





BEYOND BOOKS

Edmonton reinvents the library's public purpose

By JAY SMITH

EACH MORNING, DAVID McMAIN TRIES to get to work an hour before he officially starts. But he doesn't head straight to his office at Edmonton's Stanley Milner library, where he is an outreach worker. Instead, he checks who's hanging out in the mall. "The shelters kick everyone out between 6 and 7 in the morning," he says. "Because it's cold, these homeless people end up going to the mall. I hand out my business card to people we don't see at the library, and tell them about our services."

If his job sounds unique, it's because it is—Edmonton is one of only a few jurisdictions in North America whose library system has hired full-time social workers. McMain and Jared Tkachuk are on EPL's payroll for a three-year trial that began in 2011 thanks to the provincial government's Safe Communities Innovation Fund.

From the time the library "gates" open in the morning, says McMain, he and Tkachuk are busy meeting with library users, many of whom are vulnerable. "Most, 70 to 80 per cent, are dealing with some level of homelessness," he says. "A place with no heat, that's infested with bedbugs—I wouldn't consider that a home. A very large percentage have substance abuse issues and concurrent mental health issues. About 20 per cent have significant mental health issues and about 10 per cent have cognitive disabilities, some considerable." Many, he says, receive meagre monthly incomes through programs such as AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) or SFI (Supports for Independence: income support for people with

long-term disabilities). In the six months McMain has been on the job, demand for his services has tripled from about 10 clients per day to 30.

For those who think a library's primary function is to provide citizens with reading material, music and movies, the idea of the library used as an inner-city social agency might seem counterintuitive in the extreme. After all, libraries should be safe spaces for people to use library materials, right? Inviting homeless drug addicts with mental illnesses into the library would seem incompatible with those purposes.

WHEN THE LIBRARY BOARDS of Edmonton and Strathcona (then a separate town) met in 1912 to discuss the establishment of libraries on both sides of the North Saskatchewan River, the notion of the public library was undeniably dominated by the Carnegie model. Carnegie libraries were sponsored by Scottish-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who between 1883 and 1929 bankrolled the creation of 2,509 libraries throughout the world, mostly in North America.

The Carnegie foundation contributed money toward the construction of public libraries with several strings attached, including that one-tenth of the funds be available annually for library upkeep. The oft-repeated narrative was that Carnegie, a highly successful businessman, had been thoroughly impressed by an early employer who opened up his personal library to his workers once a week. As a result, Carnegie believed in giving to the "industrious and ambitious; not to those who need everything done for them, but those who, being most anxious and able to help themselves, deserve and will be benefited by help from others." Access to intellectual resources was the key to this self-betterment.

Unlike closed-stack libraries, where only librarians have access to the shelves and retrieve specific titles on request, Carnegie libraries popularized the "open stack" model—the sort of library that probably comes first to your mind, where anyone walking into the building can stroll up to the shelves and pick out something to read. Though the difference might sound minor, open stacks are fundamentally a more democratic model: Anyone can go to the library and read a book. No one intervenes to judge whether you "should" be a library user or even whether you have a library card. Amanda Wakaruk, a government information librarian at the University of Alberta, puts it simply: "Democratic knowledge is non-existent if you can't access it."

The impact of Carnegie on Alberta's libraries is hard to overstate. Edmonton's first proper public library building—opened in 1923 on MacDonald Avenue and replaced by the current downtown branch in 1967—was a Carnegie library. (And if you think Edmonton is a northern outpost now, think how isolated it was in 1923.) Calgary Public Library's oldest branch, Memorial Park, is also a Carnegie library.

The idea that civic libraries contributed to the common good by creating a public space in which willing readers could transcend their social station, improve themselves and

therefore improve society, is clearly still relevant in the 21st century. Even today, children and post-secondary students in Alberta usually aren't charged for a library card. There's often a nominal fee for adults, but the librarians I spoke to say few of them charge library users who can't afford to pay.

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, HOWEVER, Edmonton's downtown library has struggled with its image, often viewed less as a place where the "average" citizen borrows a book or CD and more as an unsafe environment. According to the *Edmonton Sun*, 1,399 "incidents" occurred at the Stanley Milner branch in 2008, and 728 in 2009; these ranged from "noisy patrons" to "public intoxication." Things seemed to improve in early 2010. In April of that year, however, a man was stabbed in broad daylight in front of the library. The next month, a 14-year-old girl was stabbed in the neck by a 24-year-old woman for refusing to give her a cigarette. That same month, a 50-year-old man and his elderly mother were pepper-sprayed when they unintentionally walked into a fight in front of the library. Female library patrons complained to the media about being harassed while in the building.

Virginia Clevette, manager of the Stanley Milner, has worked at the Edmonton Public Library for six years and at the downtown branch for four of them. Regarding this "crime wave" she will only say, "There was a lot of reporting [of crime] in and around the Churchill Square area that wasn't necessarily associated with the library.... Of course, the library has millions of visitors every year; at some point, an argument will break out." But, she adds, "incidents in Churchill Square were being reported as occurring at the library."

Nonetheless, the atmosphere surrounding the library was hardly welcoming. Around this time, while visiting the library with my two young children, I heard a librarian complain about feeling unsafe while walking from the LRT station to work. Security guards were walking staff to transit or their vehicles. Once, in the atrium, I passed through a group of drunk men who were yelling at each other from opposite sides of the gathering area, on my way to the utterly filthy washrooms. Say what you will about the rights of all to use the library, the Milner branch had become the sort of place I didn't feel comfortable in nor wanted to bring my family to.

The US research group Project for Public Spaces (PPS), identifies four indicators of a successful public space: accessibility, people engaging in activities, sociability and comfort. Whether a public space works is not just about whether anyone can come in. While the library may seem to have obvious uses, and therefore more inherent value than a public square without benches or a playground, people who come to the library do so for a great number of reasons, many of which aren't immediately evident. What they do after they arrive may or may not contribute to the public space's success. PPS identifies other variables, such as diversity among users in terms of age and gender, and the public's outward happiness and pride in the space. Will visitors, for instance, pick up a piece of garbage found on the ground?

And, even more relevant to libraries, the PPS considers most



Social workers Jared Tkachuk (l) and David McMain (r) with a library user (c). For those who think EPL's function is to provide citizens with reading material, music and movies, the idea of a library as an inner city social agency might seem counterintuitive in the extreme.

successful the spaces that are clean, safe and visited as often by women as by men (since women are more sensitive to security issues and more likely to avoid places that feel unsafe). By these standards, the EPL's flagship branch was falling short.

AROUND THE TIME THE STANLEY MILNER branch's image was suffering most, library CEO Linda Cook argued that incidents in the building itself had actually decreased, telling the *Sun*, "The library is just one venue, a major landmark in the square. [Any increased crime] is not strictly a library issue, it's a civic issue."

A civic issue it certainly was, clearly related to larger social concerns such as the provincial government's gradual erosion of mental-health infrastructure through the 1990s and the Alberta economy's tendency to create homelessness during boom times. But the EPL was undeniably dealing with the fallout. The first fall Clevette worked at the downtown branch, she says it quickly "became clear there were a number of individuals here all day every day—not necessarily reading or doing research. A lot of them were youth between 13 and 21, homeless, or people with mental health and addiction problems. For whatever reason, they were living on the streets or at Hope Mission and were here during the day."

Clevette says that so long as they were using library resources—be it just the space of the library—within the "use parameters" (i.e., no intoxication and no abusive or violent behaviour), these people were welcome. But she notes that the situation was nonetheless frustrating for library staff. "We would see the decline in people, see the mental health issues

getting worse," she says. Staff wanted to intervene, "[but] we didn't really know how to help." Although librarians can recommend off-site social services—and at branches such as Stanley Milner, staff were quite practised at it—they aren't trained social workers, can't be depended on to diagnose illnesses and can't work "proactively" with individuals in need.

Nonetheless, beyond recognizing their right to use the library, Clevette says it's important to remember that these individuals actively choose the library over other options. "Boyle Street [an aid agency downtown] has a pretty open policy; people can come in when intoxicated," she says. "[But] some aren't comfortable with that. Some of these places are stigmatized. 'I may be homeless [or] I may have an alcohol problem, but I'm not a crack user.' The homeless are not a great wash of people who are all the same. They have desires about what they do and where they spend their time, just as you and I do."

The growing appeal of the library as a site for social work wasn't new to those who understand the downtown. "Stanley Milner has been known as more than a library, as a community centre, for a long time—because of where it's situated, for one thing," explains David McMain. "It's in the heart of downtown, only blocks from the shelters, and it's one of the only places in town where a person can come without money." For that reason, and as any regular user of the downtown library can attest, many homeless people frequent the branch.

Jared Tkachuk concurs that the persistent presence of "marginalized people coming in every day who had housing and mental health issues" prompted the EPL to apply for



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funding to hire social workers. Tkachuk had worked for a couple of years at the Herb Jamieson Centre, a men's shelter in Edmonton's downtown. After obtaining his social work degree from the University of Calgary, he saw the ad posted for a library social worker.

"My passion was the inner city, so when I heard about the job I thought it was an intriguing idea," he says. "I knew it hadn't been done before and thought it would be fertile ground—when I was working at the shelter and I'd go to the library downtown, I'd know a whack of people [from Jamieson Centre]." Tkachuk started work at the Milner branch in July 2011.

As the first social worker hired for a position that had no Canadian precedent, he had to create a program from scratch. In addition to making himself available in the library for anyone seeking counselling, Tkachuk had a hand in creating the now extensive programming for those living in the downtown core.

For example, there's a weekly drop-in group for people who don't have a place to live. Guest speakers who talk about health and housing. A weekly youth group for at-risk teens. A writing circle, hosted by a local author, focusing on writing as a cathartic exercise. A drop-in art course. A Friday afternoon film series that explores topics such as addiction, homelessness and shopping cart racers (yes, really). Explains Clevette about the latter: "If you're living at the Hope Mission, not working, and trying to keep clean and sober, there's not a lot to do. Each film looks at a particular issue and we'll bring in an expert to talk about it. So we brought in *Carts of Darkness*, about bottle pickers in Vancouver who race shopping carts."

THE STANLEY MILNER ISN'T THE ONLY EPL branch to experience tensions that challenge its ability to function as a public space. Amanda Bird worked as a librarian at Highlands Library, in northeast Edmonton, and remembers a sex worker who regularly came inside to sleep.

"She'd come in in the morning, clearly having had a rough

night, and parents of young children would complain because she was sleeping in the kids' area," says Bird, who now works as an associate manager at the Millwoods branch. "I'd say, 'I'm sorry, she's not doing anything illegal.' She wasn't turning tricks in the library. She was just resting." University students sleep at libraries, she points out. Why is a sleeping student okay in a library but a sleeping sex trade worker not?

The woman came into the library every couple of weeks, according to Bird, and slept for a few hours. Someone, maybe her pimp, would come in and wake her and she'd leave. Although library staff had Edmonton's "report a john" number programmed into library phones, Bird saw her job, then as now, as indistinguishable from defending the library as public space. Because there was no john, there was no crime. "I think being a librarian is a political profession," she says. "Libraries are one of the few places left where you can come in for free and be anybody. You can stay all day and not be asked to leave. It's a place where everyone is welcome and no one is judged, as long as you are respectful."

Speaking out on behalf of the dozing prostitute was just part of this mission. "The Highlands library is a great example of a library in a declining neighbourhood where it's literally the only accessible public space for people," Bird says. "Other users were complaining, but I had to say it: There was no other place for her to go."

The role of the librarian, Bird believes, is not to impose moral judgment on people who come through the doors, but to protect the public space as public. "For people who only use it for books, the library is just about books," she says. "But people use it for so many reasons. There are early literacy classes where new moms who are feeling totally overwhelmed and isolated meet... and feel a sense of connection, in addition to the early literacy skills they're imparting. There are 60-year-old men who come in and play chess. Teens coming in and connecting."

Through her work, Bird has seen the extent to which neighbourhoods use libraries in idiosyncratic ways. She's

worked in four branches in Edmonton, in four thoroughly different neighbourhoods. The Castle Downs branch, for instance, she says, sees a lot of kids from subsidized housing coming in after school and staying until their parents pick them up when the library closes. Particularly in less affluent neighbourhoods, she adds, it's easy to forget that "the digital divide is greater than ever." Some people have smartphones with Internet access all day long, she says, while others have no computer at all. Meanwhile, most schools now expect their students to have Internet access for homework.

Moreover, the results of an EPL library space report from May 2011 might surprise anyone who thinks libraries are just about the books. Undeniably, the majority of survey respondents (86.7 per cent) claimed they visited the library to borrow or return materials, and did so mostly weekly (44.7 per cent). But when the interns responsible for the study observed individuals in the library, they found something considerably different.

Certainly, browsing the library collection was up there (and was the most common activity for adults between the ages of 36 and 60), but for all age groups, save for those 60 or older, the first or second most common activity was "talking to others." Although we may visit the library to borrow resources, what we actually do once we get there reveals libraries' importance as sites for public conversation and community building.

For library users between the ages of 6 and 60, using a computer was either the second or third most common activity. And it's not just the homeless who need access to computers; immigrants and other lower income users need the service as well, particularly as an increasing amount of government material is online.

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GLORIA J. LECKIE, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF information and media studies at the University of Western Ontario, writes in a 2004 article about libraries as public spaces that the millennium marked a significant shift in how libraries are regarded. During the 1980s and 1990s, the mall dominated as "public space"—a place where people could get together and freely interact. It's somewhere between ironic and outright inaccurate to consider a shopping centre a public space when you consider, for instance, that it's a private property with owners who expect their visitors to spend money there.

Libraries fell by the wayside, along with their Carnegie-derived idealism of free information and open space as the key to social and personal betterment. With personal computers and then the Internet, the widespread impression

was that "libraries as public spaces were dying and would be completely redundant very shortly," wrote Leckie. In the early 2000s, however, something changed. Noting a construction boom in new libraries in Canada, Leckie argues that our society has returned to the notion of libraries as essential public spaces.

She writes: "The library is a critical public space in the kind of democratic society we live in, and we ought to be fighting hard to keep libraries as physical places that are free, open and publicly accessible. This is certainly not a new thought, but it needs to be repeated often, because there are powerful forces around who are advocating the very opposite."

Amanda Wakaruk has been a librarian since 1999. In addition to working at the U of A, she's an active member of the Progressive Librarians Guild, an organization that works to protect the library as a public space. Her area of expertise is how libraries exist as public spaces. "Yes, we're moving towards a more digital world—that's not news," she says. "But libraries are as busy as ever, if not more so. It's never been only about accessing reading material. It's about a place to interrogate, learn and grow in a communal environment."

LEST ONE SUSPECT THE STANLEY Milner is devolving from the original, ambitious goal set out by Carnegie or lowering the standards set by such public-space defenders as the PPS, to become simply a more erudite homeless shelter, Virginia Clevette reassures that the branch offers extensive programming for the general public—book clubs, drop-in computer courses, TED talks, finance primers, early literacy programs, English as a second language groups, and more. Moreover, one of the library's most popular services, according to its space-use report, is renting out community rooms at nominal charge.

The demand for this library space, the report concludes, is "infinite": "If the library were to increase the number of study spaces, places to sit, computer stations, the size of the program room, the number of program rooms, customers would continue to fill the spaces and use these services. Everyone wants a bigger library." And while the library system can't expand infinitely, of course, it's never bad to aim high.

At the least, Edmonton's new social workers will end up benefiting all library users, Clevette says, even if McMain and Tkachuk spend most of their time working with the most marginalized clients. Since the two have started working, Clevette told *Metro*, the library "feels calmer." Although other factors, such as a mild winter, may have had a hand in decreasing incidents requiring police (36 per cent fewer in 2011 than 2010), it's likely the social workers played an important role.

"I'm a big believer in social justice," McMain adds. "I believe libraries at their very core are a socially just enterprise because they share information—and knowledge is power." ■

Jay Smith is an Edmonton-based writer. Her most recent Alberta Views feature was "Out With the Old," in the April 2011 issue.