

A new type of community centre

This week I went to the Bancroft Public Library (BPL) for a story. It wasn't exactly what I expected.

Most libraries have a large property and the first two things you see are, well, books, and of course a shushing librarian. Stepping into the BPL, however, you run into a set of stairs up or down, an assortment of DVDs and a smiling librarian. The BPL has more of a clubhouse feel than it does a rigid place of study.

After sitting down with CEO Chris Stephenson to discuss their new video game initiative, I got that this place was hard-working but laid back in an up-lifting sort of way. Everyone was packed in, but it was cozy, not cramped.

Stephenson and I moved on to talking about future plans for the library after we discussed the initiative for the story. He said the dream was to see the library expand into a building customized to fit its needs. My immediate concern was that a new building sounded costly for a space that is becoming an old idea. Stephenson didn't agree, in fact he set me on the scent of how libraries are moving into the 21st century.

When I was a kid, the library was more on the side of necessity than it was for leisure. I went to study, to do homework, to print off projects and to have access to the Internet. Today it seems that that isn't as much the case. For some people, the library is still a necessity, but essentially if you have a computer you can access many of the same things. Books can be accessed as eBooks, a fountain of research can be discovered from the endless water spout of Google. This has forced public libraries, like the BPL, to search for new ways to draw people in ? hence video games for teens.

Libraries have had to grow and evolve by cultivating what they were already doing, but maybe not focusing on it. The social aspect, for example, or using the space for learning as a community seems a relatively new idea with a newly prominent focus. It's always more fun to learn with others.

For the BPL this means programs like Literacy through LEGO or the TD Summer Reading Club. For the Toronto Public Library this means 3D design and printing hardware availability for those certified in 3D printing, digital design workstations including free classes in Photoshop and website design, a recording studio equipped with cameras and greenscreens, and much more.

In a 2015 online study by *BookNet Canada*, 84 per cent of Canadians read at least one book over the course of the year. A surprising 77 per cent had read a book via print, while under 50 per cent of people who had read a book over the year had also read via eBooks, and under 25 per cent were interested in audio books. So people are still reading. In fact, 88 per cent of people ages 18 to 29 had read a book over 2015. As new research avenues become available however, libraries have to bring in new hardware, software and mediums for their pursuit.

Libraries are evolving into jungle gyms for your mind. It's their rebirth. They're a new type of community centre. They aren't just places to read anymore, they're so much more.

It makes sense. We have community recreation centres for athletics, why wouldn't we have them for the mind? School doesn't count, that's mandatory ? ask anyone who had to climb back onto a bus this month and declare the end of summer.

So get out there and support your local library. Donate books, donate equipment, get in contact with Stephenson, volunteer or just show up. You might be surprised what you find. You might even help a community into the future.