



By Rhys Phillips

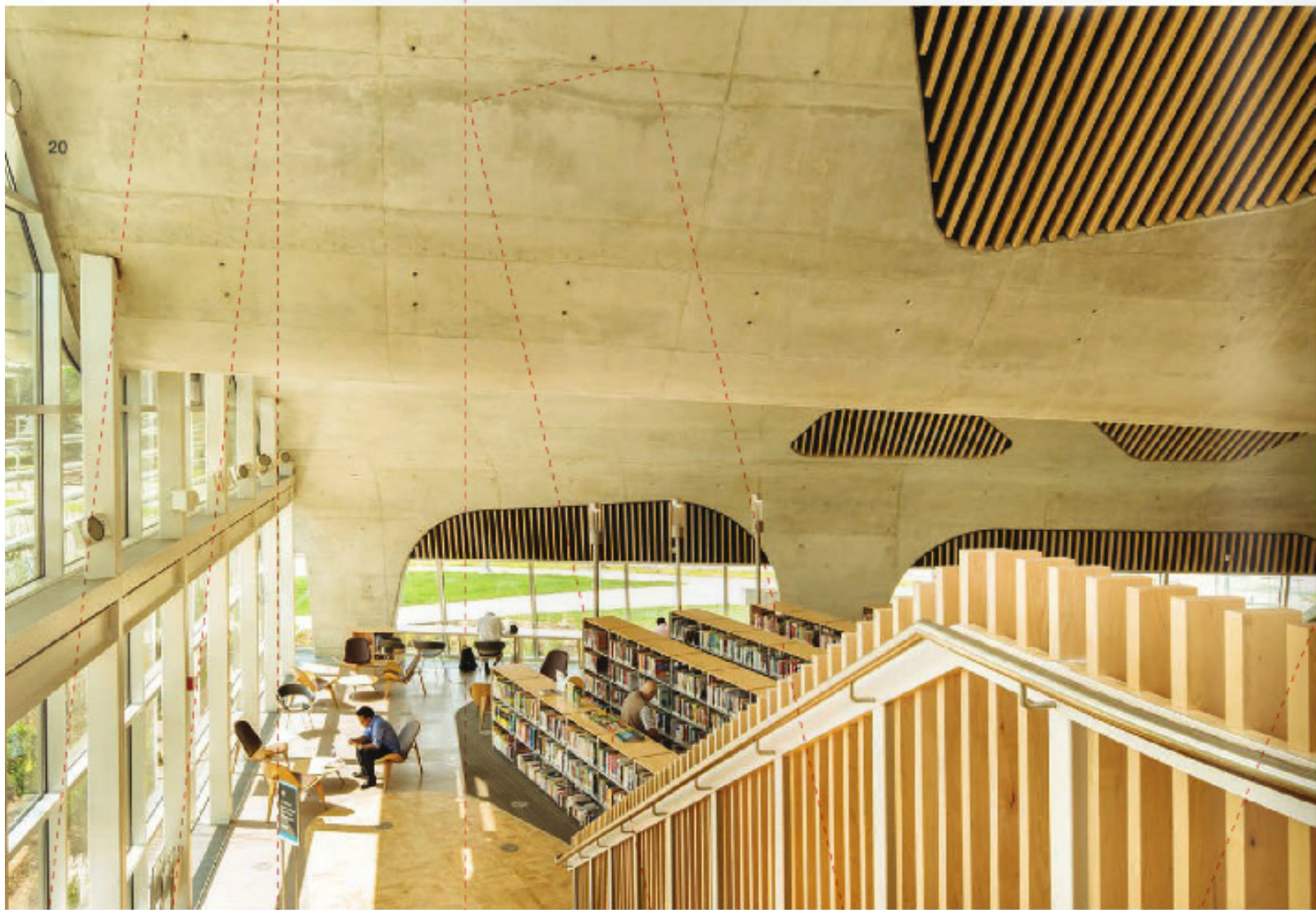
From Collection to Connection

Far from anachronisms, public libraries need to be the civic backbone of the Information Age. New examples across Canada are fulfilling this purpose, by making connections between people and information and between people and people.



Behind the standard economic and business stories in the media lurks a much more fundamental shift in how economies operate. Whether under the rubric of the Third Industrial Revolution or the creative, triple helix or maker economies, how we make and share those things necessary for our quality of life is undergoing a radical change engendered by the digital revolution. But in the Information Age, with the digitization of everything, what will be the role of perhaps the most enduring

institution for democratic access to knowledge and information: the storied public library? There are those who argue that in the digital age, with increasingly broad public access to the Internet, Google, Wi-Fi and unlimited cloud storage, the library is at best a prohibitively costly



book museum. University of British Columbia (UBC) librarian Teresa Goff recently lamented, "In a time of economic contraction, this perception has translated into extensive cuts to library funding and programs." However, many new or extensively renovated stand-alone libraries are opening across the country. Not only does this indicate that many city governments believe libraries have a vital future, the architectural quality of these projects suggests the role of public libraries extends beyond being mere repositories of knowledge in one form or another.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

Libraries have never been static institutions, but it was in the mid-19th century that free access libraries in public buildings began, facilitated in North America by Andrew Carnegie's famous largesse. While library architecture frequently acted as an urban icon, their interiors signaled a rising above the everyday into a quiet, respectful world of knowledge. By the 1980s, predictions were common that branches would increasingly migrate into the semi-public consumer space of the suburban mall. Anne Bailey, Director of Branch Libraries for the Toronto Public Library points out that two of the city's busiest branches are indeed located in malls. Today, however, a healthier trend is to integrate branches into other mixed-use but public structures such as archi-

PREVIOUS PAGE AND ABOVE: Jasper Place's curving profile is influenced by snowplough-created prairie snowbanks, while a voluminous, two-storey space spreads out under a dramatic, columnless concrete ceiling. **Right:** Voids in the bulbous yet protective northern façade allow northern light penetration.

tecturally striking cultural/sports complexes. Two such complexes will come on stream this year in Edmonton: the Meadow Community Recreation Centre and Library (Group2- Architecture Engineering, Shore Tilbe Perkins + Will), and the Clearview Community Recreation Centre and Library (Perkins + Will). Both will also include innovative education completion centres. A third, the Mill Woods Library (HCMA and DuB Architects), incorporates both a multi-cultural centre and a seniors' complex.

However some new libraries explicitly continue the traditional role of the library as a strong urban marker while incorporating changes demanded by the digital age. A number of Canadian cities are using new, architecturally significant central libraries as a major defining civic element. Bing Thom's Surrey Library (2011) is part of that BC.

suburb's efforts to establish a true urban center, Halifax will soon open a new central library, the result of an international competition, won by Danish architects Schmidt Hammer Lassen (with Fowler Bauld & Mitchell) and already dubbed a top 10 must see new building by CNN. The library will go a long way in supporting efforts to encourage city living in a core not known for lively, quality modern architecture. Calgary selected the edgy Norwegian firm Snøhetta last November, along with the Canadian firm DIALOG, to design a \$245-million library beside its City Hall. This constitutes the city's single largest investment in cultural facilities since the 1988 Winter Olympics.



LIBRARY BRANCHES AS PHYSICAL AND INFORMATION FOCAL POINTS

Knud Schul of Denmark's Aarhus Library, who has influenced many Canadian librarians, argues three roles are paramount: *place, space and relation*. The first is a defining element in the public morphology of the city, a function that extends down to the community or neighbourhood level. The second captures the library's increasingly important physical focus point for public social interaction, be it discussion, debate, meetings or a widening range of cultural events. He extends this role to include the individual experience by providing comfy chairs, unstructured social interaction, experience of great architecture inside and out, a welcoming café and other such amenities.

The third and increasingly important role is to organize, present and

facilitate the presentation of information *in collaboration* with a broad range of actors within civil society. For example, the beautiful library in Helsinki's bio-technology focused "urban village" of Viikki operates as a single service point for students in the University of Helsinki's bio-technology departments, for emerging businesses focused on bio-technology and for all local residents of the broader community.

As Maija Berndston, ex-director of the Helsinki City Library, told the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) world conference in 2013, "the service has moved from collection to connection and from preservation to communication which means that libraries have become more living places than earlier." She goes on to provide a spirited argument for the role of libraries in "place making," not simply in terms of ensuring a strong physical reference for the city but "looking at, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space to discover their needs and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place."

Citing examples from the American Library Association's *60 Ways to Use Your Library Card*, Goff believes that the core value of the free public library is the "lending of information resources and the empowerment of information literacy." The

last seems particularly relevant in an age of information and mega-data whose mastery, not incidentally, is closely linked to future economic prosperity. Like Viikki, UBC's library services both enhance community engagement and knowledge while supporting the emerging new economy. Its Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, for example, not only hosts free art exhibitions and public lectures, it provides access to the Small Business accelerator that makes secondary market research, education and business support available to B.C. businesses. Some of the new branches reviewed below are even introducing 3D printers, laser cutters and robotic resources along with digital literacy classes and workshops, all components of the newly emerging creative and maker economies.

Physical libraries, says Bailey, are community connectors that build community capacity while acting as the "essential component of 21st century public space." Thus, libraries must be visionary, dynamic and inviting in order to promote community togetherness. She sees the term community living room, a term often cited by architects, as too limiting. Instead, she prefers "community home," which suggests the more realistic complexity of today's library as society's "third place" along with home and work.

Of course the digital revolution — and it is a *revolution* for it changes fundamentally how we communicate, use information and manage our economic lives — requires significant changes to the physical library. Some would argue that traditional books are no longer required, for example the BiblioTech in San Antonio, Texas becoming the U.S.'s first bookless public library. Bailey agrees and disagrees. Certainly, she argues there is a need for flexibility to permit easy transition to and between more and more "platforms of continuous knowledge." Toronto's world respected Library Services has the highest use of eBooks in the world. But, despite a "robust demand across various platforms with one format often creating demands for other formats," she is quick to add, electronic books only constitute seven per cent of usage. The circulation of physical books remains very strong. The tactile experience of reading a physical book cannot be ignored.

At the same time, the days of libraries being defined by book stacks with sitting, reading and research areas as leftover spaces are long gone. Darryl Condon, HCMA design architect of Edmonton's Jasper Place Library refers to the book-



stacks – not disrespectfully – as “residual space.” Bailey talks of the need to zone spaces that may even fluctuate through the day. Flexible meeting rooms, multimedia services, informal collaboration areas, comfortable sitting for reading physical or eBooks and doing research or information gathering as well as quality transitional spaces to simply be seen and to mingle all play a role in new library design. Overriding, however, is the need for branches to respond to its community’s own unique requirements and sense of place.

EDMONTON’S COMMUNITY-DEFINING LIBRARIES

Don Iverson, the 34-year-old mayor of Edmonton elected last year represents less a shift in direction than a consolidation of retiring Mayor Stephen Martel’s vision for a dynamic, 21st century urban centre based on transit, sustainability and a diversified economy. Progress has been slow on Manasc Isaac Architects’ 2009 proposal to turn the city’s main Stanley A. Milner Library, an aging 40 year-old Brutalist box, into a more colourful and urban friendly component of the city’s civic quarter. But the new mayor has inherited a bevy of smart new neighbourhood defining library branches.

Jasper Place Branch (HCMA/Dub Architects) provides an older suburban community a missing social and civic focus that will eventually connect to a planned LRT line along Meadowlark Street. Its architectural form is boldly distinctive, tapping intuitively into contextual blues found in the northern prairie

horizon, says Condon. While he eschews “metaphor,” he admits that the library’s curving profile is heavily influenced by snowplough-created snowbanks of his Saskatchewan youth. This is most evident on the protective northern façade where hollows in the bulbous “snowbank” open to wonderful northern light. In contrast, the southern, more social side along Meadowlark carefully protects existing mature trees but tucks large glazed planes (and a softer wood volume) under an undulating roof that shields against summer heat gain.

The library’s interior is a voluminous, two-storey space spreading out under the dramatic, columnless concrete ceiling. Using a cast-in-place German process from Schöck that mitigates thermal bridging, the architects provide the kind of flexible, fluid space new libraries require. A cascading stair against the glass southern façade rises to the second storey mezzanine level overlooking a bold landscape. It also serves as an informal gathering space from which to see and be seen. Where the ceiling dips to its lowest, the resulting, more compressed and modestly scaled space is program-med for children.

“More and more,” says Condon, “usage studies show library use is increasing but with a shift from collections, study and research to a broader social role where people gather and interact, in part to combat the relative isolation of the digital.” A library’s floor plate must not be an idealized layout for collections but able to change rapidly as provided by Jasper Park’s free span. Perhaps challenging Bailey, Condon argues a time will come when there will be no

books, with reference sections the first to go as articles and technical information is increasingly digitalized. Wi-Fi capability and interactive technology capacity will be increasingly important while the old standby – electrical plugs – will remain key for some time to come. The most stubborn holdout, he concedes, will be children’s books.

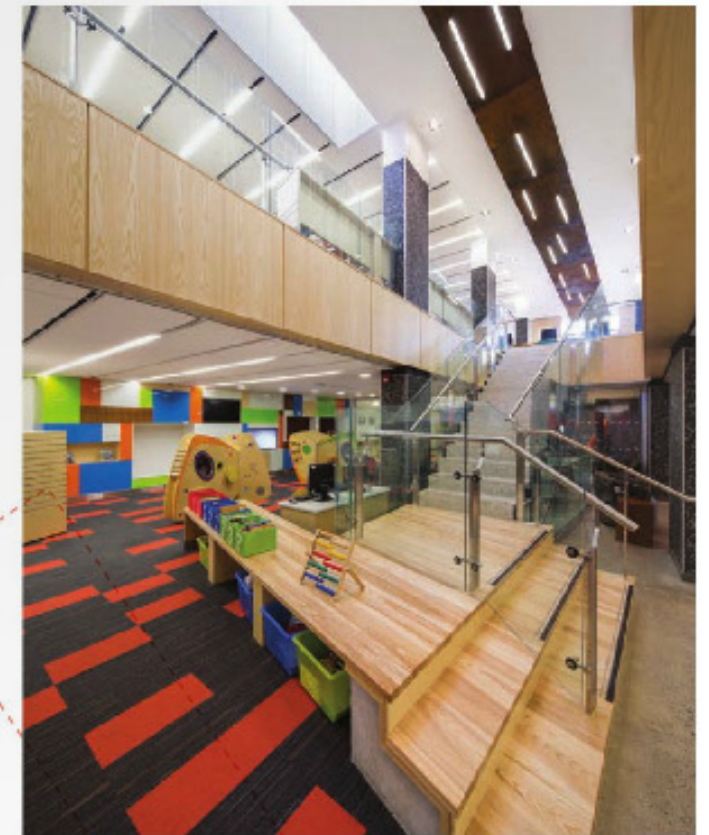
If Jasper Place provides a community with its communal “snowbank,” the under-construction **Highland Branch** (Schmidt Hammer Lassen/ Marshall Tittmore Architects) will create a more abstracted prairie iceberg. Both Mayor Martel and library CEO Carol Belanger, says MTA principle-in-charge Gordon Frankland, wanted new libraries to have strong but diverse architectural expression. Thus Highland’s two storeys are angled geometric shapes clad in aluminum but with glazed voids intended to create “a lantern in a northern landscape.” Careful placement on a modest lot carves out a small public plaza abutting a busy, semi-commercial street in a 1930s community. Generous, first-storey walls of glass connects the library’s interior to the street while large glazed blocks on the second level project light into the long prairie winters.

Inside, the library at its roots is similar to Jasper Place but with its mezzanine reached by an open stair centering a two storey core with a sculpted rather than undulating ceiling. The interior has ample daylight from all directions bathing flexible, multipurpose and programmable spaces designed to facilitate dialogue no matter the medium.

TORONTO PASSES ONE HUNDRED BRANCHES

Toronto Public Library bills itself as the world’s busiest urban library system and is probably also one of the most respected. A new crop of branches illustrate how the city wants high quality library architecture that will contribute to strong civic place-making. Two new libraries under construction, the Fort York and the Scarborough Civic Centre Library Branch represent its 99th and 100th branches. A third, the recently re-opened **Mount Dennis Branch** (E.G. Bruce Stratton Architects), is the robust renovation of an older library that responds not only to the library’s evolving role but also to the unique conditions of its community as determined through extensive public consultations. “Always public consultations,” says Bailey, “to determine hopes and aspirations.”

Bruce Stratton identifies its location as “the battered streetscape of its north Toronto neighbourhood” where development over the last decades has been slow, rundown buildings dominates and the public realm remains weak. The



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Highland Branch’s interior has ample daylight from all directions bathing flexible, multipurpose and programmable spaces; the two storeys are angled geometric shapes clad in aluminum; the newly renovated Mount Dennis library is a first step to enhancing the public realm of the battered streetscape along Weston Road in the North Toronto neighbourhood; a new feature stair connects the main and lower levels.

community’s demographics, Stratton and Bailey concur, dictate the role the branch must fill. As one of the 13 lowest income districts in the city, plagued by low literacy scores and faced with a high percentage of immigrant children, early literacy programs and success in attracting youth are key.

To this end, Stratton was concerned with first establishing an appropriate, architecturally robust street presence suitable to the community to help kick-start physical rejuvenation (something he says is already happening). Second, the library had to be physically and emotionally accessible from the street signalling “a public realm with a sense of comfort, a place of respite, an environment in which to relax, an urban living room capable of changing one’s mood.”

Finally, it had to be able to support a sense of community and facilitate social interaction. The library’s rejuvenated front façade, therefore, “is locked into the streetscape, welcoming and transparent to patrons.” Its exterior is a mix of both expressive and contextual neighbourhood materials such as refurbished brick, gritty weathered steel and clay tile. But most importantly, a two-storey



horizontal glass "beacon" dominates the street, wraps around the corner entrance into a laneway and spills a welcoming light onto the sidewalk at night. This Pilkington glass system is transparent at the lower level ensuring a high level of transparency that seems de rigour in today's libraries.

Bailey's phrase-dislike notwithstanding, Stratton speaks of the interior as an "urban living room" (with a fireplace retained from the original library) for both casual reading and contemplation. Like the two Edmonton libraries, an open "feature stair" under clerestory windows connects the main and lower levels. The palette of materials used in the various open and overlapping zones is warm and inviting. Ash veneer, polished concrete floors, carpet tiles, brightly coloured back-painted glass and porcelain wall panels ensure rich haptic and visual texture. On one side, an outdoor reading garden, previously used for garbage bins, has been incorporated into the library by a glazed wall.

If ever the term "urban living room" was more appropriate it would be for Toronto's new 1,500-sq.-ft. **Fort York Branch** (KPMB Architects) located smack in the heart of Toronto's rapidly growing high-rise tower forest on the edge of the west harbour. In this dense urban environment, says design architect and partner-in-charge Shirley Blumberg, "people really need amenities given the average size of the units, and Fort York will be a gathering place, a place to 'hang' for youth, students and newcomers."

At only two storeys, the heavily glazed and thus transparent trapezoidal box under a canted green roof provides a welcome void among the towers. Its "other than" quality is emphasized by its integration with a significant urban park to the north that also connects into a linear park along the railway line that cuts through the area to Union Station. The transparency of the structure ensures library users continually experience the park.

The humanely-scaled library and park also serve as a porous gateway opening into historic Fort York, a long-hidden but major historical artefact for the city. The building's angularity, Blumberg says, reflects those of the fort's ramparts. The site's ecological history as once a forested shoreline is reflected in the building's grand open stair rising through the two-storey atrium space, its structural beams and the ceiling, all in Douglas fir. Use of rough-hewn wood also references the foundation cribbing found on the site. Like most new libraries, social interactions as well as flexibility for both existing information platforms

ABOVE: The transparency of the Fort York branch structure ensures library users continually experience the nearby park.

and adaptability to whatever the future may bring was key to the design. A 'digital hub' armed with a 3D printer (something appearing in more and more libraries) is prominent here. "The armatures of the public social spaces," says Blumberg, "carry the identity of the branch, and functional spaces for book storage, study, reading, media, are all designed to be flexible."

Working with renowned Toronto artist and friend Charles Pachter, Blumberg has incorporated perforated vertical steel fins inscribed with digitalized images of illustrations from Margaret Atwood's poem "The Planters" included in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Texts from the book will appear at grade.

In the case of the Fort York Branch, the political debate over cost is moot. Its tab is being met through the Planning Act's Section 37 that allows the city to grant developers additional height and density in exchange for community infrastructure. The city sold the site to Context Development whose Library District condo tower, also designed by KPMB, is linked to the library by similarly scaled amenities (including a canted roof) built for tenants. In contrast to the library's all transparent skin, the latter is clad in a mix of glass and vertical striations of forest green and water blue.

VITAL INVESTMENT, NOT FOOLHARDY INDULGENCE

The number of significant and well-designed libraries appearing in Canada thankfully suggests that the false economy of not investing in cultural infrastructure in order to focus on "real" business may not prevail. The creative underpinnings of the new digital economy require as never before open, welcoming and in-depth public access to the exploding information characterizing the world we now inhabit. **b**

Images courtesy of: Hubert Kong (Jasper Place); Marshall Titmore Architects (Highland); G. Bruce Stratton Architects (Highland); G. Bruce Stratton Architects (Mount Dennis); The Flat Side of Design, courtesy of KPMB Architects (Fort York).



Mississauga Updates Three Classics

Visit building.ca to see a slideshow and read about three Mississauga, Ont. library branches, Lakeview, Port Credit and Lorne: modernist survivors of earlier radical changes to library architecture in the 1950s and early '60s, that have been recently renovated to enhance the democratization of both public space and access to library services.

How the CMHR was built using virtual design and construction and other supportive technologies

By Sean Bamers and Scott Stirton

The \$350-million Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) in Winnipeg has been steadily making headlines since its very inception. And deservedly so: when the doors open later in 2014, the space will be filled with exhibits and stories that aim to improve one's understanding of human rights. After 18 months and three levels of increasingly detailed submissions, the contemporary design of architect Antoine Predock was selected over those of 61 other firms from 12 countries, in one of Canada's largest-ever juried architectural competitions. Visitors will enter through the "tree roots," travelling through nearly 47,000 square feet of exhibit space

