


Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE SINCE 1891

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HOW THE STAFF IN YOUR PUBLIC LIBRARY ARE LOCAL CULTURE HEROES

Beyond their role as providers of books, public library staff are important facilitators and champions of your local culture.

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CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE

editor's corner



Susan M. Gardner

Canada's earliest libraries were founded in the 1600s; at that time, they were largely private collections, belonging exclusively to wealthy families or religious institutions. Libraries were eventually established, in some form, in many settlements and trading posts, but these were typically funded by subscription or membership fees. It wasn't until 1883, after the evolution of many models, that the first free, tax-supported public libraries were introduced, with Saint John, Guelph, and Toronto all establishing free public libraries that year.

The Province of Ontario arguably played a key role in opening the door to a these remarkable community resources when it introduced Canada's first *Free Libraries Act* in 1882, allowing municipalities to levy a special annual "free library rate," and further, to issue special debentures for the purposes of raising funds for buildings, books, and "other things required." The core provision of the statute: "All libraries, news-rooms, and museums established under this Act shall be open to the public, free of all charge."

Among the various duties set out, library boards were made responsible under the statute to "procure, erect, or rent the necessary buildings for the purposes of the library or of the library, news-room and museum (as the case may be); to purchase books, newspapers, reviews, magazines, maps and specimens of art and science, for the use of the library, news-room and museum, and

to do all things necessary for keeping the same in a proper state of preservation and repair ..."

Other provinces would soon introduce similar legislation, thus setting the foundation for the creation of hundreds of free public libraries (and hundreds more of branch libraries) across the country.

From the outset, our libraries were conceived of as prominent cultural institutions – a source for books and magazines, yes, but also opening the door for so much more. Since the earliest public libraries, librarians have always been important curators of our culture.

The legacy of those institutions has further evolved over the years, with an expanded mandate for today's libraries – and librarians – acting as stewards for not only local culture, but also a growing range of public services. As Anne Marie Madziak discusses in her article on page 5 of this issue, today's library services might include everything from new immigrant settlement services to local artists' collections; libraries are places where "accidental cultural experiences" happen.

Librarians, of course, are the navigators of this journey, ensuring that these cultural pillars remain relevant – responding to their communities' ever-changing needs; adapting to new technologies; acting as "connectors" for citizens, services, and other local organizations; and continuing to nurture today's creative, inquiring minds. As they were in the past, public librarians continue to be heroes of our local culture.

Public Library Staff

Champions and facilitators of local culture

In any community, cultural vitality relies on a web of collaborative relationships between a number of organizations and individuals. Local culture thrives when art galleries, museums, theatres, artists, shopkeepers, libraries, and any number of other players work together to weave a living network of people, events, and experiences. Increasingly, within these networks, public libraries are recognized as important cultural resources and library staff are valued for the knowledge of the community they bring to the table, coupled with their commitment to nurturing local culture.

Public Libraries in the Cultural Landscape

Public libraries contribute to their community's cultural landscape in a number of important ways. They have indoor and outdoor spaces that host a wide range of cultural events, from children's concerts and teen poetry slams to author readings, film nights, and multicultural festivals that draw entire communities. Libraries offer books, recordings, and programs that nurture creative expression – everything from photography contests and writers-in-residence who meet with fledgling writers, to puppetry workshops for seniors, gaming programs for all ages, and community-wide reading initiatives. As well, a growing number of libraries have art galleries that feature the works of local artists.

Also highly valued by residents are the community bulletin boards



London Public Library staff members with musical talent put on a lively family show in the library.

found in libraries. Updated regularly, these bulletin boards promote the cultural events, activities, clubs, lessons, contests, and celebrations happening throughout the community. In the words of one Ontario resident, "I learn about things at the library that I don't hear about anywhere else." The bulletin boards facilitate discovery, helping residents learn about the rich tapestry of cultural offerings available.

Public libraries play a significant role in providing settlement services and a sense of welcome to immigrant populations. They offer collections in non-English languages, and a wide range of programs and services that help newcomers understand and adapt to Canadian society. At the same time, libraries welcome and celebrate diverse cultures and ethnicities, helping

build the bridges that create a sense of community and belonging. They provide important community space, where it is possible for all members of the community to discover and engage each other across their differences. Pickering Public Library, for example, was recently recognized by the Local Diversity and Immigration Partnership



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The close relationship between libraries and culture means that some of the residents who do not choose to visit cultural landmarks such as museums, art galleries, or theatres, will experience local culture nonetheless ...

Council as a Diversity and Immigration Champion.

The Accidental Cultural Experience

While not every library user goes to the library to discover or engage in local culture, many end up doing just that. In addition to borrowing materials or using the computers, they end up wandering into the art gallery, eavesdropping on a children's program or English-as-a-Second Language conversation circle, and stopping by the bulletin boards where they learn about something that they weren't looking for, but which has piqued their interests.

In the words of Ellen Hobin, manager of communications for London Public Library in London, Ontario, "The beauty of it is that, at the library, culture comes to you! Think about what is meant by culture and look around the library ... everywhere you look, you will see culture."

The close relationship between libraries and culture means that some of the residents who do not choose to visit cultural landmarks such as museums, art galleries, or theatres, will experience local culture nonetheless ... during library visits. And, for some, the experiences of culture that happen in the library will trigger a hunger for greater participation in local culture.

Exposure to art in the library's gallery, for example, may well spark an interest in art that results in visits to local, regional, and even national galleries. In addition, there is growing evidence to indicate that exposure to, and participation in, local culture contributes significantly to quality of life and feelings of community cohesion.

Library Staff as Leaders and Champions

As valuable as these many contributions by libraries are, it is important to recognize the unique value-added contributions of library staff.

LIBRARIES, cont'd on p. 40

NEW MUNICIPAL FACILITATION GUIDE!

BETTER DECISIONS, TOGETHER

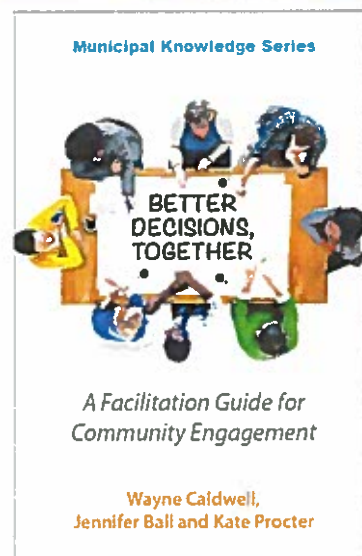
Facilitation can be a powerful tool to help build community and address pressing and relevant issues. Public processes, by their nature, will often involve diverse perspectives that can make it very difficult to unite the group. Still, through a guided process of dialogue, sharing information, and making a decision, a common purpose can usually be found.

Indeed, facilitated processes can produce greater understanding and participation, and will sometimes aid in resolving longstanding conflict and help a community move towards consensus. Even where the conflict remains unresolved, there can be a positive outcome, because community members are able to participate and have their voices heard.

Better Decisions, Together is practical facilitation guide, examining the need for citizen engagement and explaining how conflict may be harnessed as a positive force for change. The authors share facilitation strategies that have been proven to work well at the community level, along with practical suggestions for constructively engaging the community.

Communities are an interconnected web of relationships between individuals, businesses, and different groups of people, as well as between the public and government officials – including both staff and politicians. Facilitation can help to bring these various stakeholders together, foster dialogue, and encourage understanding. When facilitators "get it right," the process can also contribute to more informed and democratic decision making in the community.

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In addition to developing and delivering the library's cultural programs and events, the women and men who staff public libraries are, almost without exception, deeply committed to nurturing, supporting, connecting, advocating, and promoting local culture. In municipal and regional cultural planning initiatives across the country, librarians act as facilitators, coordinators, champions, and leaders. They serve on arts council boards, participate on committees and task forces that contribute to community events, and readily collaborate with other cultural agencies and organizations.

Librarians share their knowledge of the community and often play a leadership role, noticing a gap and calling on the right people to fill it. For example, in some communities, it is library staff who have recognized the need for the various cultural players to gather annually to share plans and find ways to work together. Another example of library staff noticing and filling a gap can be found in the rural community of Grey Highlands, in southern Ontario, where the public library is taking the lead on creating a digital cultural channel, in partnership with the local museum. The channel will promote cultural events and activities, as well as be a showcase for cultural and creative content that is local.

Renowned cultural planning consultant Greg Backer recognizes and commends public library staff for playing formal and informal leadership roles in advancing cultural planning and sustaining cultural vitality. In his view, "Because the library is the most established cultural institution in most communities, library staff are well positioned to play a leadership role and help bring others to the culture table." Those who work in libraries tend to be well connected with robust personal networks; these networks are a significant resource for the library and the community. Jeremy Kitchen, manager of a branch of Chicago Public Library puts it this way: "There isn't a program any of us can

dream up that I don't know somebody who knows somebody who can help make it happen." Library staff know how to connect the various cultural players to each other and have the connections to multiply the partnerships.

Building Relationships, Cultivating Networks

In addition to their extensive networks, library workers also enjoy personal, one-on-one relationships with many library users. Because of the frequency of visits and shared interests, staff often get to know the library's repeat customers – including which of them have creative aspirations. It is these ongoing relationships that allow library staff to have a profound influence, by encouraging, supporting, and nurturing emerging artists, musicians, writers, and creators. And, because many who work in libraries are also practicing artists themselves, the sharing, encouragement, and support of creative expression is often mutual. As well, in the context of these one-on-one relationships, library staff have the capacity to make meaningful connections for budding artists: making sure they know about exhibits, contests, and other avenues to showcase their work, as well as any related groups that might exist in the community.

Those who work in libraries work hard to sustain local culture, which, in turn, contributes to a sustainable community. In addition to the ways already enumerated, they promote cultural events and resources to the community, and model and encourage cultural appreciation. They advocate for free or affordable access to culture, especially for the economically disadvantaged. They invite different generations and different cultures to come together to experience each other's cultural offerings, and they advocate culture's importance to community identity and wellbeing. In short, those who work in libraries are champions of local culture, whose knowledge, commitment, and passion help local culture thrive as a living network of people, events, and experiences. **MW**

Auckland is now designing narrow, gently-curving, bike-friendly streets as part of their new urban design: sidewalks are wide, tree-lined, and encourage tables and chairs out on the sidewalk as part of the natural streetscape. And, in a particularly clever idea, they provide clear "roofs" or canopies over the sidewalk to protect pedestrians!

Melbourne, Australia has replaced 30 hectares of asphalt with new green spaces, and is planting 3,000 extra trees a year in their central city. The city has made a concerted effort to make its downtown walkable and connected. The city has widened foot paths and sidewalks. It has the largest tram system in the world. Oh yes ... it is now the most livable city in the world.

These are just a few of the fresh new ideas cities are beginning to contemplate as they take a bold new look at their sidewalks and street design, and their public realm. A lot of elected people don't get this yet. Some planners don't fully understand the implications and urgency.

Cities need to reclaim small, dirty, or unused spaces. They need to bring beauty back to their city centre. They need to invest in public art. They need to animate public places. They need to work with the private sector. They need to ensure people are engaging with their street and their city, not just whipping through a neighbourhood at high speed, cellphone clutched desperately in hand.

There are competitive economic advantages in building a vibrant public realm that is fun, animated, and social. That will help to attract creative talent and entrepreneurs. Providing a great quality of life enhances a city's attraction and economic opportunities.

Urban society is changing rapidly. Local government can no longer struggle to understand that. Smart, leading cities will adapt new policies and procedures to ensure their community is creative, exciting, and focused on people – and will encourage this new form of social engagement.

This is going to be one of the most significant trends for cities in the upcoming decade: how to better use their public places and spaces. **MW**