop, as digitalisation has made change inevitable in the library sector. He has written a short, eloquent book about how the "era of digital information and communication" is changing how we think and act – his publisher describes him as a "philosopher of the digital future".

Nowadays, you can be contacted at all times, but Ball doesn't think that this is necessarily a bad thing. He himself sometimes works in the evenings or at weekends. "For me, it's a good thing if work and leisure merge together," he says. "That's not to say that I live purely to work.

I like to enjoy myself too." He claims that he didn't plan his career path. "I am a Christian, and I feel that many things in life come about thanks to divine grace. I was open-minded, I've always enjoyed my work and, when something appeals to me, I give it a shot."

The 51-year-old finds it fascinating that his knowledge and professional experience have merged as he has got older to form an overall picture: "It makes a lot of things easier. I don't have to start everything from scratch any more as lots of things happen almost by themselves." ■

The non-stop society

In «Die pausenlose Gesellschaft. Fluch und Segen der digitalen Permanenz» (roughly translated as: The non-stop society – why digital permanence is both a blessing and a curse), Ball discusses the consequences of digital information and communication on libraries and society. The book was published in 2014 by Schattauer Verlag. You can watch an interview (in German) on YouTube:

youtu.be/r1nZstftJ0 →
