

La Grande Bibliothèque: Still relevant

By Marian Scott, The Gazette, October 7, 2011

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MONTREAL - If libraries are doomed, there was no sign of it this week at the Grande Bibliothèque.

From students with dreadlocks to young mothers in hijabs, every culture in the urban mosaic seemed to be represented. In the checkout queue snaking all the way to the elevators, a little girl with a pink Cinderella backpack clutched a pile of DVDs as her mother toted a ballerina storybook. A young man with waist-length hair darted in to drop off a novel at the returns counter. People of all ages were glued to computer screens, and grey-haired seniors pored over newspapers in wooden spines.

So what about those naysayers who warned libraries are irrelevant in the age of Google and e-books?

If the 9,000 users who go through the building's turnstiles every day are any indication, reports of the death of libraries are greatly exaggerated, to echo Mark Twain's quip about rumours of his own demise.

Since it opened in 2005, the \$142-million mega-library at de Maisonneuve Blvd. and Berri St. has been a runaway success, drawing 2.75 million visitors last year.

"Despite all the prophets of doom, people turn out in great numbers," says Guy Berthiaume, chair and CEO of the provincial library and archives, as he looks through a plate-glass window in his office at a busy reading room below.

"The saying here is, 'Every day is Boxing Day,' " adds Berthiaume, a former vice-rector of the Université du Québec à Montréal who took over from founding CEO Lise Bissonnette in 2009.

It might seem counterintuitive that library use is thriving at a time when the very future of books – the printed kind, anyway – is uncertain.

But in a world where communications are changing at warp speed, it would be a mistake to underestimate libraries' power to rouse passions.

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford learned that over the summer, when his administration's proposal to slash budgets and branches raised a storm of protest, led by author Margaret Atwood. He later backtracked.

Today's libraries, Berthiaume says, are far more than repositories for books. These days, their job description also includes community hub, multimedia emporium and bridge over the so-called digital divide – affording free and equal access to information.

They are an oasis in the urban landscape, a “third place” – a term coined in 1989 by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg to designate informal gathering places – distinct from home and the traditional workplace.

Like coffee shops where patrons tap on their laptops, seemingly oblivious to the bustle around them, libraries are a refuge where users can find a sense of connection in the anonymity of city life.

“In cities, many people are isolated: single parents, four roommates sharing an apartment,” says Berthiaume. “Here, they find a welcoming place.

“There is a need for places like this. We will always need them,” he adds.

Twenty per cent of Quebecers – and 40 per cent of those with an annual income of \$20,000 or less – have no Internet access at home. The free computers at the Grande Bibliothèque – in use morning and night – address that need.

Throughout the library, signs and a printed calendar list a dizzying array of activities: conferences, poetry readings, concerts, plays, book launches, reading clubs, conversation classes and exhibitions.

Libraries have become platforms for both digital and physical media, providing access to a wide range of resources for a diverse clientele.

One of the most noticeable transformations under way is the growth in e-books, says Berthiaume: The library has 200,000 titles, of which 40,000 are in English. But many kinks remain to be worked out: Users cannot download library books on a Kindle because of proprietary issues.

Contrary to the popular misconception of libraries as stacks of musty books, they have long been at the forefront of information technology, maintains Amy Buckland, a librarian at McGill University in charge of electronic scholarship, e-publishing and digitization of rare books.

“People who say that libraries are on the way out have no idea what we do,” she says. “We’ve always been ahead of things in that sense and we still are.”

Buckland views Google not as a threat, but as an adjunct to the librarian’s role.

“Librarians use Google all the time,” she says. “It is handy for quick questions. But how do you vet the quality of these things? That’s what librarians do. We teach our users how to find the quality answers.”

Buckland’s current projects include helping university researchers share data online so that it can be retrieved by other academics and creating digital versions of the university’s rare-books collection.

Libraries face crucial choices as they redefine themselves in the digital age, says Sohail Inayatullah, a professor of futures studies at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia and Tamkang University in Taiwan.

Will they focus more on digital or physical documents? Will scholarship remain the purview of experts or become increasingly accessible to all? Will governments continue to shoulder library costs or seek partnerships with the private sector?

Once the central source for knowledge, “the library has entered a contested domain” where it competes with other information sources, Inayatullah says in a phone interview from Brisbane.

“The question is: What is the core narrative of the library?” he asks. Libraries evolved from their medieval role as safekeepers of knowledge for future generations to democratic institutions offering universal access, he notes. “Now we’re in the middle of a new story for the library emerging.”

What form will libraries take in the next five, 10 or 15 years? The bewildering pace of technological change makes that difficult to predict, says Berthiaume.

But the cornerstone remains free access for all citizens, he says. While our society glorifies wealth, libraries put everyone on an equal footing.

“The fundamental characteristic that led to the creation of libraries in North America was a desire for equality,” Berthiaume notes.

“More than lenders of books, more than lenders of DVDs and CDs, we will always be a place where people will gather.”

Quebec Public Library Week runs from Oct. 15 to 22. Libraries across Quebec are holding special activities in French and English. For a complete schedule of events, visit tinyurl.com/4y5xoz3 or consult your local library.

The Grande Bibliothèque is hosting a year-long, bilingual exhibition on manga (Japanese comics) – a modern art form rooted in tradition – at 475 de Maisonneuve Blvd. E. Hours are Tuesday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. For information on other events and library resources, visit www.banq.qc.ca

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Today's libraries function as much more than simple book repositories, says Guy Berthiaume, who oversees the Grande Bibliothèque. The library welcomes 9,000 users a day.

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