



U.S.

Breaking Out of the Library Mold, in Boston and Beyond

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE MARCH 7, 2014

BOSTON — An old joke about libraries goes like this: A boy walks into a library and asks for a burger and fries. “Young man!” the startled librarian reprimands. “You are in a library.” So the boy repeats his order, only this time, he whispers.

So much has changed in libraries in recent years that such a scene may not be so far-fetched. Many libraries have become bustling community centers where talking out loud and even eating are perfectly acceptable.

The Boston Public Library, which was founded in 1848 and is the oldest public urban library in the country, is moving rapidly in that direction. With a major renovation underway, this Copley Square institution is breaking out of its granite shell to show an airier, more welcoming side to the passing multitudes. Interior plans include new retail space, a souped-up section for teenagers, and a high-stool bar where patrons can bring their laptops and look out over Boylston Street.

“You’ll be able to sit here and work and see the world go by,” said Amy Ryan, president of the library, on a recent tour. “We’re turning ourselves outward.”

Such plans might shock anyone who thought that in the digital age, libraries — those hushed sanctuaries of the past — had gone the way of the Postal Service.

“Just the opposite,” said Susan Benton, president and chief executive

of the Urban Libraries Council. “Physical visits and virtual visits are off the charts.”

At Boston’s central library alone, the number of physical visits jumped to 1.72 million in 2013, up by almost half a million from 2012.

Library usage has increased across the country for a variety of reasons, librarians say, including the recession, the availability of new technology and because libraries have been reimagining themselves — a necessity for staying relevant as municipal budgets are slashed and e-books are on the rise. Among the more innovative is the Chicago Public Library, which offers a free Maker Lab, with access to 3-D printers, laser cutters and milling machines. The Lopez Island Library in Washington State offers musical instruments for checkout. In upstate New York, the Library Farm in Cicero, part of the Northern Onondaga Public Library, lends out plots of land on which patrons can learn organic growing practices.

Along with their new offerings, libraries are presenting a dramatically more open face to the outside world, using lots of glass, providing comfortable seating, as much for collaborative work as solitary pursuits, and allowing food and drink.

“This is what’s happening at a lot of libraries, the creation of an open, physical environment,” said Joe Murphy, a librarian and library futures consultant based in Reno, Nev. “The idea of being inviting isn’t just to boost attendance but to maximize people’s creativity.”

Libraries have long facilitated the “finding” of information, he said. “Now they are facilitating the creating of information.”

That will be evident at the Boston library’s new section for teenagers. Teen Central is to become what is known as “homago” space — where teenagers can “hang out, mess around and geek out.” It will include lounges, restaurant booths, game rooms and digital labs, as well as software and equipment to record music and create comic books. The vibe will be that of an industrial loft, with exposed pipes and polished concrete floors, what Ms. Ryan called “eco-urban chic.”

“The sand is shifting under our business,” she said.

“When I started out in the ’70s, you would walk up to the reference desk and ask a question and I would find an answer. Today it’s the opposite. People turn to librarians to help them sift through the 10 million answers they find on the Internet. We’re more like navigators.”

At least the Boston library will still feature books. One library, in San Antonio, has done away with them. The BiblioTech is nothing but rows of computers, e-readers and an “iPad bar.”

Its goal is the same as that of traditional libraries: To help patrons access information. But whether the community will take to it is another question. The Santa Rosa branch library in Tucson went all digital in 2002, but a few years later, it brought back books. A lot of content was not available digitally, and patrons wanted print.

While e-books are gaining popularity, print is still king. In 2012, 28 percent of adults nationwide read an e-book, according to the Pew Research Center, while 69 percent read a print book. Only 4 percent of readers are “e-book only,” the center reported.

In Boston, the physical changes reflect the evolving nature of libraries. All renovations are to the Johnson building, designed by Philip Johnson and opened in 1972, when libraries were more monastic and inward looking.

William L. Rawn III, the architect whose firm is overseeing the project, said his goal was the opposite, to “get the energy of the city into the library and the energy of the library out to the city.”

The Johnson building was built as an addition to the original, much-loved classic library, which contains stunning features like Bates Hall, its cathedral-like main reading room.

The addition is an imposing, gray granite behemoth whose floor-to-ceiling windows are blocked from street view by 112 large vertical granite slabs that ring the outside of the building. The entryway is an empty cavern with all the warmth of an armed fortress.

“The big granite walls inside are incredibly stultifying,” Mr. Rawn said. “That space is just a miserable space to walk through. It’s like you’re

traversing a DMZ.”

The reimagined lobby will have an open lounge area with new books and casual seating, and retail space, which could be anything, Ms. Ryan said, “from a coffee shop to a high-tech experimental outlet to an exercise space with stationary bikes.”

The exterior has been declared a landmark, so the Boston Landmarks Commission must approve each change. But plans now call for the removal of 95 of the granite slabs, so the lounge and retail space will be visible from the street, and for the tinted glass to be replaced with clear glass, brightening the interior.

Clifford V. Gayley, a principal architect in Mr. Rawn’s firm, said the new entryway would create a sense of “porosity,” with “easy flow in and out.”

As it happens, the entrance, on Boylston Street, is close to the finish line of the Boston Marathon, where bombs last year killed three people and injured more than 260 others. With this wound at their front door, the architects are even more determined for the library to be inviting.

“This is a strong statement of pride in the city and its civic life, in spite of what happened across the street,” Mr. Gayley said. “The library is opening its doors and not retreating behind solid walls.”

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